

Protests erupt at Australian refugee detention centre

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The frustration of 950 asylum seekers held at the Woomera detention facility in Central Australia, many for years, boiled over in a series of protests before Christmas.

On December 17, detainees yelling “visa, visa, visa” staged two demonstrations—one in the afternoon and a second in the evening involving women and children. Fires were lit that night, damaging 13 buildings and completely destroying the mess hall and three other buildings. Other fires were lit in different compounds in subsequent protests.

The following day, 300 detainees broke through one security fence and attempted to bring down the outer layer using bed frames, clotheslines and bed sheets made into rope. According to a government spokesperson, they were repelled with tear gas and water cannon. Three fire teams, an ambulance and police came to the scene.

Further demonstrations occurred on December 19. That night 50 detainees again tried to scale the eight-metre razor wire perimeter fence, but were stopped with water cannon. Another group threw rocks at staff for several hours. The *ABC* reported the presence of a team of people wearing riot gear, possibly Star Force police officers, at the centre.

The protests were the most serious and widespread since 450 detainees broke out of the centre 18 months ago. In all, 21 buildings were set alight and \$2 million worth of damage was caused. Over the past two months, detainees at Woomera have resorted to increasingly desperate attempts to focus public attention on their plight. There were six fire-related incidents in the four weeks leading up to the latest eruption.

Dale West from the Catholic organisation Centacare told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “We were expecting

something as severe as this a couple of months ago. These people are caged without usual human courtesies and dignity, and there will come a point when they feel they have nothing to lose.”

Among the detainees at Woomera are 300 children, up to 50 of whom are unaccompanied by their parents. The Howard government has refused to release data on the length of stay at Woomera or other refugee detention centres. There is no limit, however, to the time asylum seekers can be detained and many are held in detention indefinitely because they cannot be returned to countries such as Iraq.

A recent study published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* by Iraqi medical practitioner Aamer Sultan, himself a detainee, found that the average detention period at the detention centre in Villawood was six months. For 33 long-term detainees studied by Sultan, the average was 2.1 years.

Conditions at Woomera are particularly severe. It is sited on the edge of a desert where temperatures are extreme and regularly hit 40 degrees at this time of the year. The grounds are a treeless, red dustbowl surrounded by barbed wire fences.

The government has recently added to the tensions at the Woomera centre by toughening its approach to visa applications. Hader, a recently released detainee, told the *Australian* that issue of greatest concern to detainees was the number of visas being granted to asylum seekers. He said that the number of visas issued dropped after he arrived in Woomera in late August. “When we reached the detention centre, we heard there were many visas issued every week,” he said. “But we didn’t see that, only five or six.”

Of the 250 asylum seekers who arrived with Hader in late August, only 25 have been released, 30 have been rejected and the remainder are still waiting for their

applications to be processed. Some detainees have not reached the third interview stage and are banned from making phone calls, sending letters, watching television and reading newspapers.

Hader said that detainees often supported the lighting of fires because there was no other way of protesting. “Not everyone has been involved [in the fires],” he said. “But when there is talk about ‘we must do something’ [they join in].” While at Woomera, he explained, 20 or 25 children under the age of 18 had slashed themselves as a way of protesting. “They feel hopeless,” he said.

The criteria used by the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) to determine refugee status was made even tougher under the government’s Border Control Legislation introduced in September. Firstly, the definition of persecution was tightened. To qualify, asylum seekers must face serious harm from systematic discrimination.

Secondly, the RRT is now permitted to draw “adverse inferences” more easily if asylum seekers do not have documents proving nationality, cannot provide an acceptable explanation, or refuse to provide information under oath. By definition many refugees are forced to flee without papers because their governments persecute them. Now their lack of documents can be used against them.

The government has responded to the latest protests at Woomera by suspending the processing of visas and promising to crack down on detainees. All detainees are to be collectively punished for the demonstrations. According to an Immigration Department letter to detainees, visa processing will not “commence again until the situation is under control.”

A government spokesman described the fires as “a deliberate campaign of criminal activity to hold the Australian people to ransom in order to gain visas.” The government plans to institute its new strip-search powers, further reinforce the perimeter fence, confiscate aerosol cans including insect repellants, and force detainees to smoke in a designated area.

In a further comment, another immigration official said detainees would be kept in Woomera no matter what the state of the centre. “Detainees will remain in Woomera and if they continue to destroy accommodation they will simply have to occupy the facilities that are available,” he said.

A section of the political establishment has criticised the Howard government for having lost control of the cost and administration of the detention centres and has called for changes.

An editorial in the *Australian* called for detainees “under review and awaiting deportation”—a third of those held at Woomera—to be placed in a separate facility and “offered counselling”. South Australian Labor MP, Lyn Brewer, echoed this sentiment saying, “we will have to send high risk detainees to other areas” to separate them from the women and children.

But far from altering the draconian regime facing asylum seekers in Australia or even ameliorating the intolerable condition they face in detention camps like Woomera, the proposals are simply aimed at segregating those most likely to protest in order to more easily control and deport them.



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