

Australia: Ongoing repression produced asylum seeker protests

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23 March 2011

While the mass media continues to cover up the circumstances surrounding the violent police attacks on protesting refugees at Australia's Christmas Island immigration detention centre last week, local residents and refugee advocates have denounced the Gillard government's repressive actions and the provocative measures taken by its facility contractor, Serco.

The protests, over appalling living conditions and extraordinary delays in visa processing, erupted on March 11 after Serco manager Wendy Sinclair ordered the closure of roller doors separating different sections of the facility. This decision stopped detainees at the island's seriously overcrowded North West Point centre from moving freely around the facility. (See: "Australian government uses tear gas and synthetic bullets to suppress refugee protests")

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre spokesperson Pamela Curr told the *World Socialist Web Site* this week that while some refugees were frustrated by what they saw as a needless act, others—particularly those who had fled war zones and persecution—"were terrified that preparation was being made for a military or police crackdown".

She said no reason was given for the decision by Sinclair, who was recently appointed to manage the offshore facility, after her previously working at Nottingham prison in Britain. Curr said numbers of Serco employees had not been notified of the action in advance. Some decided to leave the facility, she said, fearful of its explosive consequences.

"It was only at this point," Curr said, "that the refugees decided to break out of the North West Point centre. Approximately 170 detainees walked 15 kilometres and separated. Some of the refugees went to the beach, others to the local mosque and about 100 held a peaceful protest

at the nearby airport. By Sunday, almost all the detainees had returned to the facility of their own accord."

Notwithstanding the peaceful character of these events, the Labor government dispatched around 80 Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers to the island. They were armed with tear gas and powerful "flash-bang" grenades, as well as high-powered rifles with bean bag bullets.

Curr said Christmas Island residents "were concerned because suddenly there were officers in black riot gear with machine guns riding around the facilities. No one is allowed to have a gun there but the police were storming around the island, even though things at that stage had settled down."

On Sunday night the AFP carried out a violent "snatch and grab" operation to extract 20 perceived leaders of the weekend's events to be placed in the Red One isolation cells. When angry refugees organised a protest in defence of their friends, the AFP units fired potentially lethal bean bag bullets and teargas at the unarmed protesters. Unrest continued over the next days, culminating last Thursday night when protesters ignited fires within the facility.

Curr said eye witnesses had told her that the police fired "round after round" of teargas canisters into the area, not only hitting demonstrators but numerous other detainees, as well as Serco workers who had not been warned of the attacks. "At least one of the officers who was stung by the gas refused to leave and was treated there by a group of refugees," she said.

It was highly likely that many of the fires were directly caused by the AFP tear gas and grenades, Curr continued. "These grenades are incendiaries and can provide the initial activation energy for combustion, given the

presence of tear gas, which lowers the ignition point of air,” she told the WSWs.

“We would never have known that they were using these bean bag rounds, but one of the staff was so upset that he reported it,” Curr said. “When journalists asked the department on Monday if rubber bullets had been used, they flatly denied it. Twelve hours later we heard about bean bag bullets. Residents were up on the hill watching and that’s how we found out that they were using flash-bangs and incendiaries.”

The mainstream media has sought to downplay the provocative actions of Serco and the AFP, portraying the protestors as impatient, ungrateful and violent. In reality, the conditions inside the facility are inhuman.

The North West Point centre was built with an initial capacity of 400 people and a surge capacity of 800. Last week, over 1,800 men were held there, with 144 living in classrooms, 30 in a visiting area and 92 in storerooms. The tents that were set on fire were home to another 240.

Curr explained that while the tents are labelled “temporary,” many of the occupants had lived there for over 12 months. In Christmas Island’s tropical climate, the tents quickly become mouldy and unhealthy, she said.

The average time of detention at Christmas Island has tripled over the past year. The average stay is now 214 days, with 70 percent of detainees having been there 3-12 months. This is the deliberate result of Labor’s policies, including lengthy freezes imposed on visa processing last year and protracted security checks by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation.

This situation is worsening. Numbers of detention centres on the Australian mainland, including Curtin, Perth, Adelaide, Darwin and Scherger, are also now over capacity.

Under the government’s contractual arrangements with Serco, the company can be fined by the immigration department over “major incidents”. These include protests, reports of self-harm by the detainees and, notably, an entry to the facility by a journalist.

Kaye Bernard, who is head of the Union of Christmas Island Workers and opposes the mandatory detention of

asylum seekers, told the WSWs that Serco subcontracted its staff recruitment to the Christmas Island facility through MMS Security.

“Almost all the staff are casuals,” she said, and “it is generally understood that if an employee reports any major incidents or complains to government authorities over the appalling conditions in the centre, they will be fired. This is a profit-driven multinational company and it’s not in its interests for the conditions here to be made public.”

Bernard said Sinclair had been probably been appointed manager of the Christmas Island facility because the company already had paid the government \$4 million in abatements over contractual breaches.

She said tensions had emerged over the past two weeks between residents of the island, who number around 1,500, and AFP officers. “Residents here are not allowed to own a gun and local police officers seldom carry weapons,” she said, “but there was an AFP officer wandering around at our union community festival with a gun on his hip. We had to ask him to leave.”

Bernard said there was growing anger in the local community over Serco and the actions of the Gillard government. “The government tells you not to worry, but reminds you that these people are being kept in a maximum security prison, on an offshore detention facility, in the most remote part of the country. The issue is: do these people need to be locked up?”

The Labor government is now threatening to prosecute those involved in the protests. If this occurred, the inmates could be charged with intent to cause grievous bodily harm, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years’ jail. Those victimised could also be stripped of their fundamental democratic and legal rights to seek asylum.



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