

Whistleblowers expose unspeakable conditions in Australian refugee camps

James Cogan
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Horrific details have emerged about the conditions inflicted on refugees imprisoned by the Australian Labor government in its South Pacific detention camps on Manus Island and Nauru. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has responded by insisting that there will be no turning back from Labor's policy of indefinitely condemning asylum seekers to what are being described as "hell-holes" and "gulags."

The accounts provided by whistleblowers who have worked inside the camps establish once again that Labor's policy is based upon maintaining a detention regime that drives refugees into insanity, self-harm and suicide.

Rod St George, a former security officer, has provided a detailed account of the conditions on Manus Island. The camp, which was used to detain refugees by the previous Howard Liberal government from 2001 to 2004, was reopened last year by Labor when it fully embraced Howard's refugee processing "Pacific Solution" policy. Under the even more brutal plan announced by Rudd last Friday, every asylum seeker who reaches Australian territory by boat will now be deported to Manus or other locations in Papua New Guinea and permanently barred from settling in Australia, even after official refugee status is granted. The Manus Island camp is being vastly expanded, so that it can imprison up to 3,000 refugees—including families and children.

In an interview broadcast on Monday night by the Special Broadcasting Service's (SBS) "Dateline" program, St George denounced Manus Island: "I didn't expect it to be run as a prison—worse than a prison actually... Words can't really describe... I have never seen human beings so destitute, so helpless, and so hopeless before... In Australia the facility couldn't serve as a dog kennel. Its owners would be jailed."

Earlier this year, St George, who had worked in Australian prisons for nearly ten years, became a compliance manager for G4S, the private company that runs the Manus Island detention camp. His primary responsibility was to monitor the health and safety of both the refugees and company guards and employees. After barely a month, he resigned in outrage and shock at the conditions being inflicted on the 300 detainees.

Video footage—taken from outside the camp because the media have been shut out of the facility—shows that the refugees are housed in poorly constructed huts or in tents. Manus is a tropical island, located in the Bismarck Sea to the north of Papua New Guinea's main landmass, with a population of barely 40,000. Its main industries are subsistence agriculture and coconut cultivation and its largest urban centre, Lorengau, has a population of less than 6,000. A malaria outbreak is currently underway on the island and at least 15 refugees have been hospitalised.

St George described how the conditions on Manus led to almost daily cases of attempted suicide or self-harm. An unnamed local guard supported his claims, telling "Dateline" that detainees would "go crazy, cutting themselves up, trying to hang themselves... They get pieces of metal, like wire or something, and cutting themselves."

A refugee told the SBS program that detainees were saying "we can't tolerate this place, it is such a hell and we are going to stay here for a long time. Its better we die here."

St George alleged that the Labor government had established a regime in which immigration officials would not even take action over reports of rape and abuse. Men who alleged they had been raped or physically assaulted by other detainees, he claimed, were left in the same compounds as their purported

attackers. St George stated: “There was nothing that could be done for these young men, who were considered vulnerable, which in many cases is just a euphemism for men who are being raped. They had to stay where they were... No-one leaves Manus. That’s the message.”

He added: “I suppose being an Australian, and knowing that this is what my government is doing, that my government has sanctioned this, made me feel ashamed.”

The conditions in the detention camp on Nauru are little different to Manus and provoked an uprising on July 19. More than 500 desperate detainees held off security and police for over five hours and set fire to most of the camp, in the hope it would force the Australian government to transfer them off the island. At least 80 percent of the camp’s buildings were destroyed.

On Wednesday, 32 Salvation Army staff and former employees who have worked at Nauru joined Rod St George in publicly condemning the conditions imposed by the Labor government. In speaking out, they risked legal action for breaching “confidentiality” agreements.

Their letter stated: “[T]his riot, although shocking, was an inevitable outcome from a cruel and degrading policy... The mental health impact of detention in this harsh physical and policy environment cannot be overstated ... we have witnessed a man scrabbling in the dirt, suffering a psychotic breakdown for several days without treatment, read another man’s suicide note apologising to his family, and seen countless others who suffered similar mental breakdowns.”

Kevin Rudd has dismissed any concern for the mental health and well-being of the asylum seekers detained on Manus Island and Nauru. “We don’t apologise for our policy of saying to people-smugglers that if you bring people to Australia by boat, that they will not be settled in Australia,” he declared yesterday. “[I]f you come to Australia by boat then you will be assessed in Papua New Guinea, including on Manus Island, and if you are proven to be a bona fide refugee the agreement we have with Papua New Guinea is that you be settled there.”

The Rudd government has made clear that it welcomes the “Dateline” program’s revelations of the conditions on Manus Island. The premise of Labor’s anti-refugee policy is to inflict sufficiently barbaric punishment on asylum seekers to “deter” others from

making the journey to Australia and exercising their fundamental right to claim asylum. It is spending millions of dollars on an advertising campaign, in Australia and around the world, warning that refugees are no longer accepted in Australia. The public relations offensive this week saw the immigration department release a photograph of a woman about to be deported to Manus weeping into her hands, with an accompanying caption, “A female asylum seeker comes to terms with the fact she won’t be settled in Australia.”

The utterly lawless character of the Rudd government’s refugee policy is a foretaste of the anti-democratic measures being readied against the entire working class. Workers and youth have a responsibility to defend the democratic and legal right of every person to live and work in any country of their choice, with full rights.

The author recommends:

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