

Australian government shuts off power to refugees imprisoned on Manus Island

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At the Australian-run detention centre on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea (PNG), asylum seekers are being forced into worsening living conditions, including the disconnection of electricity. The Australian government is seeking to force them into a less secure facility, from where they will be dumped in PNG to live in impoverished conditions.

Buzzfeed News obtained information and photos from the Manus refugees, showing the destruction of the basic facilities. On June 23, the gym was shut down and the equipment removed by the local police. The gym had helped detainees deal with their mental health problems and sleep better.

Parts of the camp have been demolished and the Internet facility was taken away, leaving mobile phones as the only connection to the outside world for the detainees.

An Iranian refugee Amir Taghinia told BuzzFeed the authorities were “making the food quality much more undesirable than before.” Meals were being served uncooked and “raw.” Food supplies were also being cut, so that detainees at the end of the line might not eat.

English classes had been cancelled for more than four weeks, leaving detainees with little to do during the day. Those interviewed said these measures were “deliberate” to “provoke the guys” and force them to move to the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre (ELRTC) near Lorengau, the island’s major town.

Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish-Iranian journalist imprisoned on Manus Island, said: “Two weeks ago some other refugees left Foxtrot [part of the existing compound] and went to the rooms which were part of the old medical clinic but they could not stay there because immigration cut the power and they were homeless for a few days.”

Boochani said when the refugees asked the guards and officials for a place to stay, “they say you must go to East Lorengau camp. East Lorengau is close to the local community and means the refugees would be forced to live in PNG.”

Many of the refugees fear living in Lorengau. There have been reports of detainees visiting Lorengau being beaten, robbed or abused by local people, due to hostility whipped up by local and PNG authorities. A detainee was recently attacked with a machete and had to have emergency medical treatment in Port Moresby, the PNG capital.

The move to Lorengau is an attempt by the Australian government to force the detainees to either languish indefinitely in PNG or return to the countries they fled, regardless of the dangers. The ELRTC is designed to house only 280 men, not the well over 800 in the old facility.

The existing centre’s closure was announced last August by the Australian government, four months after the PNG Supreme Court ruled that it violated international law and the PNG constitution, which bans the unlawful deprivation of personal liberty.

At first the Australian government defied the ruling, insisting that the asylum seekers remain detained. Last November, Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton said those imprisoned would be “resettled” in PNG, returned to their country of origin or transferred to the US under the refugee swap deal negotiated with the Obama administration.

This swap deal has since been used to try to coerce the detainees into compliance with their shift to Lorengau. A notice posted at the detention centre declared: “If you refuse to move to the ELRTC or ignore other directions given to you, your failure to cooperate will be noted. US authorities will take your

history of behaviour into account when deciding whether to offer you an opportunity to resettle in the US.”

US Homeland Security officials have been conducting “extreme vetting” interviews that lasted up to six hours, with in-depth questions on associates, family, friends and any interactions with alleged terrorists. Hundreds of detainees have been interviewed and a few dozen reportedly completed the third and final stage of medical checks.

Now it seems that no detainees will be accepted this year, if ever. Earlier this year, President Donald Trump reduced America’s annual refugee intake from 110,000 to 50,000 as part of a broader immigration crackdown, and that cap has been reached, the US State Department told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Behrouz Boochani told Australia’s Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) detainees had seen the US deal as their only hope. “They are confused and the people are broken at the centre,” he said. “They don’t trust anyone. They don’t trust the US deal but are doing it as they have no choice.”

The uncertainty adds to the bitter disappointment among the refugees over last month’s \$70 million out-of-court settlement by the Australian government for hundreds of detainees, which left them with average payouts of only \$35,000 for years of unlawful detention and abuses.

Pakistani refugee Naeem told SBS: “Money cannot [give me] back the four years of my life that I have lost, without committing any crime.”

Australian Greens immigration spokesman Senator Nick McKim said the asylum seekers on Manus are being “smoked out” through bullying tactics. “If the worst happens and violence again flares up, it will be because of the choices [immigration minister] Peter Dutton has made.”

McKim’s attempt to posture as a defender of the detainees is a sham. It was the minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, kept in office by the Greens, that reopened the Manus Island detention camp in 2012.



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