

Australian government gives green light for violence against refugees at Manus Island

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The Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has unconditionally backed a Papua New Guinea (PNG) government ultimatum that refugees leave the Manus Island Detention Centre today, or be attacked by heavily-armed PNG police and naval personnel.

Refugees have reported that the camp has been surrounded by police and military forces, while helicopters are flying overhead. PNG officials are dismantling shelters and destroying bins that the asylum seekers have used to collect rainwater to survive.

The entire Australian political establishment, including the Coalition government, the Labor Party opposition and the Greens, are responsible for the desperate plight of the 600 men in the detention camp.

Over the past two weeks, the Coalition has created the conditions for a potential bloodbath at the Australian-operated facility. On October 30, it moved to close the centre, after a ruling by the PNG Supreme Court last year that the camp was illegal, because it denied asylum-seekers their liberty without charge.

Australian contractors proceeded to shut-off water and electricity supplies, and PNG authorities have blocked food shipments, in a bid to starve the refugees out of the centre.

The Coalition government has demanded that the refugees move to “alternative accommodation” at Lorengau on Manus Island, despite those facilities being damned as unfit for human habitation by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The Coalition has rejected every proposal for a resettlement of the refugees elsewhere, including the UNHCR’s demands that the asylum-seekers be transported to Australia immediately.

On Thursday, PNG authorities issued a notice that the refugees had 48 hours to leave the centre. It declared that the facility, which is located in the Lombrum naval base,

will be under the jurisdiction of the PNG military as of today.

The notice warned: “If necessary, force may be used to relocate those who refuse to move voluntarily for your own sake.” It stated: “If you still remain here after demolition of the fences, you will be deemed to be unlawfully on a military base and will face eviction or arrest and prosecution.”

Refugees at the centre reported that immigration authorities walked through the centre on Thursday, handing out the notice which menacingly told them, “your security and safety here is not guaranteed.”

PNG authorities began to demolish security fences that nominally protected the asylum seekers from attacks by armed thugs, and the military, on Thursday. The move followed the PNG Supreme Court’s rejection on Wednesday of an attempt by the refugees to obtain a court order prohibiting their forcible removal.

Yesterday, Turnbull declared that the asylum-seekers should “comply with the law” and leave the centre, endorsing the threats of a PNG military intervention.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton was blunter, stating that the refugees were “effectively squatting there.” He callously declared that the asylum seekers, who have fled war and persecution, should go back to their countries of origin, where they could face arrest, torture or death.

Labor Party MPs, who, since the crisis began, have reiterated their opposition to the right to seek asylum, have desperately sought to avoid putting a position on the prospect of a PNG incursion into the camp.

The Coalition government and the opposition know well that in PNG, threats of government “force” have a definite meaning.

PNG Prime Minister Peter O’Neill last year presided over armed police attacks on peaceful student protesters opposing his government’s austerity measures. An estimated 40 students were injured when PNG police,

trained by the Australian Federal Police, opened fire.

O'Neill returned to office, with the backing of Australian authorities, in an election last July characterised by fraud, gerrymandering, violence, kidnappings and political assassinations.

The refugees at the camp have already seen Australian-backed PNG "force" in action. In April, gangs of drunken PNG sailors, thugs and local criminals attacked the Manus Island centre with machine guns and machetes. The Coalition government blamed the refugees for the attempted pogrom.

O'Neill has signalled that a police-military operation will inflict the most brutal treatment on the asylum-seekers who have led the fight for their democratic rights and exposed the crimes of the Australian and PNG governments. In a statement on Wednesday, before his government issued its ultimatum, he declared: "Those involved in disruption have been identified and appropriate means will be used to apprehend individuals who are causing unnecessary anxiety and violence."

The refugees have rejected the threats, and appealed for international support. Behrouz Boochani, an acclaimed Kurdish-Iranian journalist held at the facility, tweeted this week: "The refugees who are gathering in a shelter are asking humanitarian organisations, people and politicians around the world to prevent Australia and PNG from killing us in this remote prison."

Boochani and other asylum-seekers have exposed the dire conditions that have been forced upon them. A video yesterday obtained by GetUp! showed that the camp has no running water, functioning toilet facilities, food or medication. Sick and hungry refugees have been left to writhe in agony.

The situation on Manus Island is a political crime, perpetrated by the entire Australian political establishment, and their vassals in the corrupt PNG administration.

The brutal treatment of the asylum-seekers is also a warning to the Australian working class. The Turnbull government, facing a domestic political crisis and intense popular discontent, is using the stand-off at Manus Island to establish a broader precedent for the suppression of all democratic rights, and the use of armed force against those who oppose its dictates.

The government has declared that Australian "activists" opposing the persecution of refugees are responsible for the crisis. If military "force" is to be used against the asylum-seekers, what measures will be taken against the "activists" allegedly inciting their struggle for human and

democratic rights? Already, Australian protests defending the refugees have been met with police mobilisations and government denunciations.

The actions of the Coalition government are the logical outcome of the "border protection" program defended by Labor and the Greens. While both of those parties have postured as critics of what is unfolding, they bear central responsibility for all physical and psychological harm inflicted upon the refugees.

It was the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard that reopened the concentration camp on Manus Island and decreed that the refugees consigned there would never be allowed into Australia. Over the past two decades, Labor has led the charge for ever-harsher repressive measures against asylum-seekers.

Greens politicians, who are now posturing as allies of the refugees, repeatedly insisted that the Labor-led attacks on refugees would not alter their participation in the de facto coalition government. Like Labor and the Coalition, the Greens support the entire framework of immigration controls, which are used against refugees and the working class as a whole.

The working class must oppose the attack on the Manus Island refugees. Within workplaces, schools and universities, the demand must be raised that the asylum-seekers be immediately allowed to settle in Australia, or wherever they choose, with full citizenship rights. The Coalition and Labor politicians who have presided over the persecution of refugees should be charged and prosecuted for their violations of international law and abrogation of fundamental human rights. If any of the refugees on Manus Island are killed or injured by PNG security forces, the Australian government must be held to account.

This, however, requires the development of a socialist movement of the working class, aimed at uniting workers around the world in a common struggle against war, inequality and the assault on democratic rights, and committed to overturning the entire framework of "border controls" defended by capitalist governments internationally.



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