

Amnesty report: Australian government running torture detention on Nauru

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Amnesty International, the global human rights organisation, issued a detailed report on Monday in which it indicted the Australian government for carrying out the torture of refugees, many of them children, in its offshore detention centre on the Pacific Ocean island of Nauru to the north-east of the country.

The report, extending for more than 60 pages, was based on first-hand research carried out by Amnesty between July and October this year, including interviews with some 58 refugees, the gathering of video and audio evidence and the examination of documents. It also conducted interviews with people who had worked for companies and organisations under contract to the Australian government and its Immigration and Border Protection department.

Summing up its findings, the report made clear that the Nauru regime was not a result of “violations” of government policy but of their implementation.

“The inescapable conclusion is that the abuse and anguish that constitutes the daily reality of refugees and asylum-seekers on Nauru is the express intention of the government of Australia,” it stated. In pursuance of its policy of deterring people from seeking asylum by boat, the government had instituted “intolerable cruelty and the destruction of the physical and mental integrity of hundreds of children, men and women” and was in breach of international human rights and international refugee law.

“The conditions on Nauru—refugees’ severe mental anguish, the intentional nature of the system, and the fact that the goal of offshore processing is to intimidate or coerce people to achieve a specific outcome—amounts to torture,” it said.

But the Australian government has made clear that the present regime will continue, despite the detailed findings in the Amnesty report. Speaking in a radio

interview this morning, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull rejected the report’s conclusions and claimed his government’s commitment to refugees was “compassionate and strong,” as he emphasised that no asylum seekers found to be refugees would ever be allowed to settle in Australia.

Turnbull’s claims are refuted on almost every page of the report. It said “mental illness and incidents of self-harm among refugees and asylum seekers on Nauru are shockingly commonplace” and that “nearly all of the people” its researchers had met reported mental issues of some kind, with “almost all” saying these problems began when they were transferred to the island.

Among the cases cited was a man who told the interviewer that he had twice tried to kill himself in the previous 10 weeks, once in May when he had bought petrol and poured it on himself and on another occasion in July when he swallowed washing-up liquid and had to be hospitalised.

Another man revealed how his pregnant wife had tried to hang herself and that he had found her in the bathroom with rope marks on her neck. In another case, a man described how his wife began having mental health problems as soon as she arrived. A week after their daughter had been born, she witnessed a young Iranian man set himself on fire after which she lost her breast milk and has barely talked or left her living quarters since.

The report said people were driven to such levels of despair because while they are technically not detained and are able to move about the island they are in a detention-like environment. Their psychological state is undermined by the fact that they have no idea of what their future is to be, even after their bona fides have been established.

“Nauru is to all intents and purposes an open-air

prison that people cannot leave, even when they have been officially recognised as refugees,” the report said.

Those interviewed by Amnesty detailed how they or their friends had been subject to attacks and verbal abuse outside and inside the Refugee Processing Centre.

“The extent to which child refugees are subjected to abuse on Nauru is chilling,” the report stated. “Children who are refugees or are seeking asylum have been assaulted both by staff of companies hired by the Australian government and by private individuals on Nauru,” the report said.

And this abuse is officially sanctioned by the Australian government, as the report made clear.

“The abuses on Nauru have been facilitated by the deliberate policy of secrecy, again established by the government of Australia. Australian law gives the government the power to prosecute and imprison doctors, nurses and child welfare professionals who speak out about conditions in immigration detention. This has had a chilling effect on disclosures about human rights abuses, and many service-providers and asylum seekers were too scared to speak with Amnesty International researchers.”

The report also pointed to the international ramifications of the Australian policy, “explicitly designed” to inflict “incalculable damage” on hundreds of men, women and children, noting that Australian politicians had sought to “sell” their model to other countries. The latest of these efforts was a major speech by Prime Minister Turnbull in the lead up to the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly last month.

The Australian “model of deterrence” had already harmed global standards on refugee protection, the report declared. Because it “violates people’s human rights in so many serious ways,” the Australian model had “shifted the parameters of what governments view as ‘acceptable’ so disgracefully far out of line that many governments are now routinely breaching international human rights law and international refugee law.”

In other words, Australia has now become a “world leader” in inflicting torture and human rights violations upon some of the most defenceless and powerless people in the world.

The responsibility for this situation rests with the

entire political establishment, stretching back over a quarter of a century. It was the “left” immigration minister Gerry Hand who first introduced mandatory detention for asylum seekers in 1992 under the Keating Labor government. Since then, the policy has been extended and made even more repressive.

In 2013, it was the Labor government of prime minister Kevin Rudd which re-opened detention centres on the islands of Manus and Nauru, with the claim that this was necessary to break the “people smugglers’ model” and prevent drownings at sea. But the government did not act alone.

It directly relied on the votes of the Greens in parliament, while outside the parliamentary arena it required the crucial support of so-called “public intellectuals” such as the academic Robert Manne, who claimed the new regime was necessary to “save lives.” Abandoning previous misgivings, they swung behind the government because of their fundamental agreement with the doctrine of “border protection” and the reactionary logic that flows from it—that ever-more repressive measures must be used to enforce it.

These justifications for the present torture regime are directly refuted in the Amnesty report. It said the attempts of the Australian government to justify its regime “in the name of a fair and controlled immigration policy, or even to claim that it saves lives, is untenable. No state can justify subjecting some people to cruelty and abuse to prevent loss of life, never mind to reduce migration numbers. Ends do not justify such means and such arguments lead down a very dark path.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has continually pointed out where that “dark path” leads, noting that a state apparatus that has no compunction in its attacks on powerless refugees will inevitably develop such methods against broader sections of the population should it consider that to be necessary.



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