

Australian government rejects damning media report on refugee camps

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Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government has contemptuously dismissed an exposure by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) "Four Corners" program of the appalling and medically unsafe conditions inside the government's refugee detention centres on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

Immigration Minister Brendan O'Connor flatly rejected the evidence that the camps were unfit for human habitation, especially by women and children, describing the conditions as "adequate" but "not 5 star". He insisted that it was necessary to detain families in the camps in order to deter asylum seekers from attempting to reach Australia by boat.

Under Labor's regime, asylum seekers are detained indefinitely in these camps, which still largely consist of military tents, supposedly to ensure that people arriving by boat have "no advantage" over refugees who wait for years for official permission to enter Australia.

Doctor John Vallentine, who worked on Manus Island for the government and International Health and Medical Services (IHMS) last year, told "Four Corners" that he had warned from the outset that the camp was not medically fit for occupation. The camp was covered with mosquitoes, had 49-degree Celsius weather and 100 percent humidity, and reeked of faecal matter from the poor sewerage facilities.

"I had decided that this was not the sort of place where children ought to be from a purely medical point of view and I wrote to my superiors at IHMS about that," Vallentine said. "And then when the asylum seekers started arriving, my concerns turned to alarm because we were getting sick people who doubly ought not to have been there.

The camp was chronically short of medical supplies.

Its remoteness meant that air evacuation to hospitals could take hours, endangering children's lives. Among the first children sent to Manus Island were a severely anaphylactic young boy and nine year old girl with anaemia and a history of blood transfusions.

Vallentine explained: "The little boy with anaphylaxis ... the chap was sent over with a mass in his neck requiring investigation. I mean how can we investigate a mass in a neck? We don't even have x-rays, let alone anything else ... For the first time in my life I felt ashamed to be an Australian."

The "Four Corners" report highlighted the severe mental health problems being created inside the camps. Secretly interviewed, one detainee told the program: "I want to die. I don't want to live more, because we don't have anything to do here. Your questions don't have answers, your fate is not clear, what will happen to you?" Another stated: "You see many guys here do suicide or hurt themselves."

Marianne Evers, a former nurse at Manus Island, said: "The very first night that I was on duty there, there was a person that attempted to hang himself, and it finished up that this poor soul was crawling on the floor like an animal looking at me saying, 'please let me die,' and that made a big impression on me."

Numbers of former staff members who had worked inside the camps were so alarmed by the conditions that they defied the government's confidentiality restrictions in order to speak to "Four Corners". One said he saw an asylum seeker suffer a mental breakdown. "He was laying on the ground in a foetal position. He couldn't control his bowels," he said. "I think back about people in a mental asylum who have no will of their own, who have no control."

In order to make the program, "Four Corners" also had to evade extensive barriers erected by the Gillard

government to prevent public scrutiny of the camps. Cameras, secretly smuggled into the facilities, gave ordinary people in Australia their first glimpses of the horrors being committed there. Even the government's own human rights commission has been denied access to the detention centres. As refugees explained, the camps are surrounded by razor wire, not to keep them in but to block the public and the media.

This concentration camp-style regime goes far beyond the earlier "Pacific Solution" of the previous Howard government, under which refugees were held for up to five years, causing numerous cases of mental illness and suicide attempts. That Liberal-National government also held children in detention until a public outcry forced it to start to release them into so-called community detention, outside the razor wire. (See: "Australian government dismisses damning report on child detention")

In his dismissal of the "Four Corners" program, Immigration Minister O'Connor rejected any suggestion of moving women and children from Manus Island, insisting that such camps were necessary "to deter people from getting onto very unseaworthy vessels". In reality, it is the reactionary "border protection" regime that has forced refugees to join desperate boat voyages by denying them safer and easier means of fleeing persecution. Many have fled from countries, such as Sri Lanka, Iraq and Afghanistan, torn apart by wars backed by Australia.

O'Connor also claimed that if children were not locked up, mothers and children would be simply loaded onto boats as a means of gaining entry to Australia. This is an echo of the "children overboard" lies used by the Howard government in 2001, falsely accusing refugees of endangering the lives of their children—by throwing into the sea—in order to force the Australian navy to rescue them. (See: "Australia: Howard's 2001 election lies return to haunt him")

Every Australian government since the 1980s has sought to demonise and criminalise people seeking asylum, with a Labor government instituting mandatory detention in 1992. This is a bipartisan policy to make refugees scapegoats for deteriorating social conditions. In response to the "Four Corners" exposé, opposition immigration spokesman Scott Morrison defended the offshore camps, while claiming that Nauru was a better place to detain families than Manus Island.



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