

UN report details brutal conditions in Australian government's Pacific refugee camps

Mark Church
7 February 2013

The United Nations Human Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) released a report Monday detailing the appalling conditions endured by asylum seekers who are incarcerated by the Australian government on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

The contents of the UN report are a further indictment of the brutal and illegal policies enacted by the Labor government. Prime Minister Julia Gillard has revived and extended the "Pacific Solution" refugee regime of former Prime Minister John Howard, deporting asylum seekers who attempt to arrive in Australia by sea and indefinitely imprisoning them on Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

The Manus Island camp was opened late last year. The UNHCR report, based on the findings of an investigative team sent there in mid-January, described the 221 camp inhabitants as living in segregated areas. In the family compound, the asylum seekers were living in hot "dongas", the size of a shipping container, without privacy and exposed to malaria-carrying mosquitoes. When the UN personnel were visiting the island, 25 asylum seekers were holding a protest over conditions in the single men's area. The remaining 66 male asylum seekers were housed in "temporary accommodation", tents that were described as being unbearably hot. The men shared a single toilet.

Originally the asylum seekers were told that after a 30-day "quarantine period" they would be allowed outside the camp for excursions. Now, however, the camp administration has cited security and operational issues for extending the "quarantine period" indefinitely, "until further notice", leaving the refugees effectively imprisoned without respite.

Of particular concern is the treatment of the 34

children on the island, aged between 7 and 17. The UNHCR report explains that the stress from their boat journey to Australia and from the conditions on the island were causing signs of mental trauma, including insomnia and lack of concentration at the camp's limited educational facilities.

The report noted that the refugee camp constituted unlawful detention and was in breach of international law: "UNHCR found that asylum-seekers are being detained on Manus Island without any appropriate legal safeguards to ensure that their continued detention is lawful, proportionate and justified by their individual circumstances; no opportunity to challenge the administrative basis of their detention; and no opportunity to prosecute their refugee claims within any clear timeframe in the future."

The UN report nevertheless covered up the full extent of the refugee regime's illegality and provided some political cover for the Labor government.

Its first finding stated that the UNHCR "acknowledges the serious commitment and on-going efforts" by the Australian and Papua New Guinean governments "to put in place procedures and conditions of treatment for transferees that are consistent with their international obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention." The report's authors added that they hoped improvements would be made to the camp so that it could be established on a "more permanent, sustainable and accountable basis under international law."

In reality, the appalling conditions on Manus Island have been deliberately established as part of the Australian government's efforts to create a "deterrent" to other would-be asylum seekers. Far from any

“serious commitment” to international legal conventions governing the treatment of asylum seekers, the Gillard government has ridden roughshod over the basic legal and democratic right of people to claim asylum in Australia.

The Labor government simply ignored the UN report. A spokesman for outgoing immigration minister Chris Bowen repeated an earlier statement in January, that the conditions on the island “were in line with the living standards and amenities” of impoverished local residents on the island. New immigration minister Brendan O’Connor refused to issue a statement.

The release of the UN report coincided with further revelations of the horrible conditions facing refugees in the other Pacific camp, on Nauru. A nurse, Marianne Evers, who worked there for three weeks late last year, told the ABC on Tuesday: “I actually liken it to a concentration camp. But the Australians don’t have the guts to kill these people and put them out of their misery. Because miserable it is.”

Evers, a nurse with 40 years’ experience, courageously defied a confidentiality agreement that the Australian authorities compel everyone working in the detention camps to sign. She explained that she witnessed numerous suicide attempts and other so-called “self-harm episodes” in her short time on Nauru, and was told by colleagues about sexual assaults suffered by the detained asylum seekers.

Immigration spokeswoman Sandi Logan responded by declaring the comparison with concentration camps was a “disgrace” and claimed that “a very good level of care” was provided on the island.

The protracted election campaign, ahead of the September 14 federal vote, will feature a reactionary “bidding war” between the major parties over who can enact the most draconian and illegal anti-refugee measures. The Australian ruling elite relies more directly on inciting xenophobia and nationalism as class tensions escalate amid rising social inequality and stepped up government attacks on working class living standards. The entire political establishment is complicit in this campaign—including various erstwhile liberal intellectuals, such as academic Robert Manne who have embraced the Labor government’s “humanitarian” rationale for its brutality, and the Greens, who have maintained their loyal and critical support for the minority government as it has lurched to

the right on asylum seeker policy.

The legal and democratic rights of refugees can only be defended by opposing the entire reactionary “border protection” framework, and upholding the unrestricted right of everyone on the planet to live and work in any country they choose.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact