

Refugees on Manus Island face catastrophe at hands of Australian detention regime

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About 600 refugees still held at the Manus Island detention centre in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are facing a humanitarian disaster, and possible police-military violence, after the Australian government moved to shut down the facility yesterday.

Contractors employed by the Australian government cut pipes, emptied water tanks, cut off electricity supplies and removed generators, before leaving the centre on Tuesday. Asylum seekers have been left without food, only minimal water, and no security. Heavily-armed PNG police and troops are massed outside the complex, warning they will enter it today unless the refugees leave.

The dire plight of the refugees is the outcome of the criminal policies of successive Liberal-National Coalition and Greens-backed Labor governments. All the major parties have imposed a “border force” regime that has abrogated the basic democratic right of refugees to seek protection, consigning those who try to reach Australia by boat to concentration camps in the Pacific.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s Coalition government announced the closure of the Manus Island centre in August last year. This followed a ruling by the PNG Supreme Court that the facility was illegal under the PNG constitution because it denied detainees their liberty, without charge.

In the lead up to the closure, Australian authorities began shutting down power supplies and other utilities. They also transferred hundreds of refugees to a temporary “Refugee Transit Centre” near the island’s main town of Lorengau, where local authorities have whipped up anti-refugee sentiment. Detainees at that facility have reported numerous robberies and assaults, including with machetes, by locals.

The refugees who remain at the Manus Island centre

have refused to be forced into the Lorengau facility, or the Australian-operated detention centre on the Pacific island of Nauru, citing concerns for their safety. They filed an application to the PNG Supreme Court yesterday, hoping to prevent their removal.

Over the past day, in social media posts and comments to the press, the Manus detainees have painted a picture of the conditions they face.

Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian refugee, tweeted this morning: “There is not water, power and food. Even the toilets do not work. People gathering in stress. Any time we expect that someone attack us.” In another post, Boochani wrote: “Some refugees are very sick. They need urgent medical treatment. They have been physically sick for a long time. There is no support for them.” Boochani denounced the Australian government for “starving people to force them out.”

Imran Mohammed, a Rohingya refugee from Burma, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Radio National program, “We’re here because we’re persecuted in our country we left violence. We want a safe country and we want our freedom.”

The refugees have tried to stockpile water in garbage bins, and to collect any rainwater that falls. Aid organisations have warned that sick asylum seekers are not receiving medication, and that the shutoff of utilities could lead to disease outbreaks.

There are also fears for the mental health of the detainees. According to unconfirmed reports on Twitter, one refugee cut his chest and wrists with a razor today. There have been five suicides at the Manus Island facility since 2012, including two this year, as refugees who have fled war and oppression face brutal conditions, and virtually no treatment for mental health issues.

Refugees reported yesterday that the centre was

attacked by looters carrying machetes, who took furniture, fans and other items. The police and local authorities made no attempt to prevent the incursion. The asylum seekers have sought to repair a damaged fence to prevent further raids.

Reports have indicated that heavily-armed police and military personnel could be preparing to attack the facility. Kate Schuetze, an Asia-Pacific researcher, told the *Guardian* that locals had informed her on Monday that three mobile squads and PNG Defence Force squads were “arming themselves like it’s a war.”

PNG authorities have overseen assaults on the Manus detainees in the past. On April 17, PNG Defence Force personnel stormed the facility, together with armed locals, firing M16 assault rifles toward buildings housing refugees. The rampage was effectively endorsed by Australian Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, who blamed the detainees for the attack.

Australian authorities have again given the green light for a bloody assault on the refugees.

Dutton yesterday issued an extraordinary denunciation of the asylum seekers. He accused them of having sought “to enter Australia,” confirming the government’s rejection of international law, which recognises the right to seek asylum.

Dutton declared that the refugees were seeking to “force a change” to the government’s “border protection” program, “aided and abetted by so-called ‘advocates’ and the Greens.” Dutton’s statement echoed previous comments in August, in which he branded lawyers for refugees as “un-Australian,” with the clear implication that it is illegitimate to oppose the government’s attacks on asylum seekers.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop this morning also backed a PNG police-military intervention, stating: “The PNG government is in charge of law and order and security and I understand that they have this matter in hand.” She reiterated that the refugees “will not be resettled in Australia.”

Labor Party MPs, including shadow immigration minister Shayne Neumann, have issued mealy-mouthed denunciations of the government for failing to prepare for the closure of the facility. It was the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, however, that in 2012 reopened the Manus detention centre and decreed that the detainees would never be permitted to settle in Australia.

With equal hypocrisy, the Greens have postured as defenders of the refugees. The party’s immigration spokesman, Senator Nick McKim, has travelled to Manus Island. Yesterday, he branded Dutton “a serial human rights abuser.” In 2012, senior Greens MPs repeatedly declared that the persecution of refugees would not affect their alliance with Labor, which allowed it to hold office as a minority government until September 2013.

Labor and the Greens, which both uphold the entire “border protection” regime, are no less responsible than the current Coalition government for the abuses that have occurred on Manus Island, and the disaster that is now unfolding.



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