

Reports expose Australian government coverup of armed attack on Manus Island detainees

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Efforts by the Turnbull government to whitewash—and blame refugees for—a violent assault by armed soldiers on Australia’s detainees on Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) remote Manus Island have been exposed as bared-faced lies.

The reason for the government’s cover-up is also increasingly clear. The Good Friday attack on April 17 highlights the dangers facing the more than 800 male asylum seekers, with the Australian-controlled detention camp due to close in October, dumping the detainees into the impoverished country.

After the initial reports of the incident emerged, the Australian government claimed that only a single shot was fired into the air. Subsequent accounts, including a leaked first-hand report from Wilson Security, the contractor in charge of security at the camp, have proved this totally false.

Obtained by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) “Lateline” program, the report stated that “a member of the PNG Defence Force produced a weapon, believed to be an M16 assault rifle, and proceeded to discharge his weapon randomly into the air and towards the RPC (regional processing centre) staff and facilities.”

The report detailed how members of the PNG Navy attacked staff and asylum seekers with “lengths of bamboo and other assorted weapons.” More PNG Navy personnel then emerged, brandishing M16 assault rifles and one shotgun, which were also discharged into the centre.

An Amnesty International Digital Verification Team of experts then examined 21 images and 6 videos of the incident, some taken by inmates, which had been viewed widely on both mainstream and social media. They established that bullets were fired directly into the detention centre, putting the lives of refugees there in

danger. Some images showed bullet holes in buildings.

In a cynical attempt to justify the attack, and demonise refugees, Australian Immigration Minister Peter Dutton claimed the assault was launched because asylum seekers led a five-year-old boy toward the facility. This lie was also contradicted by the Wilson Security report, which confirmed that the incident resulted from a dispute over use of a nearby soccer field, as part of “a building situation” of tensions between detainees and local people.

Dutton’s claims were also refuted by the regional PNG police commander, David Yapu, and the local MP Ronny Knight. They said the boy had been brought to the centre and given food by the detainees, before being taken out again.

Despite this evidence, Dutton continued his claims, even demanding an apology from the ABC for broadcasting Yapu’s comments. Dutton insisted it was “indisputable” that the two incidents were linked.

Australian governments have a long record of making false allegations against refugees in order to blacken their names and justify the increasingly brutal measures taken to punish them for trying to flee to Australia.

One of the most notorious incidents occurred in 2001, when the Howard government falsely claimed that asylum seekers threw their children overboard in a bid to force Australian sailors to rescue them and take them ashore. Outraged sailors later blew the whistle on this lie.

The “children overboard” slander was used as a pretext to instigate the use of the navy to repel refugee boats arriving in Australian waters, a practice that saw shots fired across the bows of boats and led to the deaths of 353 asylum seekers in Australia’s worst maritime disaster (see: “Five years since Australia’s SIEV X tragedy: the official cover-up continues”).

The confirmation of the violent attack on Good Friday

has intensified the concerns of the detainees as to their fate with the scheduled closing of the Manus Island detention centre. In keeping with the bipartisan policy of successive Liberal-National and Labor governments, the detainees have been told that “no-one will be settled in Australia” and “you will need to consider your options.”

Those who are classified, via a draconian vetting process, as “genuine” refugees will be given the “options” of being relocated to a refugee transit centre in nearby Lorengau, being deported to their country of origin, where they may face imprisonment, torture and death, or waiting to be resettled in a yet-to-be-determined third country. So-called non-refugees will be deported to their country of origin.

Cynically, the Australian government is offering pitiful “reintegration assistance” packages to those who choose to “voluntarily” return to their home country. These amount to \$20,000 and require refugees to abandon their protection claims, effectively giving up their right to asylum.

Many refugees fear they will be in danger in Lorengau and some are refusing to leave the detention centre. Asylum seekers are currently free to visit Lorengau during the day, but most remain in the detention centre. One anonymous refugee told Reuters: “I’m not going to Lorengau. Many refugees have been beaten, robbed and abused (there) in different ways.”

A notice has been placed in the camp threatening those who refuse to leave the centre with being ineligible for a third country resettlement option.

Last year the Turnbull government unveiled a reactionary refugee swap deal with the United States, involving the removal of some heavily-vetted asylum seekers to the US in exchange for an undisclosed number of refugees who are similarly languishing in US detention centres in Costa Rica.

Some US vetting interviews have reportedly commenced, but it remains unclear how many, if any, detainees will be selected for this swap arrangement.



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