Australia: Senate inquiry whitewashes killing at Papua New Guinea refugee camp

Patrick Kelly
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A Senate committee inquiry, led by Labor and Greens parliamentarians, has whitewashed the Liberal-National government's culpability for the violence inflicted on refugees in an Australian-run camp on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island earlier this year. Despite producing evidence of systematic criminality, the committee's recommendations centred on calls for greater "transparency" in the continued imprisonment of refugees on Manus Island, and improved training for security guards working at the camp.

The Senate inquiry, which issued its final report last Thursday, served as another demonstration of the support across the political establishment for the reactionary "border protection" regime. The role played by the Greens is especially significant, given their posturing as a "progressive" critic of the two major parties' policies. Greens Senator Penny Wright chaired the inquiry, conducted by the Senate's Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, and signed her name at the end of the final report.

The inquiry's wide-ranging terms of reference authorised the Senate committee to investigate what happened at the Manus Island Detention Centre on February 16-18, including the murder of 23-year-old Iranian Kurd refugee Reza Berati, and probe the Australian government's "involvement and response" to the violence.

The inquiry received numerous submissions from legal and human rights groups, and from former detention centre workers. It also held public hearings, questioning government officials and figures involved in the privately contracted security and welfare services on Manus Island. What emerged was further evidence pointing to the likelihood, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously raised, that the government deliberately provoked protests at the detention centre, then violently suppressed the asylum seekers as a means of deterring other refugees from attempting the journey by sea to Australia.

In August 2012, the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard announced that so-called offshore processing would recommence in Papua New Guinea and Nauru. Before Tony Abbott came to office in September 2013, the Labor government had concocted a deal with Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill ensuring that even formally recognised refugees would be blocked from entering Australia and instead settled in the impoverished Pacific country. By February 2013, the Manus camp, which was initially planned for 500 people, held 1,300 people, all young single men, in squalid conditions.

Australian authorities had received numerous reports from the camp warning of an increasingly explosive situation, and had deployed additional security personnel. They then organised a mass meeting at the facility to inform the detainees that they would never be permitted to settle in Australia or a third country. This provoked protests by refugees to which British-based transnational security giant G4S responded by calling in Australian-funded PNG paramilitary police, notorious for their violence. They stormed the camp, together with local security guards and thugs armed with machetes, firing live rounds and brutally assaulting refugees. Several were seriously injured, including one suffering a gunshot wound and another who had his throat cut. Reza Berati died from severe head wounds.

The Senate committee heard extensive testimony of the cruel and inhumane conditions on Manus Island.

The remarks of Nicole Judge, a former Salvation Army worker at the camp, were typical: "When I arrived on Manus Island during September 2013, I had previously worked on Nauru for one year. I thought I had seen it all: suicide attempts, people jumping off buildings, people stabbing themselves, people screaming for freedom whilst beating their heads on concrete. Unfortunately I was

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wrong; I had not seen it all. Manus Island shocked me to my core. I saw sick and defeated men crammed behind fences and being denied their basic human rights, padlocked inside small areas in rooms often with no windows and being mistreated by those who were employed to care for their safety."

Conditions in the camp remain appalling. Reports last week emerged detailing the Australian authorities' responsibility for the death of another detainee on Manus Island in September. After Iranian refugee Hamid Kehazaei cut his foot, which became seriously infected, he was admitted to the detention centre's medical facility on August 23. Two days later, according to leaked medical reports, doctors noted that his condition had "worsened considerably" and could develop into a "life or limb-threatening situation." Medical staff demanded the patient's urgent transfer to a hospital in Port Moresby, PNG's capital, but this was delayed for 19 hours, apparently due to delays in issuing a visa. Kehazaei later suffered a heart attack and brain death, with life support shut off on September 5.

The Senate committee also heard that several of those responsible for the attacks on the asylum seekers remain employed at the camp. The final report noted that traumatised refugees "had taken to keeping guard during the night out of fear of further attacks."

The committee also found that asylum claims were not being processed. As of last month just 10 refugees were given official approval, out of more than 1,000 claims, "and it is apparent that there is still a significant proportion of transferees who have not had their formal assessment process commenced at all."

Despite the evidence of rampant criminality, with basic international human rights conventions and refugee laws disregarded by the Abbott government, the Senate committee effectively gave the green light for the continued detention and violence against asylum seekers.

Of the committee's six recommendations, the government indicated its agreement with four. These urged the government to: 1) assist PNG authorities' criminal investigations into the violence on Manus, 2) formally state its responsibility to uphold the human rights of people detained on Manus Island, 3) offer medical and legal assistance to those injured in the February police attacks, and 4) provide private security guards employed on Manus with "sufficient workplace training to perform their roles."

The Abbott government's agreement with these recommendations points to their toothless content. The purpose is not to hold those responsible for the violence to account, beginning with senior government officials in Canberra, but to provide a "humanitarian" fig leaf for the further indefinite detention of refugees on the Manus hell hole.

The committee's two recommendations that Liberal and National Party senators said they would not endorse were no less bogus than the other four. One urged the government to "acknowledge and take responsibility for violations of human rights" during the clashes at the camp, also paying compensation to the victims, while the other advised that "appropriate access" be provided to the Manus camp, including for UN officials, lawyers, and journalists.

The Greens' duplicity and hypocrisy on refugees was again on display with the public release of the committee's final report.

While Greens Senator Penny Wright authored the report, another Greens Senator, Sarah Hanson-Young, wrote a four-page addendum to declare that "offshore detention is not sustainable" and that the continued operation of the Manus camp was "untenable." The Greens, in fact, share responsibility for the violence against the refugees on Manus Island. They provided the critical parliamentary support for the former minority Labor government as it relaunched the illegal "Pacific Solution," including the Manus gulag.

Above all, the Greens are in lockstep agreement with the Labor and Liberal parties on the reactionary premise behind the major parties' anti-refugee policies—namely, that the state and its military-police apparatus ought to monitor and prevent the entry of impoverished and oppressed people from around the world into Australia.

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