

Australian government tries to force refugees from one prison camp to another

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The Australian government is intensifying its threats against about 900 asylum seekers remaining in its Manus Island, Papua New Guinea (PNG) detention centre, attempting to force them into an insecure transit camp or to transfer to Canberra's other "offshore" facility on the remote Pacific island of Nauru.

For weeks, Australian authorities have been closing sections of the Manus Island centre around detainees, shutting basic services and threatening to arrest detainees, in order to push them into a camp in the town of Lorengau, or compel them to return to the countries they fled.

A letter distributed to detainees last Thursday warned that all food, water, sewage facilities and electricity would cease inside the Manus Island centre after October 31. The note, written in Farsi, said the fences would be taken down and the site returned to the control of the PNG Defence Force.

The letter renewed fears among the detainees, who have previously suffered violent attacks by Australian-hired security guards and PNG police and soldiers.

Asked about the issue in the Australian parliament last Monday, Employment Minister Michaelia Cash—who represents Immigration Minister Peter Dutton in the Senate—underlined the threats. She reiterated that the centre would close on October 31 and "anybody [remaining] will be removed by lawful means."

Several weeks earlier, the refugees, who have been incarcerated on Manus Island for up to four years, were told they could "voluntarily" relocate to Nauru. It was a blatant move by the Australian government to break the resistance among the asylum seekers to leaving the Manus camp, despite it being demolished around them.

Canberra is essentially insisting that all those who are being considered for a US refugee swap deal must be

transported to another hellhole, thousands of kilometres away in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Signs were posted around the Manus camp stating that those refugees waiting on the approval for US resettlement could make an "expression of interest" in moving to Nauru by October 23.

The US swap deal, announced last November under the previous Obama administration, is a quid pro quo arrangement. An undisclosed number of refugees imprisoned by the US will be swapped for some heavily-vetted refugees from Manus and Nauru, although the US has no obligation to take any.

The supposedly "voluntary" Nauru plan is a thinly veiled threat to punish those who refuse to take the transfer "offer." It is one of the many thuggish methods the Australian government has used to force asylum seekers out of the Manus camp.

This has included the shutting down of basic facilities such as electricity, English classes and the gym. In July, the Australian government, working in conjunction with the PNG authorities, threatened police violence, reportedly mobilising around 100 guards and police outside the compound.

The Turnbull government announced the Manus closure in August last year, four months after the PNG Supreme Court ruled the facility violated the PNG constitution because it deprived the detainees of liberty without charge or trial.

Many refugees fear for their safety if forced into the so-called Refugee Transit Centre near Lorengau, the major town on Manus Island. There have been numerous reports of asylum seekers in Lorengau being beaten, robbed or abused by the PNG authorities or local people, among whom the authorities have whipped up anti-refugee sentiment.

Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian journalist imprisoned

on Manus, told journalists the Nauru plan was the “latest political trick to get the refugees out of the Manus detention centre.”

Amir Taghinia, another detainee, said that after six deaths on the island the refugees feared for their lives in moving to Lorengau. Two detainees have died in recent months—31-year-old Hamid Shamshiripour and 32-year-old Rajeev Rajendran.

“We explained over and over again that we would rather stay in the Manus prison without hope than face violence in Lorengau,” Taghinia said. “Already too many lives have been lost, and the government knows that people are in danger in these camps, whether on Manus Island or Nauru.”

The US resettlement deal has been endorsed by the Labor Party, Greens and various refugee groups, which claim it will provide detainees a safe future. In reality, it means removal to the other side of the world, with no guarantee of their conditions upon arrival.

Last month, after months of “extreme vetting” by US officials, some 50 refugees were transferred to the US from Manus and Nauru. No information was provided as to where the refugees would be permitted to live and work or whether they would become eligible for US citizenship.

Under the Australia’s “border protection” regime, no asylum seekers, including those dumped in the US, will ever be permitted to enter Australia.

Any refugee transferred to Nauru will face the same traumatic conditions as those on Manus Island. Numerous reports have documented abuses on Nauru, including sexual assaults, brutality at the hands of the guards and decrepit facilities, such as mouldy tents, inadequate medical facilities and poor access to running water and sanitation.

Despite this Ian Rintoul, a leading member of the pseudo-left group Solidarity and the Refugee Action Coalition, said the facilities in Nauru were “marginally better” than on Manus Island. He accused Turnbull’s Liberal-National government of lacking a “resettlement plan,” claiming the government was in a “rolling crisis,” going “from disaster to disaster.”

In truth, the government is taking to its logical conclusion the regime introduced by the previous Labor government, which re-opened the Manus and Nauru camps and declared that no asylum seekers detained in them would ever be allowed to settle in Australia.



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