

More evidence of Australian government responsibility for refugee camp assault

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Further testimony emerged this week from witnesses of the brutal violence inflicted on refugees detained in an Australian-run camp on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island on the night of February 17–18. One refugee, 23-year-old Iranian Kurd Reza Berati, was killed, and several others were seriously wounded in the attack.

An employee of G4S, the British-based security company contracted by the Australian government to run the Manus camp, spoke anonymously with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and said he was “badly traumatised after witnessing a frenzy of out of control violence.” He explained that during the refugee protests, senior G4S personnel decided to call in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) mobile squad, an Australian-funded paramilitary unit that is notorious for its violence and criminal activities.

The G4S whistleblower told the ABC that he heard a discussion between G4S managers, with one asking about handing over responsibility to the PNG police, “Are you sure? Do you know the consequences of that?” The reply was: “Yes, hand it over.”

This account underscores the responsibility of Australian authorities for the violent rampage that followed. The obvious question is: who in Canberra was involved in this decision? As Immigration Minister Scott Morrison has openly acknowledged, his department knew that tensions were escalating in the camp, fuelled by the terrible conditions endured by the 1,300 detainees and continued uncertainty about resettlement.

Australian authorities and the G4S were also aware that hostility toward refugees had been whipped up among sections of the local population. On Tuesday, the SBS network's “Dateline” program broadcast an interview with a Salvation Army worker in the camp

who said that late last year local residents attempted to storm the camp with machetes.

In his ABC interview, the G4S employee detailed what happened last month. The PNG paramilitary forces fired a burst of warning shots, before standing back as armed local residents, G4S security guards and other camp contractors went in and attacked the refugees. “We saw them going in with machetes,” he explained. “They had anything they could pick up: rocks, sticks, the poles from the exercise weights. Once they knocked people to the ground, they were stomping on their heads with their boots. A day later you could still see guards and staff and cleaners walking around with blood on their boots.”

The G4S staffer confirmed previous reports from asylum seekers that their assailants went through the centre, smashing down doors and attacking everyone they could find. He explained that PNG police joined in the violence: “The police went from room to room as well and held guns to people's heads and said, ‘If you don't give me your cigarettes, we're going to shoot you’.”

Numerous reports from those in contact with asylum seekers have described the detainees' fear of being attacked again. A Fairfax Media article this week cited a “well-placed source employed at the Manus Island detention centre” who said Reza Berati had been killed by a local employed by the Salvation Army, which has a \$75 million contract with the Australian government to work at the camps on Manus and Nauru. “Everyone knows who attacked him and is surprised no one has been taken into custody,” the source said.

Several refugees in the camp reported that Berati was in the computer room when the violence began, then sought refuge in his room before being attacked. He died, Fairfax Media reported, “after repeated blows to

the head, most likely by a piece of timber, a PNG autopsy found last week.”

Media reports indicate that the cleaning staff quickly scrubbed the camp clean, mopping up blood, including in the area where Berati was killed, compromising any investigation.

Berati’s family held his funeral in Tehran late last month, with 1,500 people from the Kurdish community attending. The young man’s cousin angrily told reporters that Iraq’s former president, Saddam Hussein, did not treat Iranian prisoners of war as badly as the Australian government treated refugees from the country.

Immigration Minister Morrison initially lied about the incident, declaring that no violence took place within the camp and blaming refugees for escaping. Amid overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Morrison was forced to retract.

Manus camp staff, speaking anonymously, described seeing bullet casings and bullet holes in centre walls. Photos taken inside the Manus camp and published on a Facebook page appear to confirm these accounts, showing lockers, walls, and doors with bullet holes. Other photographs showed refugees, who held up their identity cards for the camera, with what appeared to be knife or machete wounds to their heads and necks, and also bad bruises and cuts to their eyes and noses.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Morrison are proceeding with an abject whitewash. The terms of the official inquiry are almost entirely focused on strengthening “security” and “intelligence” measures in the camp to suppress any more protests.

Robert Cornall, who is conducting the inquiry, was tasked by the previous Labor government to conduct an “independent” review into revelations last year by former Manus Island camp manager, turned whistleblower, Rod St George. St George said immigration department officials knew that refugees were being raped in the detention centre, treated, and then returned to the single male compound where they were raped again. Cornall’s review flatly denied this happened, and endorsed the management of the Manus camp.

The Abbott government is also supporting the investigations being carried out by PNG authorities. These will no doubt produce blatant cover-ups. Prime Minister Peter O’Neil, a long-time lackey of the

Australian government, has publicly denied that Manus Island residents were involved in any violence, and also made the ludicrous accusation that the detained refugees had firearms.

The Labor Party and the Greens have initiated a Senate inquiry into the Manus Island violence. The two parties bear direct responsibility for what happened, with the Manus camp reopened as part of the revival of the “Pacific Solution” by the previous Greens-backed Labor government.

No one should have any confidence in the Senate investigation, which will begin next month. In the aftermath of the SIEV X disaster in which 353 refugees drowned at sea in 2001, the Labor Party initiated a parliamentary investigation. Once evidence emerged that Australian officials knowingly allowed the drownings, Labor lined up with the Howard government and shut down the investigation, preventing senior military and other officials from testifying under oath.

The Manus Island killing, like the SIEV X disaster, is a product of the reactionary “border protection” regime that the entire Australian political establishment defends. In denying refugees their basic democratic and legal right to seek asylum in the country, the ruling elite has deliberately ratcheted up the violence and misery inflicted on detained asylum seekers, as a “deterrent” to others thinking about fleeing to Australia.



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