

Australia: Staff expose inhuman conditions at Woomera Detention Centre

Jake Skeers
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“About Woomera”, the title of an ABC-TV *Four Corners* program broadcast on May 19, provided a rare exposure of the brutal conditions inside one of Australia’s immigration detention centres. Using leaked video footage and detention centre documents, as well as interviews with former detention centre staff, the documentary revealed how defenceless refugees—men, women and children—were treated like criminals for seeking the basic right to asylum.

Located in the central Australian desert where temperatures often reach 50 degrees Celsius, the Woomera Detention Centre was used to incarcerate hundreds of asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and South Asia. While the facility closed in April this year and detainees have been transferred to other camps, it was the site of regular suicide attempts, numerous protests and the beating of inmates by guards wearing riot gear since it opened in November 1999.

The Howard government contracted Australian Correctional Management (ACM), a private company with a background in running prisons, to manage the camp. The harsh and inhumane conditions were aimed at generating widespread media coverage and thus acting as a deterrent to any refugee contemplating travelling to Australia.

Designed for 400 people, Woomera held up to 1,000 asylum seekers within weeks of opening. ACM management told two nurses and an office assistant to process all detainees within 48 hours of arrival or the company would face fines under its contract with the Department of Immigration.

Staff had no official interpreter and were so overwhelmed that detainees with disabilities or other health problems were not treated. In one case, a child with cerebral palsy was incarcerated in Woomera for three or four weeks before staff became aware of the condition. ACM employees were also unaware that another child had a serious heart condition.

By April 2000, nearly 1,500 people were crammed into the facility, which had no air-conditioning, only three washing machines and five toilets and failed to provide women with adequate supplies of sanitary pads.

Despite these conditions, many detainees remained optimistic, believing they would be quickly granted refugee status. As the months passed and pressure mounted, however, the number of self-harm attempts increased and protests

became more frequent.

After six months, several detainees became so frustrated with the visa process that they asked to speak to the Department of Immigration. Alley Crace, a former office worker at Woomera, told *Four Corners* that immigration officials were abusive and degrading and the meeting heightened tensions.

Immigration officers told detainees that they “should be grateful that they were in Australia,” she said. Asylum seekers were informed that they were “being looked after in good conditions”, ACM was “not responsible” for them coming to Australia and “the process will take as f...ing long as it will.”

ACM head office in Sydney told Allan Clifton, who became Woomera operations manager in April 2000, that he was “paranoid” for complaining about low staff numbers and lack of equipment. Employee numbers were 40 to 60 below official guidelines but whenever Clifton filed a report, his management, under direction from ACM in Sydney, would instruct him to falsify staff numbers.

According to Clifton, the Department of Immigration in Canberra, which also had management employees in Woomera, was aware of the chronic understaffing and false reports but allowed both to continue.

ACM not only profited from understaffing. If a riot or incident occurred they could charge twice the rate for additional employees. In fact, according to an April 2000 ACM management report, Woomera made \$1.2 million above normal budgeted profits in this way.

Clifton told *Four Corners* that local management could have prevented a riot. On one occasion, Woomera’s ACM management removed 20 to 25 people to an isolation unit, claiming they were “ringleaders” of a protest. But two of those held had not even attended the demonstration and detainees demanded their immediate release. Clifton wanted to free the asylum seekers from isolation but ACM in Sydney refused and told him to “stop being so f...ing paranoid. Take them on, because we are not going to back down.” Fifteen minutes after Clifton told other detainees that the two captives would be kept in isolation a riot erupted in the main compound.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock seized on the angry and desperate actions of Woomera inmates to demonise all asylum seekers, claiming their protests were unjustified “pressure”

tactics against “the Australian people”.

Tensions between staff and detainees escalated following the riots and detainees were locked in their rooms for hours. Head counts, which were called randomly and often several times a day and in the middle of the night, were increased.

