

# Australian government prepares cover-up of refugee detention camp atrocity

Patrick O'Connor  
22 February 2014

Responding to the brutal suppression of a protest staged on Monday night by refugees detained on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, the Liberal-National government has boasted of its draconian "border protection" regime. Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his colleagues are preparing a cover-up of the atrocity, while effectively welcoming what happened as a "deterrent" to other people thinking about seeking asylum in Australia.

Many details of what happened in the Australian-run refugee detention camp remain unclear—reflecting the blanket censorship imposed by the government on every aspect of the military-led "Operation Sovereign Borders." What is known is that a 23-year-old Iranian Kurd, Reza Berati, was killed, suffering unspecified head injuries, while another 77 refugees were injured, 13 seriously. One has been flown to an Australian hospital in a critical condition after suffering a skull fracture, another man was shot in the buttocks, while multiple witness reports indicate that another survivor had his throat slashed with a machete. Those responsible for the violence were likely Australian-funded Papua New Guinea (PNG) paramilitary police and detention centre security personnel.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott justified the crackdown, declaring on Thursday that the government "will not be deterred or intimidated by anyone when it comes to doing what we need to do to protect our borders" and would not "succumb to pressure, to moral blackmail." He warned yesterday that "we will keep control of these centres and if people are in riotous assembly, they will be dealt with at all times fairly, but if necessary, firmly."

The statement amounted to a threat of further violence against any asylum seekers who protest against their illegal detention in the squalid Australian-run camps in the Pacific states of PNG and Nauru.

Immigration Minister Scott Morrison provided a chilling reply when asked if the government guaranteed the safety of the asylum seekers it imprisons. He said he could only do so "when they remain in the centre and act co-operatively" with those in charge. Anyone who engages in "disorderly behaviour" or who flees the Manus camp, he added, "will be subject to law enforcement as applies in Papua New Guinea."

The minister supported the violent suppression of the refugee protest. "In situations like this, if you're able to restore order promptly, which was done within a matter of hours, and ensure the facility is maintained and able to resume operations then that is an outcome which is positive." In a calculated attempt at intimidation, Morrison condoned future violence, saying: "Things like this can happen and do happen and may happen again."

The Manus Island incident recalls the "SIEV X" disaster in 2001, when Australian authorities deliberately allowed a refugee vessel to sink at sea, killing 353 refugees. Then Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock declared that this "may have an upside, in the sense that some people may see the dangers inherent in it [seeking asylum in Australia]."

As in the case of the SIEV X tragedy, an official cover-up of the Manus Island violence is underway. The government's review has been

commissioned by the immigration department—which is the body responsible for what has happened—and will be conducted by a Canberra insider, the former head of the attorney-general's department, Robert Cornall. Any other investigations, Morrison declared, such as police investigations or coronial enquiries, "are matters for the Papua New Guinean government."

The government was clearly preparing for a crackdown when it deployed an additional 130 security staff to the Manus camp on February 1–3. In a press conference on Tuesday, Morrison acknowledged that the refugee protests this week came as "no surprise to us, that is why the government was increasing security at the centre." The minister explained that there had previously been a "rolling series" of what he acknowledged were "peaceful protests" of asylum seekers against the conditions in the camp.

The reasons for the protests are obvious. The Manus Island camp was reopened in 2012 by the former Labor government, and currently detains 1,300 asylum seekers, all men, kept in indefinite detention in deliberately overcrowded and squalid conditions. The whole purpose of creating this hell-hole is to deter other asylum seekers from attempting to reach Australia by boat.

An Amnesty International investigation of the Manus facility, published in December 2013, concluded that the Australian government was not only breaking international law governing the treatment of refugees but also violating its obligations under the UN Convention against Torture. It found that detainees were forced to queue for one to five hours a day for meals, toilets and showers and medical treatment, with almost no shade provided to protect people from the tropical heat.

When it rains, Amnesty reported, "the camp smells strongly of sewage." The provision of essential items such as drinking water, hygiene products, shoes and clothes, and telephone and Internet services is all strictly rationed. The investigation also found: "Detainees also reported instances of verbal aggression or abuse by some staff. The most frequent was being told to return to their country of origin, 'go home' or 'go back to your country'."

Tensions escalated sharply on Sunday afternoon, after a meeting at the camp organised by the PNG Immigration and Citizenship Services Authority. The details of what was said have not been released, but it was almost certainly bad news about asylum applications. Under the regime devised by former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and maintained by the current government, even those who are found to be officially recognised refugees are denied asylum in Australia and permanently settled in PNG.

According to Morrison's own account, the refugees "became agitated and commenced chanting." At 6.15 p.m., 35 detainees escaped the camp but "were quickly located and returned to the centre." That evening there was "minor damage to the centre," including broken light poles and detainees knocked over eight foot high internal and external metal fences. Nineteen asylum seekers subsequently received medical treatment for non-

specified injuries, suggesting a crackdown by security guards.

The following morning, Monday at 7 a.m., another provocation was staged by the camp authorities when eight refugees were arrested and detained at Lorengau Police Station, facing charges relating to criminal damage.

