Australian government refuses to transfer refugees from malaria-ridden camp

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The Australian government is continuing to incarcerate, in life-threatening conditions, the asylum seekers it vilified during last year's election, when it falsely accused them of throwing their children overboard in a bid to enter the country. Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock has contemptuously rejected a call by the Royal Australasian College of Physicians to immediately transfer the 350 Iraqi refugees from an Australian-financed detention camp on Manus Island, a remote Papua New Guinea outpost, where their lives are at risk from a drug-resistant strain of malaria.

During the election campaign, Ruddock and Prime Minister John Howard demonised the refugees who were floundering on a sinking fishing boat off Australian waters, claiming they had thrown their children into the sea when intercepted by a navy warship, the *HMAS Adelaide*. The two politicians professed revulsion, with Howard declaring that people who endangered children's lives should not be allowed into the country. After being rescued by the *Adelaide's* crew, the asylum-seekers were transported to an old military base on Manus Island, under an agreement with the PNG government, which was given strict instructions not to allow them any access to the media.

During the past two weeks, the "children overboard" allegations have been exposed as lies. It has now been revealed that Howard and his ministers concocted the story, in collaboration with top military, public service and intelligence officials, to deceive the public and whip up anti-refugee hysteria during the election campaign. The subsequent treatment of the refugees at the hands of the government reveals the real extent of its concern for the children's lives and wellbeing.

Last week, the College of Physicians, backed by 10 experts in the area of public health and infectious diseases, recommended that the government urgently remove the refugees because *falciparum* malaria, which is resistant to the drug chloroquine, is endemic on Manus Island.

College president, Professor Richard Larkins, commented: "Given the medical evidence about the prevalence of malaria, in particular the chloroquine-resistant strains, on Manus Island, the responsible course of action is to immediately evacuate the detention centre. This is the only truly effective way people at risk can be protected, especially pregnant women and children, but also any others with low immunity."

Statistics from Manus Island indicate that a high proportion of the local population is infected with the disease. "Malaria is a dangerous disease which can rapidly lead to severe illness and death, particularly in pregnant women and young children," Dr Jill Sewell, president of the College's Paediatrics and Child Health Division, pointed out.

"Australia's national antibiotic guidelines recommend that pregnant women should not travel to areas with chloroquine-resistant *falciparum* malaria, and Australia's policy of placing asylum seekers on Manus Island is putting them at high risk," she stated. "In addition, preventative drugs such as doxycycline and mefloquine are unsuitable for prevention for pregnant women and young children. The detainees should be moved to a location where malaria and other potentially dangerous diseases are not endemic, in order to protect the health of asylum seekers and staff working in the facility."

The government dismissed the doctors' call out of hand. Ruddock's department callously declared that health services in the Manus camp were better than those the asylum seekers were accustomed to and therefore the refugees, including the children, would stay put, indefinitely.

The first press account of the conditions at the Lombrum military air base, 400 kilometres north of the PNG mainland, only appeared on February 5. Greg Roberts of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Melbourne *Age* reported that malaria and other potentially fatal diseases have not been treated on Manus. Doctors at the island's Lorengau Hospital told him that 15 asylum seekers, including children aged between five and seven, have malaria.

The doctors said it was likely the detainees caught malaria on Manus, which has one of the highest rates of infection in the world. Yet, one doctor reported that it took "some time" before staff at the detention centre received essential medication to treat malaria. No mass immunisations against diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera and polio have taken place and doctors suspect that some asylum seekers have tuberculosis and typhoid fever. An X-ray machine used to screen contagious diseases only arrived in late January.

Asylum seekers were only treated at Lorengau Hospital, which is 15 kilometres from the detention centre, because the

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military base's medical centre was, as one doctor explained, in a state of "total disrepair". When the asylum seekers arrived on the island, the medical centre, which is up the hill from the detention camp, had smashed windows and the insect gauze had rotted away.

