

UN reports expose conditions in Australia's offshore refugee camps

Mark Church
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Two reports released in late November by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reveal the plight of asylum seekers banished by the Australian government to the remote Pacific island of Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. The reports describe a monitoring visit to the detentions camps by UNHCR observers in October.

Following the lead of the previous Labor government—which reopened the camps last year—the Abbott government is deliberately using the primitive conditions in them, combined with indefinite incarceration and a ban on any detainees ever living in Australia, to deter all refugees from seeking asylum in Australia.

Like Labor, Abbott's Liberal-National Coalition claims to be pursuing this policy for the "humanitarian" purpose of stopping refugees losing their lives on dangerous voyages to Australia. But the inhuman conditions outlined in the UN reports highlight the fraud of this claim and expose a life-threatening regime that is triggering suicide attempts and severe mental trauma.

Some 1,900 asylum seekers were in the centres at the time of the UNHCR visit. There were 801 men, women and children in Nauru and 1,093 men at Manus Island. Two-thirds of the detainees were from Iran, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq—all countries affected by Australian-backed US military interventions or economic sanctions, or the Western-supported repression in Sri Lanka.

In Nauru, the UN team found detainees living in tents under hot, cramped rat-infested conditions. The children were lice-infested, some had skin infections and all suffered deteriorating mental health. The camp's school was too hot to be usable and there was no suitable arrangement to use Nauru's schools.

In one section of the camp holding 305 people in family groups or single adult women (including pregnant women), the report observed "cramped conditions with very little privacy in very hot conditions, with some asylum-seekers sleeping on mattresses on the ground." These conditions "raise serious issues about their compatibility with international human rights law."

In another section, single men lived in tents with minimal bedding. Their area had no grass and no natural shade, just white gravel that produced an intense glare during the day. The monitors drew particular attention to the lack of toilets and showers and the near complete absence of privacy.

The male asylum seekers reported feelings of helplessness and despair, with no knowledge of when or if the Australian government would grant them refugee status. They further reported a sense of isolation from their families, minimal contact with the outside world and anger at their living conditions.

Conditions were similar on Manus Island. Women and children were removed to Australian detention centres in June, but numbers of male detainees have risen from 300 to over 1,000. They were kept in cramped, hot and humid buildings, or dongas (modified freight containers), with poor hygiene and little or no privacy.

Most detainees lived in "cramped accommodation" with some placing their bedding on the floor to escape the "particularly oppressive" hot conditions. One block "smelt putrid and had blocked shower drains with several inches of filthy water flooding the floor."

The Manus Island asylum seekers were concerned about the danger of malaria-carrying mosquitoes and other parasites common to the island. Those who were allowed to leave the camp for brief excursions, even for

a walk or run, were kept under heavy guard.

The UNHCR reports provide a limited glimpse of the shocking conditions, which the Abbott government, like its Labor predecessor, totally shield from media access and public scrutiny, fearing the popular outrage that would result.

As with previous UN inspections, the reports use guarded language and avoid outright condemnation of the Australian policy. The UNHCR merely urged the government to stop sending children, particularly unaccompanied ones, to the camps. “Unaccompanied children are already very vulnerable and to place them in situations of uncertainty and tough physical conditions ... could be very damaging to their health and well-being,” the UNHCR’s Richard Towle said.

The reports make no suggestion of UN action against Australia, despite pointing to violations of international law. For example, the UNHCR states that “viewed as a whole,” the conditions, coupled with the protracted periods of detention, “raise issues about their compatibility with international human rights law, including the prohibition against torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment ... the right to humane conditions in detention [and] the right to family life and privacy.”

The UN reports show that the Australian government is actively pressuring asylum seekers to return to the countries they fled. Refugees had received an official letter stating: “[I]f you are not pleased with the current processing arrangement, we can put you in touch with [the] International Organisation for Migration who may assist you with return to your country of origin.”

The UNHCR said the policy meant that refugees risked being driven back to their countries, not having made a truly voluntary decision to go. To add to the pressure on refugees to give up on their protection claims, decisions on their applications have been stalled. As of last month, only one protection application from Nauru and Manus Island had been finalised since the camps opened last year.

Immigration Minister Scott Morrison pointed to plans to accelerate departures by setting up a “removal centre” to house people about to be deported. He flatly dismissed the UNHCR report, claiming: “The criticism of Papua New Guinea and Nauru is quite overstated.”

Morrison blamed the former Labor government for the poor conditions. The truth is that this is a

completely bipartisan policy. The Nauru and Manus camps were originally established by the previous Howard Liberal-National government, which lost office in 2007 partly because of the public outcry over the brutal conditions, which led to repeated hunger strikes, mental health breakdowns and suicide attempts. The facilities were initially closed by the Labor government but reopened last year, quickly leading to fresh reports of suffering and resistance.

Far from pursuing humanitarian concerns, both Labor and the Coalition have sought to scapegoat refugees and whip up a nationalist and xenophobic atmosphere as a distraction from their own pro-business policies under conditions of rising joblessness, sharpening austerity measures and deepening economic crisis.



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