That evening, again according to Morrison's account, 50 to 70 detainees staged another protest inside the Manus camp, demanding the release of the arrested refugees. At 9.45 p.m., internal fences separating different compounds within the camp were reportedly torn down. The protests then "escalated quickly with several hundred transferees involved" and only at 2 a.m. was "order was restored to the centre."

G4S, the British-based security corporation contracted by the Australian government to run the Manus facility, issued a public statement on Tuesday categorically insisting that "G4S staff were able to restore order within the Centre without the use of force." The same day, Morrison issued his own statement declaring: "I am advised that G4S were able to protect critical infrastructure and take control of the facility within the centre without the use of batons."

### Lies exposed

These statements have since been exposed as outright lies—security personnel used extreme force against the refugees. Australian-funded PNG paramilitary police were also involved in the violence. Numerous witnesses, including refugees, detention centre staff and security guards testify to what happened.

The *Daily Telegraph*'s Paul Toohey yesterday reported that Reza Berati, the Iranian Kurd who was killed, "may have been murdered by out-of-control guards who stomped his skull as he lay defenceless on the ground." The journalist continued: "According to an account from an Australian guard working for security contractor G4S, local guards working for G4S were in a frenzy and jumped on the man's head in a rage on Monday night, inside the detention compound."

The ABC's correspondent in PNG, Liam Cochrane, reported the comments of one eye-witness who did not want to be identified but said he watched PNG guards beat detainees with sticks, iron bars and rubber hoses, as well as fists, boots and shields. "When they pulled them outside they started beating them with the sticks... some of them with sticks, and some of them with all these hose, rubber hose and pipes," he told the ABC. The witness also described refugees trying to protect themselves by hiding in their rooms—"but the G4S went in, opened the room and pulled them out and [belted] all of them."

An Iranian-Australian interpreter at the camp, Azita Bokan, has also reported what she saw on Monday night, courageously defying a confidentiality agreement imposed by the Australian immigration department as part of the conditions of her employment. In the makeshift triage area where the injured refugees were initially treated she saw horrific injuries. "There was blood everywhere," she told Fairfax Media. "The number injured was horrific: people with massive head injuries, at least one with a slashed throat."

Several media outlets have also cited witnesses reporting that at least one person had their throat slit, with the ABC citing an unnamed G4S security guard confirming this. Morrison, however, has insisted that he "has no reports" of such an incident.

Police officers from PNG's paramilitary mobile squad were also involved in the violence. The mobile squad is notorious for its brutality, with numerous assaults, murders, and rapes catalogued by human rights organisations. The PNG government has previously deployed the mobile squad to suppress protests of local residents against lucrative logging and mining projects. Now the unit is on the Australian government payroll, with each officer receiving a \$100 a day "living away allowance" from Canberra, an enormous sum in PNG.

Scott Morrison admits that the PNG police fired at least two bursts of live rounds, at around 11.20 p.m. and 1 a.m. He maintains, however, that

the police never entered the detention centre and only clashed with refugees who left the camp. According to the government's account, external fences were torn down and several protestors moved outside before the PNG police responded. Several refugee advocate organisations, however, say that the asylum seekers fled in panic after security personnel entered the facility and began attacking people.

Morrison also claims that there is no evidence yet to determine whether police shot the man who was hit in the buttocks. No one should "join the dots," he said, between the shooting and the confirmed reports that police fired their weapons on at least two occasions. Fairfax Media has reported, however, that initial X-rays of the man shot "suggests a projectile from a large calibre weapon such as those used by police."

PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neill appeared to contradict Morrison's claim that police never entered the camp, saying: "Police were called into the centre only at the request of the management of the processing centre because their security guards were unable to control the situation." He claimed that police only fired warning shots, absurdly claiming that they did so "to calm things down."

Local parliamentarian for Manus Island, Ron Knight, also hinted that the police went further than just firing warning shots, telling the *Australian* that the protesting refugees "did OK until they ran into the mobile police unit, whose methods, though brutal, are effective."

Prime Minister O'Neill is a trusted stooge of the Australian government. His government will collaborate with Canberra to suppress the truth of what happened on Manus Island. O'Neill issued a statement to the country's parliament, declaring: "I am told that from the initial investigations, that there may have been some firearms in the camps as well." This baseless accusation that the refugees were armed is aimed at providing a justification for the extreme violence inflicted by the police and security personnel.

The Australian government has responded by doubling the number of security personnel at the Manus Island camp. Morrison also dispatched Lieutenant General Angus Campbell, the commander of "Operation Sovereign Borders," to the facility to assess the security situation.

The unrest on Manus Island has all the hallmarks of a calculated provocation orchestrated by the Australian government to provide the pretext for a violent crackdown, designed to serve as a warning to asylum seekers within the detention regime and as a deterrent to others considering exercising their right under international law to seek refuge in Australia. The violent suppression of refugee protests underscores the extraordinary criminality that is central to the reactionary "border protection" regime that is supported by the entire Australian political establishment.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**