Psychiatric nurse Peter Osterek-Gammon told *Four Corners* that ACM employees would regularly lock detainees in their rooms and drill the doors closed. “[We] actually had to visit one of those guys one day and they had to get an electric drill to open the cabin,” he said.

Conditions at Woomera were so bad that 15 former detention centre nurses have taken legal action in a South Australian district court to claim compensation from ACM for pain and suffering and loss of income. They allege that ACM was negligent and in breach of its statutory duty under the Occupational Health Safety and Welfare Act.

“Inside Woomera” exposed the cruel treatment meted out to detainees with mental health problems.

Lyn Bender, a psychologist at Woomera in 2002, said that as long as inmates did not die management were not concerned about their health. “They [ACM] were very worried about fatalities. They weren’t so worried about actual harm, and they weren’t worried about the detainees’ state of mind either... ACM faced financial penalties if anyone died,” he said.

Due to a lack of staff, detainees who had attempted suicide or self-harm were regularly handcuffed or jailed. Although those at risk of self-harm were placed on observation programs and supposedly checked every two to twenty minutes, these inspections were not consistently carried out due to a shortage of staff.

Drugs were another means of dealing with psychiatric problems. A nurse, Mark Huxstep, described how another nurse ignored warnings and injected a detainee with twice the maximum adult dosage of Largactil, an anti-psychotic drug. The detainee began to lose consciousness and had to be hospitalised.

Huxstep wrote a report on the incident the next day, placed a copy in the file, and sent another copy to the health manager. The report, however, disappeared from the file within a few days. He printed a second and then a third copy but these also disappeared. As Huxstep explained: “[I]f there’s no documentary evidence of breach of duty of care, you can’t be held accountable for it.”

ACM employees told *Four Corners* how a child sexual-abuse case was covered up at Woomera. Nurses and staff were concerned that an Iranian boy was being sexually molested by some detainees and reported it to the Department of Immigration and centre management.

Alley Crace said that immigration officials and centre management were informed but did nothing other than make “smutty remarks”. Crace was told that the detainees “weren’t actual people in Australia” and therefore she was not obliged to report the incident to South Australia’s Department of Family

and Community Services.

One night the guards rushed the boy, who was in an agitated state, to Rowena Henson, a nurse at the facility. The guards told her that they had caught, or almost caught, detainees sexually interfering with the child. Henson demanded the boy be taken to the hospital but the centre manager refused and held a separate interview with the child. He later claimed that nothing had happened and that the boy was simply under stress. Henson presented a written report on the incident but the centre manager tore it up after reading it. Soon after, Henson was sacked over another matter and the boy’s file disappeared.

Despite these damning exposures Minister for Immigration Phillip Ruddock and senior government officials have attempted to brush aside the *Four Corners* program.

A day after it was televised Ruddock declared that the documentary was based on “rehashed allegations” and “nothing new”. He attempted to blame detainees for the abuse at the centres, saying they made “management difficult” and claimed that *Four Corners* had “no understanding” of the contract between the government and ACM and that the company had “sufficient staff”.

Ruddock categorically rejected calls by Labor, the Democrats, sections of the media and various medical bodies for a judicial inquiry into the conditions at Woomera. Instead, he claimed the Immigration Department would conduct an internal inquiry into whether ACM complied with its contract.

Another private contractor, Group 4, is due to takeover management of Australia’s detention centres from ACM. In 2000 the Victorian coroner found that Group 4 and the state government had directly contributed to the deaths of five people at Port Phillip Prison, which Group 4 operates.

The opposition Labor Party has called on the government to have the camps controlled by the state-owned Australian Protective Services. The problem, however, is not whether private contractors or state-run enterprises run the detention centres but the mandatory detention of asylum seekers—a program introduced by a federal Labor government in 1992 and still officially supported by the Labor Party.

This policy and the entire detention centre system constitute a fundamental attack on basic democratic rights. Until this program is ended and the right guaranteed of all refugees, asylum seekers and their families to travel and live where they choose, the cruel practises at Woomera and other immigration detention centres will continue.



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