

Growing protests against Australian refugee detention camps

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Nearly 50,000 people have joined rallies across Australia in recent weeks against the Howard government's policy of incarcerating asylum seekers. More than 3,000 detainees, many facing severe psychological trauma and health problems, are currently being held in prison camps, both within the country and on remote islands in the Pacific and Indian oceans.

Close to 15,000 people marched in a Palm Sunday rally through Sydney's inner city on March 24. Broad layers of middle class and working class people participated, spanning all age groups. Many had never attended a demonstration before. Trade union, immigrant, radical, Christian and Muslim groups supported the rally. In Melbourne, more than 20,000 walked through the streets, while smaller protests were held in other cities.

The following weekend, around 1,000 protesters travelled in buses and four-wheel drive vehicles and camped near the Woomera detention centre in the South Australian desert. Another 700 people marched on Sydney's Villawood detention centre, tying balloons with slogans to the outer fences. In Melbourne, 600 attended a Passover vigil protest at Maribyrnong detention centre, organised by a Jewish refugee group. Speakers at the rally drew parallels between the turning away of boatloads of Jewish refugees during the 1930s and the government's current treatment of refugees.

Rally participants condemned the government for breaking international laws, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in its treatment of detainees. In Easter sermons, several Christian bishops made a point of criticising the detention of children.

Numerous medical and professional groups have also expressed opposition to the government's policy. In February, the Public Health Association of Australia, the Australian Hepatitis Council, the Medical Association for Prevention of War, the Australian Nurses Federation (Victoria) and six other groups published a statement in a major Australian newspaper. Signed by 600 individual members, the statement accused the government of contravening international human rights law and of administering the "antithesis of good public health policy" in the Nauru and Manus Island detention camps. It called for the immediate release of all detainees. Health professionals have raised particular concerns about the mental and physical health

of children in detention.

At present, 125 children are incarcerated in the mainland camps, out of a total detainee population of 1,531. With no time limit on detention, the government has held many refugees for more than three years. An unknown number who have had their visa applications rejected are stranded in detention indefinitely because the government is unable to deport them to certain countries, including Iraq and Iran.

Since July 1, the numbers in detention within the country have dropped from 4,182, largely because the government has used the navy to block asylum seekers reaching Australian shores. Warships have turned some boats back to sea, while 1,155 refugees have been forcibly transported to an Australian-financed camp in Nauru. 446 asylum seekers have been forced onto either the malaria-prone facility on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island or the offshore Australian camp on Christmas Island. Together, the island camps hold 376 children.

Woomera, which has seen detainee protests, hunger strikes and mass breakouts since it opened in 1999, holds about 300 asylum seekers, down from 1,000 nine months ago. During the Easter weekend, it became the focus of the national demonstrations.

Protesters began to arrive at Woomera on March 28, pitching tents one kilometre from the detention centre. Protests of this size have not occurred there before, because of the centre's isolation. It lies some 500 kilometres from the nearest major city—Adelaide. The federal government has established an exclusion zone around the centre, which is part of a former rocket testing facility.

On the first night, police pushed over a number of tents and scuffled with protesters, attempting to force them away from the camp and into the Woomera township. On Good Friday, the next night, 1,000 people walked past a police barricade and toward the detention centre, holding a banner to give to detainees.

Upon reaching the perimeter, protesters climbed onto the five-metre high, outer barbed-wire fencing, which began to give way. They dismantled a section of the fence and many walked through to the inner fence to speak and shake hands with around 80 detainees. The detainees and demonstrators started chanting "freedom" and "ACM, immigration mafia," directed

against Australasian Correctional Management, the company that runs the detention centres. Several detainees cut themselves trying to climb over the razor wire-topped fencing. In the meantime, other detainees loosened a metal slat in the fence.

Fifty detainees, including four children, jumped through the fence and over a line of police into the crowd of protesters. One woman yelled, "Freedom! Freedom!" as police tackled her to the ground. Protesters struggled with the police and were able to free her. Another detainee ran out shouting, "After two years I'm free". Some protesters swapped clothes with detainees to disguise them. Ten mounted riot police rode into the crowd, while other police stood by with a water cannon.

More than 20 prisoners escaped the immediate area. For two days, several detainees sheltered in the protest tent camp, surrounded by police and the desert. Some of them said they would risk jail or death before going back to Woomera. One child said guards inside the centre called him and other detainees "animals."

Ali Narozi, a 20-year-old Afghan who had been locked in Woomera for a year, spoke to the media in the tent camp. "We are scared from our homeland," he told the *Age*. "We come for a safer place, not be put in a [detention] camp."

Narozi expressed frustration with his asylum application, which is currently before the Federal Court. He faced uncertainty, he said, not knowing if or when the government would release him. He had resorted to self-harm attempts, such as drinking shampoo, and now required tablets to sleep. When he first applied for asylum, immigration officials did not believe he was an Afghan. After a period, the officials accepted he was, but said "now the situation in Afghanistan is better (and) we cannot give you a visa."

Two escapees who went into hiding in Melbourne told reporters they would never give themselves up to authorities. "Our life is not in danger but our mind is in danger," Sadiq Ali declared. "Every person became crazy in Woomera camp, even children, female, male, everyone." He added: "I think animals are better treated than us in Woomera."

The government's crackdown in response to the breakout began before the three-day Woomera protest had even ended. After the demonstrators left the detention centre on Good Friday, ACM guards clashed violently with detainees, according to inmates who contacted the *Age*. Guards used tear gas against the asylum seekers, including a one-year-old child, and one prisoner suffered a suspected broken arm. Detainees threw bedposts and garbage bins at guards. In the high-security Oscar compound, detainees were handcuffed and locked in a common room until the next morning.

During the next days, guards warned detainees not to go near security fences and constantly moved them between compounds to prevent escape attempts.

Despite the obvious desperation of the escapees, the government instigated a massive police operation to hunt them down, threatening them with lengthy jail sentences. Police

quickly arrested 31 asylum seekers, who spent several nights in Port Augusta jail, being treated like hardened criminals, before being returned to Woomera.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock warned that, once captured, the escapees could be denied refugee status or, even if granted visas, would have to serve jail sentences. "If people commit a serious offence under our law and that involves jail sentences, that can lead to protection claims being vitiated," he said.

Ruddock criticised the South Australian state police, saying they should have confronted protesters with more force and earlier. "It may have been a misjudgment, one would have hoped that steps would have been taken at an earlier point in time to remove the protesters from the environs of the detention centre," he told Sky News.

Protest organisers held out the prospect of pressuring the government to modify its policy but Prime Minister John Howard joined Ruddock in declaring that the protests would only strengthen the government's resolve. Howard railed against the protesters, declaring "no amount of demonstration, no series of breaches of the law, is going to in any way alter the government's policy in relation to illegal immigration".

Further, in a bid to intimidate opponents of the policy, police charged 28 protesters with harbouring escapees or trespassing, and Ruddock said those charged face up to 10 years in jail. Later in the week, police raided the Melbourne house of a refugee advocate.

The demonstrations have revealed growing public opposition to the government's brutal and inhumane treatment of asylum seekers. The perspective of the various groups organising the protests, however, is to appeal for support from Labor, the Australian Democrats and the Greens, as well as trade union officials, all of whom have long supported the erection and maintenance of draconian refugee and immigration controls.



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