

Australian government drops threat to bar UN visit to detention centre

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After six days of threatening not to do so, the Howard government last week accepted a request from United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, to send an envoy to visit the refugee detention centre at Woomera in the South Australian desert. The request followed a 16-day hunger strike by several hundred Afghan detainees against the conditions in the centre and lengthy delays in processing their claims for asylum.

At a meeting with Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer in Geneva on February 5, Robinson asked that a personal envoy, former Indian Supreme Court Chief Justice Rajendra Bhagwati, be permitted to inspect the centre. Robinson had received a letter from three Australian religious groups—the Uniting and Catholic churches and the Islamic Council—describing Woomera as a “concentration camp” and asking her to intervene. Robinson said she found the letter “sufficiently serious” to require a “personal appraisal on the ground”.

Downer displayed some hesitation at the meeting, but told Robinson he would discuss it with fellow ministers once he returned to Australia. In the days that followed, Downer, joined by Prime Minister John Howard and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock, sought to whip up a public sentiment against the visit. Downer declared that “raging and ranting” church groups had influenced Robinson.

Howard made every effort to thumb his nose at the UN saying, “I’m not particularly bowled over by a request from Mary Robinson.” On the morning of February 11, the day that his cabinet was due to decide on the visit, Howard expressed contempt for Robinson’s position. “You may ask, if the UNHCR [UN High Commissioner for Refugees] has ready access, why is the High Commissioner for Refugees, or whatever her title is—Human Rights Commissioner—why is it she also wants access,” he told Channel Nine. “You might start to wonder whether there’s some agenda being run.”

Ruddock questioned the amount of “scrutiny” Australia’s detention centres received from UN agencies. He offered the spurious argument that official visits were disruptive to the centres and stretched government resources. Yet, representatives of the unelected Afghanistan administration could be visiting Woomera in just a few weeks—at the Howard

government’s request. The purpose of that visit, which Howard suggested to Afghanistan’s interim leader Hamid Karzai on a recent trip to New York, is to assist in removing refugees back to Afghanistan, despite the continuing US bombing, factional fighting, repression of minorities and hunger in that country.

Although cabinet ultimately approved the UN inspection, it did so on certain conditions. Bhagwati will only be permitted to visit with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which will not be until May, at the earliest. Furthermore, the group may be denied permission to talk to detainees, “depending upon what the UN wanted to do,” Downer stated.

By May, the government could have deported or shifted detainees involved in the hunger strikes to other camps. Batches of refugees are deported regularly and detainees, particularly those involved in protests, are frequently transferred to another of Australia’s six detention centres. Nevertheless, Robinson accepted the government’s terms, issuing a statement that she hoped the visit would take place “no later than May”.

After the decision, Downer continued to rail against the church groups, as well as the ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions), which had passed the church letter onto Robinson. The visits to the detention centres would turn into “some kind of circus,” he declared. “We just can’t have a stream of people from every UN agency that gets lobbied by the ACTU or other non-government organisations and, on the basis of that, they think they might get a bit of a media run out of it, rush along and go to Woomera.”

Downer attempted to put a gloss on the decision, asserting that the government had “nothing to hide”. But the most obvious reason for prevaricating on the UN request was that the conditions in Woomera and other Australian camps are barbaric and in breach of UN and international covenants. To have blocked the visit, would only have put a spotlight on this fact.

Detainees are held indefinitely in searing heat in remote, desolate locations, many for more than two years. They are treated worse than prison inmates—denied adequate medical facilities, proper education for their children, free access to news sources and independent legal assistance. They are subjected to humiliating and intimidatory treatment, such as denial of privacy, constant night-time checks and arbitrary rule

changes. If they object to their situation, punishment can include solitary confinement in “coffin cells”.

Without notice, the government stopped considering refugee applications from Afghan detainees last November, and only agreed to re-commence as part of a deal to end the hunger strike. Other refugees, particularly from Iraq and Iran, have also experienced protracted delays. As a result, the camps remain nearly filled, even though the government has used naval warships to turn away all refugee boats since August. As at February 5, there were 760 people, including 217 children, imprisoned behind the razor wire at Woomera. Across the country, the total was 2,012 detainees, including 370 children, with about 2,000 more held in offshore camps at Christmas and Cocos Islands, Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s isolated Manus Island.

Apart from having much to hide, Howard and his ministers had other motives for threatening to reject UN inspection. Their anti-UN demagoguery is oriented to the nationalist and xenophobic constituency that the government has increasingly cultivated and relied upon for electoral support. Such rhetoric is designed to make an appeal against so-called interference with national sovereignty. It dovetails with various right-wing nostrums that depict the UN as some kind of left-wing conspiracy. This is not the first time that Howard has fanned anti-UN sentiment. During 2000, his government threatened to pull out of the UN committee system and refused a UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention request to visit the detention centres.

The government’s leaders felt compelled, on this occasion, to allow a UN visit. In recent months its detention regime has come under criticism from media, human rights, religious, legal and civil liberties organisations, both in Australia and internationally, and there are concerns in some quarters that long-term economic and diplomatic interests are being damaged. While the government was working out its response to Robinson’s request, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper carried a column by the Australian correspondent for the Indonesian magazine *Tempo* warning that “Australia is fast developing a reputation of being isolationist and lacking in compassion,” threatening to result in “the loss of trade and capacity for diplomatic negotiation”.

To have refused access to the UN would have severely undermined Australia’s ability to use “humanitarianism” or upholding “human rights” as the pretext for its interventions in the Asia-Pacific region. Australian troops remain in East Timor under a UN administration. The military intervention, which helped secure Australia’s oil and strategic interests, was carried out with UN backing.

Just days before the government was due to make its decision on the UN visit, its own Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) announced that it considered that the conditions inside Woomera breached the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. HREOC Commissioner Sev Ozdowski,

appointed by the government in 2000, told the National Press Club: “You had riots, you had buildings burnt, you had hunger strike(s), you had all the things which are happening over there, and kids are living in that environment,” he said. “The culture of despair rasps on them.”

A five-day HREOC assessment of Woomera during the 16-day hunger strike found that 24 children had harmed themselves in a two-week period. Five had sewn their lips together, three had slashed themselves, others had swallowed shampoo and one attempted to hang himself. Contradicting government allegations during the hunger strikes, the report found no instances of parents encouraging children to harm themselves.

HREOC found that more than 70 children had been in Woomera for over six months, nine for over 12 months and many were suffering psychological trauma. Schooling was limited to children under 12 years of age and even then, it was for just two hours a day, in a single classroom. “If your child was going to similar schooling in Australia, you would be protesting with all your powers,” Ozdowski said.

Ruddock immediately dismissed the findings, and insisted that parents had helped children to sew their lips together. His allegation was later proven false when South Australian authorities confirmed there was no evidence that adults had coerced children into joining the hunger strike.

Ruddock also accused HREOC of seeking to undermine the compulsory detention regime. “These conclusions have been drafted on the basis of trying to unwind mandatory detention,” he charged. As a matter of fact, HREOC does not oppose forced detention, but merely suggested the release of some children. Nevertheless, Ruddock’s stance presumably means that the government will brand as illegitimate any inquiry—even if conducted by its own handpicked agencies—that in any way calls into question the mandatory detention policy.



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