

World medical body denounces Australia's refugee detention censorship law

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The World Medical Association (WMA) has publicly condemned the sweeping new censorship law imposed on all staff, including medical professionals, at Australia's refugee detention camps.

The "Border Force Act" was passed on May 14 with the support of both the conservative government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott and the Labor opposition, and came into force July 1. It is now a crime, punishable by two years in prison, for any "entrusted person" to publicly divulge information about any aspect of Australia's "border protection" regime, including conditions in refugee detention camps.

The definition of an "entrusted person" encompasses not only centre staff, but medical professionals and representatives of "public international organisations"—including medical and human rights bodies—"whose services are made available" to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

The WMA statement was written in support of an open letter opposing the law. The letter was published Wednesday and signed by 41 medical professionals and other detention staff. The letter declared that "standing by and watching sub-standard and harmful care, child abuse and gross violations of human rights is not ethically justifiable." It concluded: "We are aware that in publishing this letter we may be prosecuted under the Border Force Act and we challenge the department to prosecute so that these issues may be discussed in open court and in the full view of the Australian public."

In a letter to Prime Minister Abbott, WMA president Dr Xavier Deau and chair Dr Ardis Hoven stated that the law was "in striking conflict with basic principles of medical ethics. Physicians have to raise their voice, if necessary publicly, when health conditions of their patients, be those free or in detention, are unacceptable."

Deau added, "This is effectively an attempt by the Australian government to gag physicians by making their advocacy for the healthcare of asylum seekers in Australian detention camps a criminal offence." The Australian Medical Association and Australian Medical Students' Association have also publicly opposed the new law.

Under Australia's illegal refugee detention program, anyone who attempts to sail to Australia for asylum is dumped in barbaric prison camps on the impoverished Pacific islands of Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, or on the Australian territory of Christmas Island. Following agreements signed by the former Labor government in 2013, even if a person is officially recognised as a refugee, they can never settle in Australia. They are instead given the "choice" of resettling on Nauru, in PNG or—under an agreement signed by the Abbott government—Cambodia.

The conditions in Australian offshore camps have always been subject to media censorship. The entire political establishment is conscious of the deep revulsion felt by the Australian people toward the treatment of refugees.

The detention centres employ methods that are most closely associated with concentration camps. Everything is done to break down the spirit and internal resistance of the refugees, to atomise and dehumanise them. They are not referred to by name, but by their boat "identification number." They have no rights and no privacy.

Natasha Blucher, who worked for Save the Children on Nauru until October last year, told the ABC on Monday that the "power balance ... is out of control." The camp guards "can dictate when a person can eat, can shower at a certain time. There's an officer there who turns the water on and turns the water off; you can

only move through the camp in certain ways.” Under conditions of intense heat, the refugees sleep in large rooms, or—in the case of Nauru—in tents, with no air conditioning.

Among those who resort to acts of self-harm in protest are children. A government review into reports of abuse at Nauru noted that in the 12 months prior to October 2014, 17 minors committed such acts. “The incidents range from an attempted hanging by a 16-year-old to the infliction of minor lacerations,” it noted. “The youngest child recorded as having self-harmed was an 11-year-old who swallowed a metal bolt and a rock.”

These are the consequences of both major parties’ deliberate policy of deterring anyone considering attempting to claim asylum in Australia.

The expansion of naval surveillance, foreign intelligence operations, and border militarisation—under the auspices of disrupting “people-smuggling networks” and monitoring asylum seeker boats—is a convenient pretext for the build-up of Australian military operations in South Pacific and Indian Ocean. This takes place under conditions of a massive military build-up by the Obama administration against China as part of the “pivot to Asia.” Australia is centrally involved in this strategy.

The “Border Force Act” marks a further step forward in this agenda. It combines both the customs department and department of immigration and border protection into a new, centralised paramilitary-intelligence body, the Australian Border Force (ABF). The ABF commissioner will have the same powers as the heads of the Australian Defence Force, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, and the Australian Federal Police.

In the course of Wednesday’s swearing-in ceremony for the first ABF Commissioner, Roman Quaedvlieg, both Prime Minister Abbott and Quaedvlieg cloaked the new agency within the militarist nostrums of the defence of Australia against alleged external threats. “This is the beginning of a new era of disciplined service,” said Abbott. “You are guardians of our safety, our security and our prosperity. Behind our borders is our sanctuary. It must be our sanctuary if it is also to remain a beacon of hope and opportunity to the wider world.”

Quaedvlieg, a former career police officer, said: “Our

utopia, our country, is under constant threat. Our border, which we view as a strategic national asset... is under constant challenge each and every day... There are those who would seek to attack our way of life.”

ABF officers who travel at sea, unlike customs officers at present, will be armed. The ABF will also assume responsibility for the operation of security operations at airports, in the name of combating “terrorism.” The agency will have an official annual budget of \$800 million, and employ over 5,500 staff. It will gather intelligence both domestically and overseas. Both Abbott and Quaedvlieg repeatedly referenced the need to combat “terrorism,” which is continually invoked to justify the build-up of police state powers and the participation of the Australian military in US-led wars in Iraq and Syria.

The role of offshore detention centres for refugees is being implicitly expanded to supposed internal “enemies.” Recently unveiled legislation would allow the government to strip dual Australian citizens of their citizenship if they are suspected of “terrorism.” Anyone whose citizenship is revoked but cannot be deported could be detained indefinitely as an “illegal immigrant” in one of the refugee prison camps.



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