

Australian inquiry whitewashes PNG refugee camp crackdown

Patrick O'Connor
31 May 2014

The Australian government on Monday released its official report into the violent suppression of refugee protests in an Australian detention camp in Papua New Guinea's Manus Island in February, which left one asylum seeker dead and several others seriously wounded. The report was a blatant whitewash, covering up the government's responsibility for the violence, blaming the victims for their own plight, and issuing a series of recommendations aimed at strengthening the repression of detained refugees on Manus Island.

Presenting the report, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison acknowledged the "terrible, tragic and distressing series of incidents" only to dismiss them by declaring that "there would have been no incident that night had there been no protests." But the protests are the direct consequence of the draconian refugee policy that illegally condemns asylum seekers to indefinite detention on remote Pacific islands with no prospect of resettlement in Australia.

Robert Cornall, a former senior public servant trusted by the Coalition government, conducted the inquiry on behalf of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, which is responsible for the Manus Island detention centre. The previous Labor government had struck a deal last year with the Papua New Guinean government that asylum seekers arriving by boat in Australia would be sent to the impoverished Pacific country and permanently settled there, in violation of fundamental precepts of international law.

The Coalition won office last September on the basis of even harsher "border protection" policies. Cornall's report acknowledged rising tensions in the detention centre in late 2013 and early 2014. By the beginning of 2014, there were 1,340 single males detained in the camp in squalid conditions, denied access to the Australian and international media and held in legal limbo.

According to the government report, a series of protests

took place in late January and early February. Refugees demanded answers to what was going to happen to them. In response, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection organised a meeting in the camp on February 16 in which the detention centre's operational manager read out a series of scripted answers.

Detailed in the government report, these answers were provocatively drafted—repeatedly declaring that the detainees were free to return to the country they had been persecuted in, and explaining that if they refused to do this they must "remain at the Centre for as long as it takes to process your refugee claims." Refugees were told that Australian authorities would provide no assistance for resettlement in a third country other than PNG, and added, in a clearly unlawful instruction, that "your behaviour and conduct at the Centre will be taken into consideration during your Refugee Status Determination."

The report noted that during the meeting where this was communicated there were shouts of protest and complaints that interpreters were being misheard. Cornall concluded, "the transferees [refugees] well understood the central message that refugee processing was going to take a long time and they could expect to be at the Manus RPC [camp] for an uncertain period, possibly up to four years."

The report detailed information, gained well before the February 16 meeting by both Immigration Department officials and personnel with the G4S security firm in charge of camp operations, that a major eruption was imminent. About 130 extra security personnel were dispatched to Manus. Staff were instructed to collect loose stones and other potential missiles or weapons. The government report ignored the obvious question as to why, in this context, instead of attempting to defuse tensions, officials arranged a meeting of detainees to bluntly tell them that they faced indefinite detention in PNG.

The only plausible explanation, as the *World Socialist*

Web Site has previously noted, is that Australian authorities consciously organised a provocation, as the pretext for a violent crackdown. This was to send a message to detainees that no opposition or protest against their treatment would be tolerated. It was also to bolster the “deterrent” message to potential refugees around the world considering seeking asylum in Australia.

At the time, the Coalition government denounced the victims of the violence for what occurred. Immigration Minister Scott Morrison declared that anyone involved in “disorderly behaviour ... will be subject to law enforcement as applies in Papua New Guinea.” In a clear threat, he added that “things like this can happen and do happen and may happen again.”

Following this law-and-order line, Cornall repeatedly describes the protest involving several hundred refugees on the night of February 17–18 as a “riot.” It confirms previous witness accounts that the PNG mobile squad—a notoriously violent and corrupt paramilitary unit—pulled down fences and stormed the detention camp after G4S lost control. They were reportedly joined by both PNG nationals and “a few” Australian expatriates who worked for the centre’s contracted service providers. PNG nationals with a G4S unit also went into the camp.

The report could not completely ignore the brutality of what it blandly described as a “police intervention.” “The nationals and sometimes expats and police went into bedrooms in Mike [one of the camp’s four compounds] and dragged transferees outside to be beaten... Transferees also reported that the intruders stole their personal property... The mobile squad also fired an uncertain number of shots, some of which penetrated the walls of buildings at about chest height and some of which were fired into the residential buildings,” it stated.

The report found that at least 69 refugees were treated for injuries, including broken bones and lacerations. One lost an eye, another was shot in the buttocks, and another survived having his throat slashed. Iranian Kurd Reza Berati was killed after suffering “a severe brain injury caused by a brutal beating by several assailants.”

Underscoring the official contempt for Berati and other refugees, the details of the man’s murder were not included in the report’s executive summary. Only towards the end of the 107-page document is further detail provided, including the alleged involvement of an Australian G4S security officer.

Witnesses who spoke with Cornall reported that Berati was not even involved in any of the protests, but was twice struck with a stick by a PNG national hired in the

camp by the Salvation Army. Berati was then repeatedly kicked in the head by an estimated 10 officers, both PNG and Australian, before one of the locals smashed his skull with a large stone.

The official report tacitly condoned the extreme violence. Citing an obscure 1974 PNG law, Cornall claimed it was illegal for a police officer “not to suppress a riot in his neighbourhood unless has a reasonable excuse.” The report added that the “result of the police intervention” was that “the riot in Mike did not continue for much longer” and that G4S was able to shortly afterwards “establish some form of order.”

The report exonerated the Australian government, Immigration Department and G4S, concluding that responsibility for “offences which caused death, injury, loss of personal property or property damage lies with the offenders.” It added that responsibility for investigating these offences lay with the PNG authorities.

The PNG government has already made its attitude clear. Prime Minister Peter O’Neil slandered the refugees immediately after the police-security attack on the camp, accusing them of hiding guns in the lead up to the protests. Senior police officials responded to the Cornall report by blatantly denying that PNG officers ever entered the Manus camp. Deputy Police Commissioner Simon Kauba added in a statement that G4S officials had refused to speak with PNG police.

The Cornall report concluded with a series of recommendations, many aimed at strengthening security measures against detained refugees. This included a recommendation that the PNG government permit the contracted security officials on Manus wider “powers of search and use of force” against detainees.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact