

Police attack protesting refugees at Australia's Christmas Island

Will Morrow
13 June 2011

For the second time in three months, police have opened fire with bean-bag bullets and chemical weapons on refugees protesting inside Australia's Christmas Island detention facilities. Federal police were called in to put down a disturbance after the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard handed out another round of rejections of protection visas.

The incident was reportedly sparked at 11 p.m. on Thursday night after numbers of detainees were informed that their asylum claims had been refused. Guards attempted to forcibly move one man to a "Red" block isolation cell. When he resisted, other detainees intervened to try to stop the removal. Guards also tried to transfer a second man to isolation.

Under conditions of mass frustration among detainees over increasing rejection rates, as well as long processing times and overcrowding, the dispute quickly led to a protest involving more than 100 refugees. Riot police "took control" of the facility after firing potentially lethal bean-bag bullets, as well as using capsicum spray and "distraction devices."

Three men occupied a roof during the evening, and over the weekend as many as 12 men joined their rooftop demonstration. The last two protesters were reported to have climbed down last night.

Although the police claimed to have had no choice but to open fire on Thursday night, after some refugees escaped from a compound and threw objects at guards, the conflict appears to have resulted from a definite plan to crush opposition to the escalating number of visa refusals.

According to the *Australian*, Serco, the company contracted to operate the detention centre, and its security sub-contractor MSS, had boosted the number of guards after the detention centre's "intelligence team" had predicted trouble when the immigration

authorities delivered Thursday's round of rejections.

In March, the government responded to a break-out and peaceful protest by asylum seekers on the island by dispatching Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers from the mainland in preparation for a confrontation. Days later, police reacted to a further protest by 200 detainees with tear gas, flash-bang grenades and bean-bag bullets.

At that time more than 1,800 people were squeezed into the island's main North-West Point facility, which is designed to hold only 400 people, with a surge capacity of 800. Since then, the government has shifted 500 detainees to mainland facilities, a process, which often involves arbitrarily separating friends.

On Friday, Immigration Minister Chris Bowen issued unsubstantiated and inflammatory claims that sought to blame the unrest on asylum seekers. According to the *Australian*, Bowen stated that "a lot" of people in detention were not genuine refugees. "That does lead to some degree of consternation and frustration within our detention network," he asserted.

In reality, the government's own statistics indicate that its officials are rejecting an increasing number of refugees, and that detainees are then being punished for protesting against the decisions.

Acceptance rates for initial claims for asylum fell sharply from 73.9 percent in 2009-2010 to 27.2 percent in the first six months of this year. Yet, at the same time, there was a high overturn rate on legal review, with 78.6 percent of detainees eventually classified as refugees, even within the government's narrow definition. In the meantime, detainees were forced to wait more than six months between initial applications and the successful appeals.

Clearly, the Gillard government has tightened the application criteria in an effort to use prolonged

detention to deter refugees from exercising their legal and democratic rights to seek asylum. Following a visit to the Villawood detention centre in Sydney, Australian Human Rights Commission president Catherine Branson reported that detainees were routinely told by immigration officials they were free to “go home” if the conditions in centres were unbearable.

The Labor government has also widely advertised its in-principle agreement with the Malaysian government that will see 800 asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by sea deported to Malaysia. Nearly 300 people who have since landed in Australian waters are being kept held indefinitely in legal limbo at the Bravo compound on Christmas Island—which was reportedly not involved in Thursday’s clash. They include 47 children who, along with pregnant women, will not be spared removal to Malaysia under the agreement.

These methods are intended to incite fear and doubt in the minds of people hoping to exercise their basic right—recognised by international law—to seek asylum where they choose.

The Gillard government has exploited the inevitable resistance of asylum seekers to the system of compulsory detention to justify the further evisceration of their legal rights. Under a bill before parliament, detainees convicted of any offence while in detention will fail the visa “character test” and could be refused asylum, regardless of their refugee status.

According to guards at the North-West Point centre, detainees’ fear of being charged and possibly deported because of their role in the March protest contributed to the heightened tensions before last week’s outbreak. Last night, the AFP reportedly began charging about a dozen refugees with a range of crimes, including affray, assault, destruction of government property and manufacturing weapons.

Preparations for deportations were intensified over the weekend when Serco flew in members of its special response group—riot-trained guards who forcibly restrain and escort rejected asylum seekers out of the country if they refuse to leave.

In what provides a revealing glimpse into conditions inside detention centres, it was reported on Thursday that a detainee at Sydney’s Villawood detention centre was diagnosed with leprosy. The man, believed to be an Iranian named Seyed Majid Rabet, arrived in Australia in 2009 and was first detained at Christmas Island, but

was later transferred.

Rabet’s illness raises obvious questions about lack of adequate access to medical care inside the detention camps. Leprosy is a contagious disease that has an incubation period ranging between six months to more than a decade, although it is generally between 3 and 5 years.

One of the government’s justifications for the prolonged and arbitrary detention of asylum seekers is a need for detailed health checks. The truth is that the wellbeing of detainees is of little concern. Rabet had reportedly lost weight over the past six months and suffered fainting spells, but no skin scrape test was conducted to detect the leprosy.

As well as stepping up repression against detainees, the government is intensifying its efforts to find other countries, such as Papua New Guinea, where new arrivals can be shipped. The purpose of Labor’s regime is to block any refugees from seeking asylum in Australia. Within the political establishment and corporate media there is no opposition to this illegal agenda, so that the revulsion felt by ordinary people can find no official expression.

The Liberal opposition has condemned the government for its “weakness” in failing to put down the unrest in immigration centres, while proposing to reopen the infamous detention centre on Nauru, a small Pacific island, where asylum seekers languished for up to five years under the previous Howard government. Immigration Minister Bowen has criticised that proposal as ineffective because “the majority of people processed as genuine refugees ended up in Australia anyway.”

While the Greens have pointed to the mounting desperation and frustration of detainees, they have proposed alternative forms of “community detention”, and remain committed to their parliamentary alliance with the Labor Party that permits the government’s survival.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact