

Refugee's death triggers another riot on Australia's Christmas Island

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10 November 2015

In the latest outrage on Christmas Island—Australia's notorious immigration detention outpost in the Indian Ocean—security guards provoked rioting by inmates on Sunday following the suspicious death of an Iranian Kurdish refugee, Fazal Chegeni.

Chegeni's body was reportedly found by police at the base of a cliff on Sunday after he escaped from the detention compound on Friday night or Saturday morning. Detainees reported hearing cries for help before the Australian Federal Police (AFP) returned Chegeni's corpse in a body bag.

Other inmates, including New Zealanders being deported from Australia, joined a protest by a group of Iranian refugees, starting a wider revolt against the inhuman and degrading conditions in which they have all been incarcerated for months on end.

Last night, AFP riot police were flown to the island in a bid to violently regain control of the facility. Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton this morning gave the go-ahead for the repression, declaring that a "core group of criminals" were barricaded in the compound, and the government was "not going to cower in the face of the activities of some of these criminals."

According to reports by detainees, a confrontation broke out on Sunday after a small group of Iranian refugees demanded answers from security guards, only to be abused and taunted. Emergency Response Team (ERT) officers employed by Serco, the company that operates the facility under a government contract, allegedly challenged the Iranians to go "one on one" in a physical confrontation and then made jokes about Chegeni.

Twenty-five year-old detainee Matej Cuperka told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC): "The death is very, very suspicious. They [the inmates]

believe Serco officers did something to him. I clearly heard him in the morning screaming for help, and the next thing I see they bring him in a body bag, and after that the whole place went into lockdown."

New Zealand detainee Lester Hohua told the ABC the riot was sparked when a guard started arguing with a refugee, who asked about Chegeni's death. "When we saw the officer try to fight with the refugee, that's when [some other detainees] stood up, and we didn't give it back or anything, didn't throw any punches, but we said, 'you can't do that'," he said.

UK-born detainee Mick Tristram told the *Guardian* a group of about six Iranians had confronted ERT guards. However, the outbreak of fires and damage in the centre came after the ERT "stormed" another compound and dragged a detainee out screaming.

On Saturday, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection had falsely stated that an "illegal maritime arrival" escaped from the centre. In fact, Chegeni was granted refugee status about two-and-a-half years ago, but was charged with assault following a fight between detainees at a detention centre.

Chegeni, who suffered torture in Iran, was later released into the community in Melbourne for a few months but then re-detained, even though he was given a good behaviour bond for the assault charge. According to refugee advocates, he had been on Christmas Island for around 10 weeks after being transferred from Darwin's Wickham Point detention facility.

Pamela Curr from the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre told the ABC that Chegeni was a gentle man who previously tried to take his life by jumping from the roof of another detention centre. "He showed me his legal file at one stage, and I am really sorry I ever read it, because that man was most brutally tortured in

Iran.”

Initially opened as an “offshore” refugee detention centre in 2003, Christmas Island this year became a maximum security prison-like facility for alleged detainee “troublemakers” and long-time residents of Australia who have had their residency rights arbitrarily revoked by the government.

The Liberal-National government has aggressively used draconian new Migration Act provisions that it introduced last November, with the support of the opposition Labor Party, to halve the prison sentence necessary to trigger deportation for a non-citizen resident convicted of a crime, from 24 to 12 months.

This means that even traffic offences and other minor convictions can now be exploited to detain and deport people once they have served their sentences. Those being removed may have lived in Australia since they were young, and have families of their own settled in the country, without applying for citizenship. Over the past year, more than 80 New Zealand citizens have been deported already and 200 are in detention awaiting removal, including about 50 on Christmas Island.

In its reports on the Christmas Island confrontation, the government-funded ABC has lined up behind the government by slandering the detainees as “criminals” and “bikies,” even though they have completed their prison terms.

The reality is that the responses of these deportation detainees to Chegeni’s death, the abuses committed against the refugees and their own mistreatment underscore the intolerable conditions at Christmas Island and Australia’s other detention camps.

The current disturbance is the latest in a long series of protests on Christmas Island. Over the past six years alone, these have included a November 2009 riot, a November 2010 hunger strike, and four nights of rioting in March 2011, during which the AFP fired tear gas and bean-bag “bullets” at detainees.

In May 2011, Christmas Island detainees again protested for a week, some sewing their lips together, after an asylum seeker committed suicide at Sydney’s Villawood detention centre. A month later, Labor government rejections of asylum claims led to three days of unrest. In July 2011, the AFP again fired tear gas and bean-bag rounds to quell a three-day riot.

At that time, like Dutton today, Labor’s Immigration Minister Chris Bowen said the actions were not

protests, but “criminal behaviour.”

Under the current Liberal-National government, in May–June 2014, about 70 detainees held a week-long protest, including hunger strikes, to mark 100 days since the killing by security personnel of Iranian refugee Reza Berati in another Australian detention camp on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

Chegeni’s tragic and unexplained death, and the provocation of the detainees has further fuelled public opposition to the anti-refugee regime. This follows a litany of asylum seeker suicides, reports of illegal boat “turnbacks” and the government’s refusal to take any more than a token 12,000 of the millions of Syrians who have fled the US-fomented war in that country.

Nevertheless, Labor’s shadow immigration minister Richard Marles reiterated his party’s support for the entire policy of repelling asylum seekers and for the Christmas Island facility in particular. He described the centre as “an important part of the detention network,” while urging the government to organise “independent oversight” of the facility to try to assuage public concern.

The Greens leader, Senator Richard Di Natale, told reporters the situation in the detention centre was “volatile” and “needs to be investigated.” In the past, the Greens have postured as critics of the bipartisan front against refugees, but increasingly they are offering their services to the government to help make cosmetic changes. Di Natale said he wanted to work with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull “to change our current system of offshore detention to ensure that it is more decent and more compassionate.”

The truth is that the latest meltdown at Christmas Island is another graphic demonstration of the lies and criminality at the heart of the brutal “border protection” regime.



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