

Australian government suppresses mounting unrest in refugee detention centres

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The Labor government has responded with severe repression to a wave of refugee unrest throughout Australia's 16 detention facilities, caused by prolonged periods of detention and frustration over their uncertain future. Desperate protests by inmates, attempting to draw public attention to the abuse of their basic legal and democratic rights, are being met by police violence, the arbitrary removal of demonstrators to high-security prisons and threats by Prime Minister Gillard and her ministers to retaliate by stripping refugees of their fundamental right to asylum.

Over three consecutive days late last month, Australian Federal Police officers (AFP) used rubber bullets and chemical sprays to put down protests at Christmas Island. Several participants in the demonstrations were forcibly removed to Sydney's Silverwater jail, without being charged with, let alone convicted of, any offence. At the same time, hunger strikes and other forms of protest spread to the increasingly over-crowded mainland camps.

Gillard and Immigration Minister Chris Bowen backed the police response by personally denouncing the protesters, and falsely accusing them of failing to pass the test of refugee status. Bowen bluntly declared: "People undertaking this sort of activity are achieving nothing except potentially their release from detention and transfer into a prison."

Across Australia's detention network, incidents of self harm, most often through attempted suicide or mass hunger strikes, have escalated. According to statistics obtained by the Ombudsman from the Immigration Department, there were 1,132 instances of actual or threatened self-harm over the past 12 months—an average of three per day. In just one week last month, there were 50 such incidents.

Under the mandatory detention system introduced in

the 1990s by the previous Labor government, detainees are held indefinitely without charge, and are kept unaware of the status of their applications or the causes for delays. Despite the current government's election promise to reduce detention periods to 90 days, initial applications generally take six months, but can stretch far longer, while appeal processes take another six months. Further hold-ups occur while refugees wait interminably for security clearances by the Australian Security Intelligence Agency (ASIO).

Last month's conflicts on Christmas Island began on July 17, when 11 men staged a rooftop protest after a detainee was transferred to the "Red" isolation compound. Serco, the private contractor running Australia's detention facilities, uses the Red cell block to punish detainees for any infraction of its rules. Detainees are cut off from their friends and kept under 24-hour surveillance in cells near others who have developed serious mental illnesses.

The protest escalated on July 19, this time encompassing up to 50 detainees. For the third time in five months, the AFP was called in to take control of the centre, using tear gas, "sound and distraction devices" and "bean bag" bullets. Detainees later dug shallow graves for themselves in the centre courtyard.

The AFP followed up with a heavy show of force. In the early hours of July 22, police stormed the rooms of sleeping detainees to extract suspected ringleaders. Iranian refugee Reza Faraz, who had spent a year in detention at Christmas Island and Sydney's Villawood centre, relayed reports from a detainee: "[The AFP] dragged those involved onto the ground and started beating them up with batons. I could hear them begging AFP guards not to beat them. We were all terrified and shaking with fear."

In his commentary on the Australian Broadcasting

Corporation's The Drum web site, Faraz pointed to a calculated government policy to intimidate refugees. He said the protesters were incensed by "frequent pressure by their immigration case managers to give up their waiting and sign papers to voluntary return". This pressure "confirms their belief that the Department is less concerned with determining the merits of their case but creating an environment so intolerable they have few choices but to go home to be killed, harm or kill themselves, or continue to be subjected to waiting with no projected end."

The sustained crackdown began in March, when the government responded to a break-out and peaceful protest by detainees at Christmas Island by dispatching armed AFP officers from the mainland. Days later, police reacted to a further protest by 200 detainees with tear gas, flash-bang grenades and bean-bag bullets. In May, another protest at the centre was suppressed in similar fashion. Since March, the AFP has maintained a heightened presence on Christmas Island. AFP officers routinely tour the camp in riot gear—carrying guns and riot shields—to intimidate detainees.

Over the past two weeks, protests have broken out elsewhere. At the Melbourne Immigration Transit facility in Broadmeadows, three young men sewed their lips together last weekend.

A six-day hunger strike at the remote Scherger centre in far-north Queensland grew to between 90 and 100 detainees, mostly from the Afghan Hazara minority. One detainee cut his throat and another inflicted serious wounds to his arm, while several fell unconscious. The protesters were pleading for shorter processing times. Pamela Curr, spokeswoman for the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, said one had been waiting for 22 months.

In Darwin, a five-day rooftop protest grew to 20 mainly Afghan and Iranian asylum seekers. Several of the men had been in detention for between 16 and 17 months. Protests at Darwin have occurred since the end of June, when a rooftop protest was organised to coincide with Gillard's tour of the city. Gillard declared there was "no excuse for poor conduct in detention centres". The next week, five detainees attempted suicide at the centre. Another 50 men were reported to be on hunger strike.

Gillard stepped up the government's threats on July 20, insisting that "if you commit a criminal offence" it

would "count against you" in seeking a protection visa. Such threats violate international refugee law. According to the refugee convention, an asylum seeker can be denied protection only if they have been convicted of a war crime, crimes against humanity or a serious non-political offence.



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