

Australia: huge police mobilisation against refugee protest

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More than 400 state and federal police were deployed in a violent operation against a protest outside Australia's largest refugee detention camp over the Easter long weekend. Hundreds of riot police dispatched by the South Australian state Labor government joined their federal counterparts in repeatedly attacking demonstrators who approached the heavily-fortified Baxter facility, located in semi-desert country some 12 kilometres from Port Augusta.

What was so striking about the police mobilisation was not just its size, which almost outnumbered the demonstrators. Police went to extraordinary lengths to try to prevent the anti-detention campaigners from making any human contact with jailed asylum seekers, bursting their protest balloons, smashing their kites and arresting 16 people, some simply for flying kites with banners attached.

While protest leaders dismissed the police tactics as "ridiculous" and "overkill", the police operation is a serious warning of the methods being resorted to by the Howard government, aided and abetted by the Labor Party, to stifle dissent and depict any protest against its policies as violent and illegitimate. It is also a sign of the government's extreme sensitivity to any publicity about the ongoing maintenance of concentration camp-style conditions in its detention centres.

As soon as the protesters arrived at their base camp, several kilometres from the centre, on Friday March 25 they were confronted by a show of force. Apart from the legions of police with batons, shields and horses, helicopters whirred overhead, and various surveillance devices were on display, including video cameras. Police insisted that the protesters had no right to demonstrate within hundreds of metres of the prison camp.

Police instigated clashes with protesters on Saturday

March 26, when officers on horseback and heavily-armed tactical response group members charged into a group of 200 marchers who had cut through the centre's razor-wire topped outer fence. After the group was halted by a police cordon, riot squad officers twice rushed at the marchers, snatching protective webbing from their hands.

Even as the protesters chanted, "The whole world is watching" and "This is what democracy looks like", the helmeted response squad charged in again, grappling with and detaining six people while a dozen mounted police rode through the marchers. A young woman, 23, was trampled by mounted police, before being treated and released without charge. One of those arrested, a 22-year-old man, was injured so badly that he had to be treated at Port Augusta hospital.

The commander of police operations at Baxter, Assistant Commissioner Gary Burns, said police would pursue those allegedly caught on video damaging the perimeter fence, and threatened to raid the protest camp site, breaking an earlier agreement with the organisers that the site would be left alone.

The next day, Sunday March 27, more than 100 riot squad officers charged into the demonstrators once they came within 200 metres of the facility. This time, the police burst demonstrators' balloons with pins and tore up "Free Refugees" kites that were to have been flown outside the centre, claiming they endangered the safety of a police surveillance helicopter.

While Burns, the police commander, cited a restricted air space zone over the centre, the clear purpose of the police action was to prevent political slogans being displayed. Campaign organisers said they had planned to make contact with detainees by flying a banner reading "Freedom" over Baxter using helium-filled balloons. Nine people were arrested for trespass,

hindering police, resisting arrest and “flying kites”.

Those arrested included a separate group of five people who cut down a small piece of the perimeter fence in a symbolic protest against mandatory detention. Despite peacefully giving themselves up for arrest once they had pulled down the electrified wire, they were assaulted by police. One woman was tipped into a thorn bush, suffering cuts and bruises, while another was grabbed by the hair, pulled to the ground and had her face pushed hard into the dirt. A man was punched in the head by a police officer.

Police were so intent on provoking clashes and making the protest look violent that a South Australian police media statement alleged that “protesters were armed with cricket bats and lacrosse sticks”. This followed a harmless game of cricket outside the centre, during which some police officers retrieved or confiscated balls that flew over the fence.

Later, the South Australian Police Commissioner Mal Hyde tried to blame the protesters for the deaths of six people on the state’s roads over the holiday weekend, claiming that the demonstration had diverted police resources from patrolling the roads. Protest leaders demanded an apology for the slander, but none was forthcoming.

Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone and South Australian Police Minister Kevin Foley backed the police actions and did their best to demonise the protesters. Vanstone derided the participants as “activists, not idealists” and declared that their activities would have no impact on federal government policy. Foley denounced them as “feral” and “un-Australian”.

Throughout the Easter protest, the Baxter detainees were placed in a government-backed “lock down”. Their already restricted movements were curtailed further, they were prevented from making phone calls or other contact with the outside world, and all visitors were banned. Only one prisoner appeared to acknowledge the presence of the protest, climbing onto a cell block roof to wave to the demonstrators.

Nevertheless, Vanstone accused the protesters of giving the detainees “false hopes” of release, calling it “one of the cruellest things you can do”: This from the minister in charge of keeping men, women and children incarcerated indefinitely, in violation of international law, for the alleged crime of fleeing from political and

economic oppression.

Her reaction constitutes another refutation of claims that the Howard government is making steps to soften its mandatory detention policy. In reality, it is stepping up its attempts to suppress all opposition to the continuation of the inhumane system, first introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1992.



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