

More evidence about atrocity at Australian-run refugee camp

Mike Head
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Fresh evidence has emerged over the past two days of the Australian government's cover-up of the state-sanctioned repression that left one refugee dead, and 77 wounded, 13 seriously, inside the Australian-controlled detention facility on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island last week.

Liz Thompson, an Australian professional migration agent who was deployed by the Australian government to Manus in early February to help assess asylum applications, quit her job there after the assault on the detainees. Interviewed on the SBS television program "Dateline" on Tuesday, she recounted having heard the violent attacks from her room and spoken with multiple eye-witnesses the following day.

Thompson's testimony confirmed earlier accounts that security guards and police, joined by some local people, conducted terrifying attacks on detainees inside the facility. Her interview further exposed the lies initially told by Immigration Minister Scott Morrison that the violence, including the killing of 23-year-old Iranian Kurd, Reza Berati, occurred outside the camp after refugees escaped.

"It was certainly clear from what I was hearing that a lot of what happened occurred inside the perimeter fence and that there'd been a breach of the perimeter fence by locals who'd come in and attacked people," she told "Dateline". "People describe being pulled out of their beds."

Thompson said protests broke out among the asylum seekers after she and other interviewers were instructed by the Australian authorities to tell the detainees that their only option was resettlement in Papua New Guinea (PNG), not Australia or any other country. Detention centre staff were warned that if they did not "stick to the script" they would be dismissed and removed from the island.

Thompson characterised the information given to the asylum seekers regarding their settlement in PNG as a "lie", given that the country's government had made no decision to accept any asylum seekers and that the detainees faced the potential threat of lifelong imprisonment on Manus Island. She told "Dateline" that the refugees knew from media reports about their limbo status. "They (detainees) watch the news, they read the newspapers, they watch what's going around in the camp, they know there's no decision from the Papua New Guinean government on resettlement. So what that means is... you're never getting out of this camp, it's indefinite detention."

The final trigger for the protests came on the Sunday, according to Thompson's account, when a PNG official told the detainees that PNG had made no decision to resettle them. "I believe what happened was completely predictable, that tensions were allowed to build up, that misinformation was allowed to circulate, that people were allowed to be driven into a frenzy about what was going to happen."

Thompson said she would never go back to Manus because the process was "fake": "It's not designed as a processing facility, it's designed as an experiment in the active creation of horror to deter people from trying in the first place." She concluded: "Reza Berati's death is not some kind of crisis for the department, it's an opportunity to extend that logic, one step further—to say 'This happens, but deterrence continues, Operation Sovereign Borders continues'."

Operation Sovereign Borders is the Abbott government's name for its military-led operation to stop all refugees from entering Australia, in direct violation of their right under international law to flee persecution and seek asylum.

According to the Murdoch media today, a preliminary

PNG police report into the Manus violence stated that the detainees' protests erupted after they were not satisfied with the response by the centre's management to 11 questions they had asked a week earlier. The questions included what the assessment process was; how long it would take; why there had been a delay for those interviewed "some time ago;" why the media was barred from interviewing them; and why they could not be sent to a third country.

Judging by the media leaks, the PNG police report seeks to exonerate the police, including the paramilitary mobile squad, which is known to have fired shots during the suppression of the protests. It blames the detainees for the conflict, claiming that they "overpowered" security guards and pushed down a perimeter fence, so that "extra force" was needed to contain them.

The report claims that the mobile police squad only fired shots in the air, despite at least one refugee being shot in the buttocks. It also states that security guards were "seriously assaulted" by asylum seekers, even though there is no evidence of serious injuries sustained by G4S staff.

The claims in the police report contradict an incident report by G4S, the British security firm hired by the Australian government to police the facility. According to the *Guardian*, this report made no reference to asylum seekers escaping the compound. It also stated that G4S guards invited PNG dog squad police into the compound, further escalating the situation.

The G4S incident report was completed before 9 a.m. on the morning after the atrocity and handed to the Australian Immigration Department. That same morning, Immigration Minister Morrison falsely told the media: "PNG police did not enter the centre and ... their activities related only to dealing with transferees who breached the external perimeter."

Five days later, Morrison shifted his story, admitting that the "response" to the protests occurred inside the centre. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared that Morrison had his full confidence, because "you don't want a wimp running border protection."

Abbott's response underscored the government's intention to whitewash the assault on the refugees, while exploiting Berati's death and the serious wounding of others, to deter all asylum seekers from trying to reach Australia.

Yesterday, the government released the terms of reference for its official review of the Manus incident. These focus almost exclusively on how to bolster "security" and "intelligence" at the facility to suppress future protests. The review "will be undertaken in cooperation with the PNG government," whose police force has already prepared a concocted report.

There is no reference to the inhuman conditions in which the refugees have been incarcerated for months on end, or the underlying "border protection" regime. Labor opposition's immigration spokesman Richard Marles welcomed the release of the terms of reference. He earlier declared Labor's support for keeping the Manus camp open, in line with his boast that the previous Labor government's reopening of the Manus and Nauru centres "stopped the boats."

Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young branded the terms as "entirely inadequate", in line with her party's sanctimonious criticisms of the violent crackdown and its appeals for a more humanitarian treatment of refugees. The Greens were responsible for propping up the minority Labor government that reactivated the Manus detention hellhole and struck the agreement with the PNG government to permanently settle the detainees in the Pacific state, denying them asylum in a safe country.



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