

Australian government changes its story on refugee camp killing

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Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Scott Morrison issued a statement late Saturday night revising the government's account about what occurred on February 17 on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, where one refugee was killed and dozens injured in or around an Australian-run detention camp. The shifting official version of events is further evidence of a cover up of what initial witness accounts indicate was state sanctioned violence.

Morrison initially reported that the deceased asylum seeker, 23-year-old Iranian Kurd Reza Berati, sustained fatal head injuries outside the detention centre. This account was presented by the government as part of its portrayal of the refugees as violent criminals, who had allegedly attempted to burn down the camp and escape detention but were then thwarted by Papua New Guinean police.

In his first press conference held the day after the violence occurred, Morrison declared that "where there is violent behaviour on the part of those who are breaching the perimeter fence and going out of the centre then this is a disorderly environment in which there is always great risk ... if you behave in an unruly way and in a disorderly way then you subject yourself to the response of law enforcement."

In his statement released on Saturday night, and press conference yesterday, the minister admitted that "the majority of the riotous behaviour that occurred on the night of February 17 at Manus Island, and the response to that behaviour to restore order in the centre, took place within the perimeter of the centre."

Morrison's initial account of the violence occurring outside the camp was unambiguous and unqualified. His latest announcement, in stark contrast, was kept deliberately vague and made subject to further revision, pending the official investigation to be conducted by

the immigration department.

The latest official version of events nevertheless exposes as blatant lies the initial accounts provided by the immigration minister and by the security firm in charge of the camp, British transnational G4S. Last Tuesday, Morrison maintained that "G4S were able to protect critical infrastructure and take control of the facility within the centre without the use of batons," while G4S categorically stated that "G4S staff were able to restore order within the Centre without the use of force."

Far more credible are the numerous witness accounts that emerged in the last week—including from detainees, camp employees, and security guards—indicating that G4S personnel stormed the facility in response to asylum seeker protests, and brutally assaulted refugees, including those who were dragged out of their rooms and from under their beds. At least one refugee reportedly had his throat slit. According to witness accounts reported by the *Daily Telegraph's* Paul Toohey, Reza Berati was murdered by security guards, who "were in a frenzy and jumped on the man's head in a rage."

The security personnel are PNG locals, who receive as little as two weeks training before being sent in to guard the refugees. London-based G4S is the world's largest security firm, with annual revenues of more than £7 billion. Australia's refugee detention gulag is a rich source of profits for several security companies. Responsibility for the Manus Island camp is being transferred from G4S to Transfield Services, which recently won a \$1.2 billion contract for various services at the PNG and Nauru camps.

Morrison's latest statement on the Manus Island violence leaves unclear the role played by PNG's notorious paramilitary police mobile squad. These

officers are paid by Canberra. The squad is notorious for numerous allegations of murder, assault and rape in recent years across PNG. They fired at least two bursts of gunfire during the clashes with the refugees, but their responsibility for the shooting of one of the refugees in the buttocks remains unconfirmed.

Also unclear is precisely what triggered the refugee protests. On February 16, the PNG Immigration and Citizenship Services Authority held a meeting of the detained refugees, after which demonstrations immediately erupted, with asylum seekers clashing with security personnel. The following morning, eight refugees were arrested, with this provocation triggering further protests that led to the deadly violence during the night of February 17-18.

Under the policy introduced by the former Labor government and maintained by the current Liberal-National administration, asylum seekers deported from Australia to PNG will be permanently settled in that Pacific country if they are officially recognised as refugees. This measure, in blatant violation of international law, serves as the cornerstone of the government's efforts to deter people travelling to Australia for asylum by sea.

It is unlikely that the 1,300 detained refugees first learned about this policy during the February 16 meeting. What triggered the escalating protests? One possibility is that the refugees were told that their permanent settlement in PNG would be in the Manus Island camp. Morrison last week left open the prospect that a new section of the detention centre, now under construction, will be used for permanent settlement, that is, to effectively give refugees a life sentence of detention.

The immigration minister has stated that his official inquiry will proceed "over the next few months", but may "take longer." In other words, the whitewash will be dragged out for as long as possible.

The incident has all the hallmarks of a state provocation, orchestrated to bolster the government's reactionary "border protection" regime. After Morrison was caught out lying, Prime Minister Tony Abbott yesterday declared that he was doing a "sterling" job, adding that "you don't want a wimp running border protection."

Reports yesterday indicated that the Abbott government has also asked Cambodia, one of the most

impoverished countries in Asia, to join PNG and Nauru in accepting asylum seekers deported from Australia.

The government has the full backing of the opposition Labor Party. It has criticised the government only for "losing control" over the Manus Island camp, which it reopened in 2012. Labor immigration spokesman Richard Marles has insisted the detention centre was "absolutely fundamental" to halting further asylum seeker arrivals.

Appealing to the widespread outrage among ordinary Australians over the refugee killing, the Greens have demanded Morrison's sacking, the closure of the Manus camp, and for a parliamentary inquiry into what happened. This merely represents an attempt to devise a more humane façade for the existing anti-refugee policies. The Greens agree with the reactionary premise behind the "border protection" regime, namely that the state must control and limit the number of people who can enter and live in Australia. Moreover, the Greens bear direct responsibility for the current situation. Without their support for the previous minority Labor government, then Prime Minister Julia Gillard could not have enacted more punitive anti-refugee measures, including reopening the Manus camp.

The author also recommends:

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