

Refugees step up protests in Australia's offshore detention camps

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New unrest, involving hunger strikes, attempted suicides and letters addressed to the Australian people, has erupted on Manus Island, the remote Papua New Guinea island where the Australian government has so far incarcerated 221 asylum seekers. The refugees' protests highlight the inhumanity of the Labor government's policy, which consists of transporting men, women and children to be detained indefinitely in squalid camps, either on Manus or Nauru, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Initially, the refugees, who include unaccompanied teenagers, face living for months in tents, converted shipping containers and other temporary accommodation, exposing them to hot and humid weather, as well as malaria-bearing mosquitoes and other health risks. The government has declared that they will remain in detention for as long as they would have to wait in overseas refugee camps—effectively for many years.

According to refugee advocates, up to five male asylum seekers on Manus Island staged desperate acts of individual protest last weekend, following the transfer of another 40 single men from Darwin to Manus Island on Saturday. Three detainees are currently in the camp's medical centre—an Iraqi man who attempted to hang himself on Saturday morning; a man with severe injuries from putting his hand into a fan; and another who collapsed yesterday as a result of his hunger strike. Families and children in the camp witnessed some of the incidents, causing distress and anxiety.

During the weekend, three men scaled a perimeter fence and ran into the sea in apparent joint suicide attempt, before being rescued by security guards. A group of 5 Iranian, 15 Afghani and 25 Iraqi asylum seekers has since declared a hunger strike in protest at

their transfer to Manus Island. An email sent by one asylum seeker said they were shocked and dismayed to find themselves on Manus Island, having only been told their destination after they had been loaded onto a plane.

Australian immigration officials sought to discredit the refugees and cover up the level of unrest. They “categorically denied” any acts of self-harm or attempted suicide, and insisted that the three men who fled the camp were simply escapees, who were quickly caught—as if detainees seriously contemplated fleeing from the island, which lies about 300 kilometres north of the Papua New Guinea mainland.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government last week intensified its efforts to prevent the detainees from informing the Australian public and the outside world of the conditions in which they are being confined. After earlier curtailing Internet access, immigration authorities temporarily cut off all phone and computer communications, then disabled the photo-taking functions of refugees' tablet computers, after photos were published by media and web sites revealing the sub-standard and unhealthy accommodation facilities.

Despite the prevalence of malaria on the island, the photographs appeared to show little protection offered for children from disease-carrying mosquitoes, with flywire hanging loose over doorways. There were no doors on the converted shipping containers to offer privacy and protection from mosquitoes, and no air-conditioning to relieve the equatorial island's intense heat. Families had basic water amenities and were sleeping on camp stretchers or bunks.

Children were shown sleeping outside to escape stifling heat. Plastics chairs and tables appeared to make up most of the furniture. Captions for the photos said: “Is this home?” and “No, door, no window, no

privacy but home for five years.”

Immigration department spokesperson Sandi Logan accused the refugees of “staging” the appalling conditions in the photos, and claimed the controversy was a “beat-up” because no cameras were ever allowed in Australia’s detention camps, supposedly to protect “client privacy.”

At the same time, the department defended the living conditions, saying they were comparable to those of Papua New Guinea locals—many of whom live in poverty. The Gillard government has barred media access to the camp since it opened in November, preventing any other exposure of the situation.

In an attempt to have their voices heard, Manus Island detainees have begun writing open letters about their plight. One letter, excerpted by Australian public broadcaster SBS, asked: “Why have we been bought to Manus Island? It feels like we are at the end of the world. We are thinking this is not life. Death is better than existing like this. It is a big world, but it feels like there is no place for us. Why is there no justice anywhere in the world for us? We are not guilty of anything but wanting freedom and safety.”

The letter continued: “Our situation is insane. Our children go to school that has no air conditioning in it... They have difficulty in eating because they don’t like to eat because of the hot weather. Some people can’t breathe in this weather... People are being bitten and have sores all over their arms and legs.”

In a “Submission to the People of Australia,” some detainees made a joint appeal: “We write this with tears, having come to your country with so much hope and expectation, only to find a policy that treats us unjustly and unfairly, without compassion or respect for our individual situations. We are so far away here, living on a remote island, unseen, without permission yet to leave the small compound where we live. We ask the people of Australia, do not forget us or abandon us.”

Last Saturday, the government also sent another 30 men to Nauru, where about 400 single male detainees have already suffered several months of similar conditions that have provoked a series of hunger strikes and protests. After almost four months of tent accommodation, the Gillard government said at the end of December that “permanent” facilities would only be completed during the first half of this year. Within

months, however, the government intends to fill the two camps to their planned combined capacity of 2,100.

The punitive conditions in the Manus and Nauru camps strip bare the government’s claim that its refugee regime is driven by humanitarian concerns to stop people risking their lives by joining dangerous voyages to Australia. Labor’s version of the “Pacific Solution,” like that of the previous Howard government, seeks to intimidate refugees and deny them the basic right, enshrined in international law, to flee persecution and seek asylum.



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