

Protests continue in Australian detention centres

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Determined protests have erupted inside Australia's three largest refugee detention centres in recent weeks, highlighting the growing crisis of the Howard government's mandatory detention regime. Incarcerated indefinitely in inhumane and intolerable conditions at remote, near-desert locations, asylum seekers are staging increasingly desperate demonstrations, while the government has responded with escalating violence.

According to immigration department officials, on June 7 and 8 about 30 detainees used soccer goal posts to barricade themselves in the dining area at the Woomera centre, on the edge of the South Australian desert. They were protesting against the denial of refugee status to four asylum-seekers.

Staff from Australasian Correctional Management (ACM), the company contracted to run the centres, used a truck-mounted water cannon to blast away the barricade. Government officials claimed that detainees rampaged through the centre, smashing windows. Guards allegedly seized several items, such as sharpened eating forks, and immediately displayed these crude weapons to the media in an attempt to depict the detainees as hardened criminals.

A day after the protest had been put down, seven detainees escaped from Woomera by burrowing under wire fences, sparking a much-publicised police manhunt. The escape came one year to the day after 500 detainees burst through the perimeter fences and marched into Woomera township, chanting: "We want freedom".

On May 31, anger boiled over within the even more remote detention centre located at the Curtin air base, 40 kilometres from Derby in the north of Western Australia. About 150 inmates demonstrated against a government decision to deport 57 men, women and children without even giving them the opportunity to apply for refugee status. When the 57 arrived by boat in March, officials did not inform them of their right, under international law, to apply for asylum.

As with the Woomera protest, a wider group of refugees sought to defend the rights of those slated for removal. Officers claimed that the 150 protesters damaged fences,

windows, tents and a de-mountable building. Guards used tear gas against the prisoners, injuring four.

When journalists were finally allowed into the centre more than a week later, detainees chanted "We want freedom," before being hustled away. Children held up handwritten signs saying, "Don't put us in cages", "we hate cages", "stop demonising us", "please stop hating us" and "multiculturalism not racism".

At the Port Hedland centre, a converted mining camp, also in Australia's north-west, the government's repression reached a new level on May 26. Around 170 state and federal police, Australian Protective Services officers and ACM guards, armed with guns, batons and shields, conducted a pre-dawn raid to arrest and remove 22 detainees. Refugee groups condemned the raid, saying women and children were beaten and handcuffed.

Among the prisoners carted off to jail in Roebourne, some 200 kilometres away, were the mother and father of a six-year-old girl and her 11-year-old brother, leaving the children without their parents for at least three weeks. When the charges against the couple were read out in court, the father called out: "The ACM are criminals." The distraught mother left the court crying and calling out for her children.

Inside the Port Hedland centre, 300 refugees, including eight children, went on hunger strike for several days, saying that those arrested were unfairly targeted.

The government claims that those arrested, including three teenagers, were ringleaders in an alleged riot on May 11 when guards suddenly transferred six inmates to another centre. Detainees were outraged when guards began to beat a 15-year-old boy. About 100 prisoners allegedly threw stones and damaged buildings before being dispersed by guards spraying tear gas.

After the May 11 protest, guards became abusive towards inmates. On May 17, guards assaulted two Iraqi teenagers. One received bruising to his left side and the other received extensive bruising to his body and face. Around 150 refugees surrounded the guards and demanded that management call the police to prevent the boys being placed

in isolation cells. The totally dark, airless cells, referred to by detainees as torture chambers, measure about two-and-a-half metres square.

The guards had accused the teenagers of being “troublemakers” after they approached detainees working in the kitchen to inform them that a strike had been called over working conditions. Inmates were demanding a pay increase and a proper roster. They are currently paid in coupon money, the only way they can buy phone cards, cigarettes, shampoo and extra milk.

Unrest has been building in Port Hedland over the past 12 months. June 9 last year saw a mass breakout of 100 detainees, following the Woomera example. On January 21, guards used capsicum spray against 180 protesting detainees, sparking a hunger strike. On March 30, centre operators claim that a riot broke out, involving 60 inmates.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock has vehemently rejected calls for an inquiry into the disturbances, declaring that it would undermine Australia's migration policy. In all, the government now has six detention centres holding 3,622 inmates. Of these, 1,185 have been denied refugee status and are facing deportation. In some cases, the government has been unable to remove them because no other country will take them.

Like other Western powers, Australia adheres to the restrictive 1951 Refugee Convention, which narrowly defines refugees as people who face persecution because of their religion, race, political opinion, nationality or particular social group. This definition bars entry to those fleeing hunger, disease, economic oppression, war and civil war.

Australia has gone further than any other country in enforcing this policy, building a series of virtual concentration camps and applying a regime of mandatory detention to all unauthorised arrivals. Detention can last for many months and even years, particularly if inmates exercise their legal rights to appeal against decisions to reject their applications.

The unrest in the camps has fuelled divisions in ruling circles, with some religious leaders, judges, academics and media commentators calling for policy modifications. Many are concerned that the country's international image is being tarnished, undermining the government's ability to undertake interventions such as into East Timor under the banner of human rights. Others are calling for increased numbers of information technology graduates and other skilled migrants, particularly from Asia, who might be put off by the treatment of refugees from Asia and the Middle East.

The growing cost of mandatory detention has also become a factor, with the government spending \$200 million this year locating, detaining, processing and removing asylum seekers. In addition, there are signs of growing public

support for the refugees, with anti-detention marches attracting several thousand people nationally on June 3.

Backed personally by Prime Minister John Howard, however, Ruddock is stepping up his efforts to vilify the refugees, accusing them of resorting to violence to put pressure on the government. Refugee advocate Marion Le questioned this claim, pointing out that detainees were endangering their own claims by protesting on behalf of others.

Ruddock also displayed his contempt for the plight of refugees by defending the government's policy of not informing unauthorised arrivals of their internationally-protected right to apply for refugee status. He cynically declared that the detainees being removed from Curtin had not been adequately “coached” by so-called people smugglers on how to get into Australia.

While coming under mounting fire in some powerful quarters, notably Rupert Murdoch's media outlets, Howard and Ruddock are clinging to right-wing populism and nationalism, for perceived electoral reasons. With an election due before the end of the year, and facing considerable public hostility, they are deliberately promoting anti-immigrant xenophobia to try to undercut support for the extreme rightwing One Nation party.

Having introduced mandatory detention in the early 1990s, the Labor Party leaders are equally intent on retaining its basic features. Opposition leader Kim Beazley has called for an inquiry into the management of the detention centres but reiterated his belief in detaining unauthorised arrivals, “because if you don't detain them you allow yourself to be overrun by illegality”.

Labor's immigration spokesman, Con Sciacca, has gone further, urging the government to turn one of the detention centres into a fully fortified prison for those asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected and face deportation, thus isolating them from other detainees. His proposal for a high security deportation holding pen would take the official policy to its logical end of treating desperate refugees as criminals.



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