According to a local PNG newsletter, Lorengau Hospital itself, which caters for the whole of Manus Province, is barely functioning. Doctors are unable to wash their hands because the water supply only flows in the morning. Daily temperatures are between 24 and 30 degrees, yet in December the air conditioning unit in the operating theatre needed fixing.

Roberts was the first Australian journalist to visit the detention camp, but was unable to enter the facility or speak to the refugees because of the official media ban. A similar ban applies on Nauru, the site of the other Australian-funded detention camp in the South Pacific.

Apart from silencing the refugees rescued by the *Adelaide*, preventing them from replying to the government's slanders, these bans are a clear attempt to prevent coverage of the conditions prevailing under the Howard government's so-called "Pacific solution," which consists of militarily turning away refugee boats or forcing their passengers into detention on far-flung islands.

PNG residents told Roberts that the first group of asylum seekers, from the *Adelaide*, believed they were going to Australia and were "very angry" once they arrived on Manus. Some tried to claw their way over the barbed wire fences, and 20 detainees staged a hunger strike.

Popai David and Klopil Komet travelled by boat to observe the scene. "We saw them trying to get out, screaming that they did not want to be there, that they were promised they were going to Australia," David said.

Komet said detainees tried to get over the barbed wire fence, but were "cut up". "They had blood all over them." PNG soldiers pointed guns at them and threatened to shoot them if they did not get off the fences. Komet remarked that he "felt sorry for them. They were really frightened."

In late January, another 140 asylum seekers were airlifted to Manus from Christmas Island, adding to the 218 refugees already on the island. The refugees are housed in converted shipping containers covered with green cladding. Private security guards with walkie-talkies and batons circle the perimeter. Refugees considered "ringleaders" have been forcibly isolated from other detainees.

Roberts saw signs on the detention camp fence saying "our children are not going to die here" and "we refuse to live here". Other signs visible in photographs published in the *Age* and *Herald* read: "What's our crime, why are we in jail?", "We ask the United Nations to get us out of here" and "Where are human rights?".

At the behest of the Howard government, the PNG administration has barred the detainees from obtaining legal assistance. Lucas Kuwah, a PNG law student, has been trying to gain access to the centre for three months, on behalf of PNG and Australian lawyers who wish to assist them.

Kuwah described the treatment of the detainees as unjust. "First they are forced against their will to come here, then they get here and there is not enough protection against disease and hardly anything of a hospital." The refugees have no right to appeal to any outside agency against rejection of their asylum claims.

It is little wonder that the refugees from Iraq, Palestine, Turkey, Iran and Bangladesh are outraged and frustrated. They fled their own countries to escape political persecution and economic backwardness, but are now caged on a malaria-infested island that lacks the most basic infrastructure. Manus Province is the most isolated and least visited in PNG. Lorengau, its only significant town, has barely 4,500 people. Ninety-five percent of the province's people live in villages and depend upon subsistence farming and fishing. Even Deputy Governor Job Pomat does not have electricity access and washes his clothes in a stream.

Yet, Howard and Ruddock are intent on expanding the Manus camp and extending its use indefinitely. In return for cash payments, the government of PNG, a former Australian colony, recently agreed to house up to 1,000 refugees there for 12 months, and construction is underway to extend the centre. Asylum seekers could be incarcerated there for many years. The Manus Island Deputy Premier said it could be "two years or three years or more [if] there are problems for Australia in finding places for these people to go".

Ruddock, who visited Manus with Labor Party immigration spokesperson Julia Gillard just before the first news report, insisted that, "the level of care was of a very high order". He declared there were no malaria cases on the island, refuting the hospital's report of 15 cases. He contradicted his own departmental spokeswomen, who said there were "five confirmed cases of malaria among asylum seekers in Manus". After returning from the trip, Gillard backed Ruddock, saying the conditions in the centres were "not bad" compared to third world refugee centres.

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