

Australia authorities violently suppress refugee hunger strike

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A sit-in and hunger strike by refugees in Australia's Christmas Island detention centre, protesting against their indefinite detention in violation of fundamental democratic rights and international law, was forcibly suppressed by the government's security contractor, Serco, on June 2, leaving at least eight asylum seekers injured.

It was the second crackdown by the Australian government on detainees in four months—following the police and security guard violence that killed Reza Berati, a 23-year-old Iranian Kurd, and seriously injured other refugees on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island in February.

In both instances, the Liberal-National Coalition government was enforcing a regime introduced by the previous Labor government with the aim of stopping all refugees trying to reach Australia by boat. Under Labor's "no advantage" detention policy, imposed last year to punish and deter asylum seekers, there is effectively no limit on the length of time that they can be incarcerated on Christmas Island, Manus Island or the tiny Pacific country of Nauru.

After the June 2 assault by the Serco Emergency Response Team, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison told parliament that that six asylum seekers were taken to hospital with broken bones and sprains, and another two were treated inside the detention centre.

The sit-in protest by 75 detainees began on May 27—marking 100 days since Berati's death. A number of protesters went on hunger strike and seven stitched their lips together. As well as protesting against Berati's killing, the detainees were demanding information on the status of their protection visa claims and access to the media. Some of the asylum seekers have already been locked up for a year.

After immigration officials and Serco, the British-

based security firm running the detention centre, locked down the whole detention facility, hundreds of detainees joined the protest. On June 2, Serco officers in riot gear attacked the protesters. Refugee advocate Pamela Curr branded the attack as "brutal." She told the media: "They bashed men with batons. The men have injuries on their hands and arms from trying to shield their faces."

Morrison defended the intervention of the "emergency team" as necessary, rejected calls for an inquiry and vilified the refugees. "Reports to me suggest some detainees became aggressive and were subsequently restrained," he said. However, an anonymous witness told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that the protest was peaceful.

Detainees on Christmas Island, a remote Australian possession in the Indian Ocean, have been told they will be sent to Nauru or PNG for assessments of their refugee status and potential resettlement there. After visiting Christmas Island in March, Dr Karen Zwi, a member of National Inquiry into Children in Immigration, described the environment as "frightening," with detainees "depressed and anxious."

As was the case with the Manus Island attack, it seems that the protest was deliberately provoked by the government in order to provide a pretext for a crackdown. The Manus incident was triggered by detainees being told they would only ever be "settled" in Papua New Guinea, not Australia. The Christmas Island clash occurred after asylum seekers were threatened with being sent to Manus or Nauru.

In its PR campaigns, the government is actually highlighting the medical and mental health problems being suffered by detainees, in order send a "deterrent" message to refugees not to seek asylum in Australia. The Department of Immigration and Border

Protection's web site features graphic images of people experiencing depression.

Last December, 15 doctors working in detention facilities wrote a 92-page letter of concern, documenting cases which constituted departure from medical norms, posing significant risks and harm to detainees. "Decisions made by Minister Morrison have direct and significant impacts on the wellbeing of our patients," they stated.

Dr John-Paul Sanggaran, one of the letter's co-authors, recently told a public meeting that the government had ignored the letter. "Despite over 18,000 words of detailed concerns there has been no adequate response," he said.

This also points to a deliberate government decision to provide a sub-standard medical care, at the cost of the health and wellbeing of asylum seekers, in order to deter refugees. At the same time, the government has imposed a blanket of secrecy over all aspects of its anti-refugee operation, in order to keep the public in dark about this inhumane treatment.

Refugees previously released on temporary bridging visas, which provide no protection against being deported or locked up again, are also facing hardship and psychological problems.

In constant fear of being sent back to Sri Lanka, a Tamil asylum seeker died after setting himself on fire in Geelong, near Melbourne, on May 31. Leo Seemanpillai, who arrived in January 2013, was detained for six months in Darwin before his release. He was under constant pressure from immigration officials to leave Australia "voluntarily."

In April, another Tamil burned himself in Sydney after being told that he had to return to Sri Lanka. Between them, the Gillard, Rudd and Abbott governments have deported more than 1,000 Sri Lankan asylum seekers since August 2012. Many were subject to an "enhanced screening process," in which they were interviewed rapidly, without lawyers present, and not informed of their right to apply for a protection visa.

The resort to such police-state methods by Labor and Coalition governments alike is a warning to working people. Refugees, who are among the most oppressed and vulnerable people in the world, are being used as a testing ground for repressive measures that will be used in the future against workers and youth as opposition

and resistance grows to the savage austerity agenda being imposed.



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