

Australian government starves refugees on Manus Island

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Six hundred refugees are suffering dehydration, hunger and worsening mental health problems at the Manus Island Detention Centre in Papua New Guinea (PNG), after the Australian government moved to close the facility last Tuesday. The shutdown followed a ruling by the PNG Supreme Court last year that the centre was “illegal” because it deprived the refugees of their freedom without charge.

The asylum-seekers are threatened with an attack by heavily armed PNG military and police personnel. Begsy Karaki, a senior officer in charge of the Lombrum naval base where the centre is located, declared on Thursday that his troops were prepared to remove the asylum seekers with force if they received an order.

Australian contractors, hired by the Liberal-National Coalition government of Malcolm Turnbull, cut pipes and emptied water tanks before leaving the centre Tuesday morning. The final shipment of food, which arrived on October 29, contained less than two days of rations.

The remaining electricity to some sections of the camp was shut-down on Wednesday. Many refugees at the facility are unable to charge their mobile phones, which they have relied upon to maintain contact with the outside world.

On Friday, PNG naval and immigration forces blocked a boat of local residents that was transporting food to the centre. The day before, they prevented a church group from bringing emergency supplies.

These measures are in line with the Coalition government’s strategy of forcing the asylum-seekers out of the centre by starving them, depriving them of water, communication and every other necessity of life. The Australian government is demanding they go to other facilities on Manus and the Pacific Island of

Nauru, which the refugees have said are unsafe.

On Wednesday, Nat Jin Lam, the regional representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said that two “alternative accommodation” centres at Lorengau were not fit for human habitation.

Directly rebuffing the claims of the Australian government, Lam said the facilities he had inspected were still under construction. One of them reportedly lacks running water and power and neither have a security fence. “I would not be bringing any refugees to stay there, not in that state,” Lam said. One refugee who accepted a transfer to the facility left shortly after arriving, making a three-hour walk back to the main detention centre.

The crisis on Manus Island underscores the criminality of the “border protection” program implemented by successive Coalition and Greens-backed Labor governments. Their policies, including consigning refugees to concentration camps in the Pacific, have made Australia a world model for the persecution of asylum-seekers.

On Thursday, Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian refugee at the Manus Island camp shared a shocking picture on Twitter of asylum-seekers digging a well. “They were digging for hours and finally found water,” Boochani wrote. “I don’t know if this water is clean enough to drink or not, but the refugees are drinking from it.” Refugees have also sought to stockpile water in bins and to collect any rainwater.

Boochani and other asylum-seekers have indicated that the situation within the camp is becoming increasingly dire. On Thursday, he tweeted: “At the moment hundreds of naked men are lying around me. They are starving and their bodies are getting weak.”

There are also growing fears of disease outbreaks as a

result of the lack of running water and functioning toilet facilities.

Refugees do not have access to required medication or treatment, and at least one of the detainees self-harmed this week. A United Nations report last year found that asylum-seekers on Manus Island had “amongst the highest recorded rates” of depression, anxiety conditions and post-traumatic stress disorder “of any surveyed population” in the world.

The Australian government’s actions have provoked mounting opposition. The UNHCR issued a statement on Friday night, demanding that services be restored to the centre. It rejected the Coalition government’s claim that it is no longer responsible for the men, and called for them to be transported to the Australian mainland immediately.

Former PNG Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare said Australia’s stance was “ruthless” and “hypocritical.” “Don’t treat them as animals, they’re not animals, they’re human beings,” Somare said. His two governments, however, like successive PNG administrations, actively collaborated with Australia’s persecution of asylum-seekers.

Within Australia, prominent human rights organisations have voiced support for a legal case by the refugees before the PNG Supreme Court, aiming to halt their forcible transfer. On Friday, at least three students were arrested after briefly occupying the Sydney office of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton has responded by repeatedly declaring that “activists” are responsible for the ongoing standoff because they have supported the refugees’ refusal to leave the centre.

Prominent Labor MPs, including the party’s federal leader, Bill Shorten, have sought to cover up their own responsibility for the unfolding catastrophe. It was the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard that in 2012 reopened the Manus Island centre, and decreed that the refugees sent there would never enter Australia.

In a statement on Friday, Shorten denounced the government for failing to arrange “resettlement” options. He reiterated the Labor Party’s rejection of the right to seek asylum, which is enshrined in international law, declaring, “We would never countenance anything that would put the people smugglers back in business. Australia is not and must not be a resettlement option.”

Shorten touted an “offer” by the newly elected New Zealand Labour government of Jacinda Ardern, to “resettle” 150 of the asylum-seekers. Ardern, who is in a coalition with the far-right New Zealand First Party, centred her election campaign on denunciations of immigrants and refugees.

Moreover, international law experts have previously indicated that the forcible government transfer of refugees from one country to another could amount to human trafficking. Demonstrating the real character of the New Zealand proposal, Shorten favourably likened it to a “people swap” arrangement with the United States.

Under that deal, just 54 refugees are being “resettled” from detention centres in the Pacific to the US. They have first been subjected to an “extreme vetting” process, including prolonged interrogations, and face an uncertain future, as the Trump administration escalates its attacks on immigrants.

For their part, the Greens have denounced the Coalition government as “inhumane” and “callous.” They were in a de facto coalition government with Labor when it reopened Manus, however, and thus bear central responsibility for the disaster that is unfolding.



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