

Violent crackdown on hunger strikers in Australian refugee camp

Will Morrow
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The Australian government today publicly thanked and praised the Papua New Guinean (PNG) government for yesterday conducting a violent attack on asylum seekers involved in an ongoing hunger strike in an Australian refugee detention camp on PNG's Manus Island.

Heavily-armed security guards stormed the camp's Delta compound, where protesting refugees had blockaded themselves. Security forces reportedly also moved into Oscar compound.

The PNG government claims that police officers were present during the operation, but were not involved. But video footage has emerged, appearing to show police or guards in riot gear forcefully breaching Delta compound.

PNG Immigration Minister Rimbink Pato said "agitators" were arrested. A detainee told the *Guardian Australia* yesterday that up to 30 men were taken to an unknown location. The web site said it received photographs of refugees being removed from a compound by security personnel.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported today: "Asylum seekers in other compounds who did not witness the confrontation reported people being beaten, dragged on the ground and handcuffed."

A number of refugees had reportedly already been placed in solitary confinement since Saturday in the camp's "Chauka compound," which is a collection of shipping containers, each with just a single bed and no windows.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott quickly endorsed the repression, saying "thank you to the government of PNG." Abbott declared that the protests were a "major challenge to the policy of the [Australian] government" and "I am pleased to say that that challenge has been defeated."

Abbott's Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton also hailed the PNG government, Australian private security contractor Transfield and his own staff for their "exemplary" actions. Foreshadowing further crackdowns, he warned that the "threat is ever-present" and "we are monitoring it."

All the operations at the Manus Island facility are subject to total media censorship imposed by the Australian government. Journalists are excluded from the camp. Everything that is being reported is the result of comments, photos and videos sent to the media by detainees or camp staff members.

Despite the government's claims, widely repeated in the mass media, that the refugee protest has now been "resolved," the hunger strike is continuing.

As of yesterday, the strike had spread to involve up to 700 of the 1,053 detainees in the camp. Refugees were also committing other desperate acts of protest. An asylum seeker in the centre told the ABC that two refugees drank mosquito repellent, and another two drank detergent. At least one, and up to three people, are said to have swallowed razor blades. There are varying reports of up to 30 people sewing their lips together.

Yesterday's crackdown was preceded by a series of incendiary and provocative comments by Abbott government ministers. Dutton declared on Monday that protesters were engaging in "aggressive behaviour."

In an interview with the ABC this morning, Dutton said the protest would have no impact on the government's policy of barring entry to all asylum seekers, regardless of whether they face persecution. "In the end, we want to help these people return to their country of origin," he said. "They will not be coming to Australia."

On Sunday the ABC said it received several reports

that PNG police, notorious for their violence, were being prepared to break up the protests. An asylum seeker told the national broadcaster: “They [camp guards] said, maybe some team—they’re called SWAT team—will arrive tomorrow.”

Last February, PNG paramilitary police, backed by local thugs armed with machetes, stormed the refugee camp to put down a protest. One refugee, Reza Barati, was murdered, and 71 others were injured. There has been mounting evidence that the Australian government deliberately provoked the protest and supported its violent suppression in order to deter other asylum seekers from trying to enter Australia.

There are indications that detainees have been subjected to collective punishment in response to the protests. An Australian Associated Press report on Sunday cited refugee allegations that they were denied food and water bottles. The ABC published a video showing a detainee crawling under a compound fence to reach a bottle of water. At this time of year, Manus Island has an average temperature of over 30 degrees Celsius.

The *Guardian Australia* reported on Sunday that up to 200 people were receiving medical treatment for dehydration. Doctors for Refugees convener Barri Phatarfod told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the camp lacked “the capacity to handle a hunger strike of even one tenth of that size.” The newspaper reported that the camp’s “medical centre” is located in a kitchen and has neither beds nor mattresses.

The hunger strike is driven by fears that 50 refugees whose claims for asylum have been accepted by the PNG government are to be removed from the camp and settled on Manus Island, where they fear persecution. The protest was also triggered by the cutoff of all running water in the camp, including for showers and toilets, since at least last Wednesday.

Under the regime instituted by the previous Greens-backed minority Labor government, and maintained by the Abbott government, refugees who seek to reach Australia by boat are imprisoned indefinitely in hell-hole camps at Manus Island and the Pacific state of Nauru, or on Australia’s Indian Ocean outpost of Christmas Island.

Many on Manus Island have already been in detention for more than 15 months. Their sole “offence” is to have attempted to exercise their basic

democratic right—protected by international law—to apply for protection from persecution.

Underscoring the bipartisan nature of this policy, Labor Party leader Bill Shorten on Sunday backed the Abbott government’s agenda. He only urged the government to provide greater “transparency” on the Manus Island operations, declaring: “Australians will normally give support to their government on tough matters—if people are told the truth.”

The Greens’ immigration spokeswoman Senator Sarah Hanson-Young called for a “proper independent investigation into what is going on at the asylum-seeker centre.” While claiming to oppose the inhumanity with which the policy is being implemented, the Greens support the underlying reactionary framework of “border protection,” which asserts the authority of national governments to prevent anyone from seeking asylum.



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