

A first-hand account

Life inside an Australian refugee detention centre

A correspondent
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The following account of the oppressive conditions inside the Immigration Detention Centre at Maribyrnong in Victoria was submitted to the *World Socialist Web Site* by a reader. The centre is one of six facilities currently holding several thousand detainees under the Howard government's policy of mandatory detention of all asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants. Many, including hundreds of children, have been incarcerated for months and even years.

"The more humanity owes the poor man, the more society refuses him. All doors are closed to him, even when he has the right to open them; and if sometimes he obtains justice, it is with greater difficulty than another would have in obtaining a pardon." [*Discourse on Political Economy*, Jean Jacques Rousseau, 1755]

I would like to describe the Immigration Detention Centre, Maribyrnong—one of the string of six privately managed centres—where 35 of the 80 inmates went on hunger strike recently for six days in support of recent protests at Woomera. The regime inside is designed to reduce the men, women and children imprisoned there to an existence in limbo and to rob them of any hope.

The entrance is so anonymous and bland that passing motorists would scarcely notice it. Yet it is only a block away from Melbourne's largest shopping mall. Down the driveway, high electronic gates protect the building and the pale grey walls are topped with rolled razor wire. The banality of the architecture coincides unpleasantly with the systematic and detailed cruelty being meted out to the inmates.

Privacy is a luxury that detainees are denied. The 60 men sleep four to a room, sometimes with two more sleeping on the floor. At night the guards come and

take a head-count every half hour, flashing their torches into the sleepers' faces. There is not even the right to uninterrupted sleep here. But the dreams still come—and with them nightmares of incarceration and barbed wire.

The inmates live under a regime of uncertainty and fear. They can be deported at any time. The guards can come and wake someone up at 4am, and drag him off without even giving him the chance to say goodbye to the others. If he struggles he can be drugged with an injection in the arm. When a Jordanian man was being deported this way, the guards broke his arm.

By day there is nowhere to go and little to do. There is no air, there are no trees, there is no grass. Although there are people from all over the world, there are no interpreters allowed. What for? Who would they talk to? About what? If they try to discuss the events of the world, September 11, the war in Afghanistan, the Australian refugee situation, the guards come and listen in on their conversations and disperse them. They have no right to opinions.

The absence of democratic rights weighs down on everything. The government maintains a thin fiction of consultation. The Ombudsman conducts a monthly meeting inside with the Department of Immigration represented, along with ACM (the private prison company) and some detainees to make it look representative. But the detainees are hand picked, and none of the other inmates ever know anything about what goes on in these meetings that are just a façade.

No lawyer can have a free conversation with an inmate, in case the question of rights becomes specific. On arrival, inmates are interrogated without a lawyer, in isolation, without being told they can have one. In some detention centres, this isolation can last for

weeks.

There is no Internet and the few newspapers are censored, particularly if there is anything in them in support of the refugees. There is no media access to the centre.

All the rules are enforced arbitrarily, without any rhyme or reason. The rules change all the time, and the inmates are not told about the changes, because if they know the rules they might consider themselves to have some rights.

The auxiliary staff play a role to demoralise the inmates, and make them think they should give up their applications to remain in Australia. The nurse is discriminatory in her treatment, and acts as a gatekeeper to the doctor, who is barely there—only four hours a week. She tells inmates “It is better if you go back” and his nickname is “Dr Panadol”—that is, he won’t prescribe much more than aspirin.

Yet many people are seriously ill. One detainee had tuberculosis—this was diagnosed for months, but the other inmates weren’t told. He had to be sent away to hospital, and returned with 20 tablets prescribed for his disease, but he was still sleeping in a room with four people, sometimes more. He slept next to them, ate with them, with the potential to infect them, and they weren’t told the truth about his condition.

To degrade them even further, if they do get sent outside for medical treatment or for official hearings, they have to go in handcuffs. One Malaysian man was handcuffed when he went to the dentist. He had to sit in the chair with his hands cuffed together while he had his teeth fixed.

These constant humiliations are meant to remind them that they are officially regarded as *criminals*, even though Australia is not *imprisoning* them, but merely detaining them. Parliament has legally defined centres such as Maribyrnong as “not prisons”, and so the inmates are not termed “prisoners”. This sanitised terminology is to hide the trampling on their legal rights.

If the inmate’s family or friends can visit, the main control room requests the particular person to be brought to the supervised visiting area. He or she is escorted through a series of airlocks and doors to briefly meet the relative or friend. The room is cramped and sterile, with nothing but plastic chairs around the walls. Outside there is a courtyard with concrete walls

and floor, a few more plastic chairs against the walls. The guards oversee it all through glass doors and large observation windows.

Starved of ordinary human contact, the inmate will have an hour or so to try and communicate his anguish and humiliation, the worry etching more deeply into his face each visit. As the months stretch out, the arbitrary regime exacts its toll, the abuses pile up, the mental outlook becomes more hopeless. “There is not even any place to cry,” says one. “We cannot smile. We have nothing to smile about.” Some appear to be nearly broken in spirit, and then can only engage in conversation by a real effort of will.

A year ago, when a Tongan man Viliami Tanginoa committed suicide inside Maribyrnong, there were about 10 others who were close to doing the same. But then the demonstrations started outside, and hope rekindled in the possibility of freedom.

The aftermath of Tanginoa’s suicide makes clear that the authorities undertake reprisals against inmates. Those witnesses to his agony on the basketball pole were put in isolation for months, and one was sent to prison before being deported.

Weighing on the minds of the inmates is their knowledge of the whole system of detention centres. In Port Hedland, there are coffin cells, which are tiny compartments without any window, where there is no difference between night and day. There is an Iraqi boy, aged 17, in such a cell, living there in complete darkness. One of the Maribyrnong detainees had been in an isolation cell for 45 days. Another says softly: “This is like something from the dark ages, this is like something medieval.”

The Maribyrnong detainees would like to know when Australia is going to tell the truth about their incarceration and renounce its signature to the 1951 UN Declaration on Refugees.



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