

Callous maltreatment of refugees in Australian detention centres

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Further evidence has come to light of the systematic abuse of refugees locked up indefinitely in Australian detention centres. The latest reports come on top of the well-publicised cases of Cornelia Rau and Vivian Alvarez, who were detained, physically mistreated and in Alvarez's case deported, despite being seriously ill. Alvarez is an Australian citizen and Rau has permanent residency.

On July 29, the Immigration Department released a damning report issued by Knowledge Consulting, following an investigation into the mistreatment of five unnamed asylum seekers in September last year. The detainees were being transferred from Maribyrnong detention centre in Melbourne to the Baxter facility in South Australia when the incidents occurred.

The report found that the refugees were humiliated and treated in an "inhumane and undignified manner" after they were manhandled, denied food, water, medical treatment and toilet stops during the eight-hour journey.

One of the asylum seekers, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of jeopardising his visa application, told the *Age* newspaper that he was only given 10 minutes notice of his transfer between the two detention centres. The man described how he and the four other detainees were refused permission to call a lawyer, and were pushed into a van by guards. After a struggle, one of the detainees reportedly broke a bone in his arm.

The refugee interviewed by the *Age* described how he was forced into a dark space in the van which was so small that he could not move. "The guards said, 'If you die inside no one will know,'" the detainee said. "I can't see anything. For eight hours there was no toilet, I had to go in the van, same as dog."

When the men first protested against their treatment, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs denied any wrongdoing. A spokesperson falsely claimed that the detainees travelled in "a special-purpose air-conditioned vehicle", and that "[d]uring the drive they had access to food and drink and secure places for toilet stops all along the routes, so the detainees only needed

to ask if they required a stop." Only after official complaints were made to the federal Ombudsman last year did the government convene an investigation into the incident.

The ensuing report criticised Global Solutions Limited (GSL), the transnational firm contracted by the federal government to transport the refugees. GSL officers had no training in essential areas of prisoner transferral, and initial complaints made by three of the refugees were "quickly dismissed by the relevant GSL officer without rigorous investigation".

The report further found that the manager of the Maribyrnong detention centre provided "inaccurate and misleading" information about the incident to investigators. Two GSL managers have since resigned and the government has penalised the company \$500,000. Victorian police are investigating whether criminal charges should be laid.

As well as holding the \$300 million contract to manage detention centres in Australia, GSL operates prison facilities in South Australia and Victoria. One former employee, Kjell Liljegren, who worked both as a prison guard and an employee in the Maribyrnong and Baxter detention centres, told ABC radio that GSL treats refugees no differently to the inmates inside its prisons.

Asked if he was surprised by the latest revelations, Liljegren replied, "Not at all. I'm not surprised at all. Many staff, too, have their ... I can't say hatred, but dislike towards refugees and detainees for some reason, and some staff doesn't draw a line between a detainee or a prisoner. Most have come from prisons, so they don't see the difference."

The Labor Party criticised the latest abuse and denial of basic human rights to refugees. "The treatment of these asylum seekers by this company is a blot on Australia's international reputation for being a nation of civilised human beings, and it's Philip Ruddock and Amanda Vanstone [the former and current immigration ministers] who are responsible for this, just as surely as if they had been on board those vehicles themselves," declared Labor's human services spokesman, Kelvin Thompson. "It's Philip Ruddock and Amanda Vanstone who created a culture in

which asylum seekers can be seen as less than human beings.”

What Thompson neglected to add, however, is that the Howard government’s vilification and persecution of asylum seekers has only been possible with Labor’s complicity. It was Labor, in 1992, which first introduced mandatory detention, and the party still adamantly defends the policy, despite all the abuses uncovered in recent years. Labor has called on the government to end GSL’s contract, and return all detention facilities to government control. Such a move would do nothing to alter the underlying system of compulsory indefinite detention of refugees.

In other recent reports mistreatment of immigrants and asylum seekers include:

- * The immigration department failed to protect a woman who was sexually abused and violently attacked in front of her daughter at the Curtin detention centre in the north of Western Australia in late July 2002. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission found that the department and the centre managers failed in their duty of care and breached her human rights.

The woman, a follower of the Sabeen Mandeian religion, a pre-Christian minority that suffers persecution in Iran, was left for months as the only woman along with her daughter in a compound with 50 men. One man had tried to rape her and she was assaulted by another man who punched her in the chest and face, tore her clothes off and broke her finger. Her daughter, who came to her aid, was also punched.

- * Two children were finally freed late last month after wrongfully spending four months in Sydney’s Villawood detention centre. Ian Hwang, a 12-year-old South Korean boy, and his 6-year-old Australian-born sister Janie were forcibly removed from Stanmore Public School in Sydney by immigration officials in March after their mother, Young He, was arrested for overstaying her visa. They were released only after weeks of adverse publicity for the government.

The children’s aunt, Jane Hwang, told the press after their release that her nephew Ian would be scarred for life from the time he spent in Villawood. “One night he called me, and he was like ‘I want to commit suicide’. He is just a 12-year-old boy and he wanted to commit suicide. My heart broke.”

The lawyer for the Hwang family, Michaela Byers, said the department made a mistake when its officers removed the children while their shocked classmates and teachers looked on. She believed the children at least were always entitled to the bridging visa they have now received.

Nevertheless, Immigration Minister Vanstone has defended the children’s seizure and detention. She insists that her department was trying to reunite the children with

their mother who was detained at Villawood. “The advice I have is that the children were taken to the facility at the request of the mother but not themselves technically detained,” she said.

Although the family has now been transferred from Villawood, Young He and her children are still subject to close monitoring and restrictions under a modified form of detention, like all the other asylum seeker families with children. Young He is not permitted to leave her house unaccompanied. The family still faces deportation if they lose an appeal to the Federal Court.

- * On July 25, a riot reportedly involving up to 25 detainees broke out at the Baxter detention centre. Guards and police were called in to end the disturbance, which occurred after the asylum seekers complained about the substandard quality of the food being served. One detainee told the ABC that arguments and complaints about the food had been long standing, and that the latest disturbance was not an isolated incident.

The immigration department alleged that detainees caused damage worth between \$50,000 and \$70,000. So-called ringleaders were placed in isolation, and the rest of the asylum seekers separated in different compounds. Police are investigating and may lay charges against the detainees.

Confronting growing public outrage over the abuse of asylum seekers and opposition within its own ranks, the Howard government has been compelled to modify aspects of its refugee policy. Last week, like the Hwang family, the remaining families with children were released from the Villawood, Baxter and Christmas Island centres into “community detention”.

However, hundreds of people—childless couples and single men and women—remain behind the razor wire in detention facilities and the system of mandatory detention, which is responsible for abuses and violation of democratic rights, remains in place.



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