Australian government supports brutal assault on Manus Island refugees

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Under the close supervision of the Australian government, the Papua New Guinea (PNG) police force has violently terminated a month-long standoff with starving asylum seekers imprisoned on PNG's remote Manus Island. Despite ongoing protests in Australia by many thousands of outraged people, police forcibly removed the remaining 348 men from the now defunct Australian-controlled detention camp last Friday.

The assault began last Thursday, when police officers targeted 50 detainees, including those who had sought to expose the ongoing attacks on their basic democratic rights, including to seek asylum. Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian-born journalist who had reported extensively from the camp, said he was handcuffed for hours and had his belongings destroyed.

On Friday, baton-wielding PNG police beat asylum seekers and smashed up their possessions. Australia's Special Services Broadcasting (SBS) television screened damaging images of men with lacerations and welts across their bodies. In one brief video clip, three PNG policemen were shown yelling and threatening an asylum seeker with metal poles, as he desperately tried to protect himself on the ground. In the background, one could hear the frantic cries of other men, fearing for their safety.

Samad Abdul, a Pakistani refugee, said he was hit during the raid. "The police are so aggressive," he said. "They are telling us, 'you should go back to your country.' They are swearing at us. Everyone is scared, everyone is just terrified." Abdul commented: "We don't have any option to stay here. All of us, we all are going."

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that 12 buses left the camp. Boochani told the ABC: "The refugees are saying that they are leaving the prison camp because police are using violence and very angry." He said the PNG police attacked the detainees. "They beat some of the refugees, so that was not peaceful."

In a statement, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) described the footage as "both shocking and disturbing." Thomas Albrecht, a UNHCR representative, said: "The situation still unfolding on Manus Island presents a grave risk of further deterioration, and of further damage to extremely vulnerable human beings."

PNG Police Commissioner Gari Baki had claimed that the relocations were conducted "peacefully and without the use of force." At the same time, he cynically remarked: "Manus is a peaceful island and I am sure it is a walk in the park compared to what they left behind in their respective countries."

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Australian government openly backed the violent eviction as part of its brutal message to asylum seekers globally, including the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who have fled Burma. As far as the government is concerned, the assault on the Manus detainees is essential to its punitive military operations aimed at barring any refugees from reaching Australia.

Turnbull personally hailed the detainees' forced removal and insisted that they had to leave. "That is precisely what you should do if you're in a foreign country: you should comply with the laws of that other country."

Peter Dutton, Australia's extreme-right immigration minister, said he "welcomed" what had happened. At the same time, he denied that the incriminating footage was genuine. "There are lots of claims," he declared, "but a lot of this doesn't add up to the facts on the ground." At the same time, he accused refugee advocates of "compounding their [the asylum seekers]

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problems" by "offering false hope."

The prison camp was slated for official closure on October 31, in a belated response to a PNG Supreme Court ruling that the centre violated the PNG constitution, because it deprived the detainees of liberty without charge or trial. In effect, the Australian government used the opportunity to send an ever harsher message to any aspiring asylum seekers.

In June, it began shutting down essential facilities, including eliminating power to some of the compounds, serving rotten food, shutting down the gym and threatening police violence. This month it attempted to starve the refugees by stopping food supplies, cutting water pipes and tanks, and even blocking food shipments from charity organisations. There were several reports of PNG police destroying make-shift wells, which the men had constructed in a desperate bid to stay alive.

The Turnbull government's demand was that the asylum seekers move to new camps in Lorengau, the island's main town. These are still under construction, despite the fact that Dutton's department has insisted that their "food services, cleaning, security and the medical clinic" have all been "operational" since October 31.

The UNHCR, however, said the camps were unfit for human habitation. After visiting the "facilities," World Vision's Tim Costello said: "I can tell you this is a construction site, this is not finished …There is earth-moving equipment, there are open drains."

Video footage, taken by Ezathullah Kalar, a refugee, showed unfinished buildings, partially cemented paths and no access to electricity. "People are still homeless and looking for rooms," Kalar said "Everyone is upset about their future."

While the Labor Party and the Greens have criticised the Turnbull government's inhuman treatment of the detainees, they are equally responsible. The last Labor government, which was backed by the Greens, reopened the Manus Island camp, and another on Nauru, in a deliberately punitive move to stop asylum seekers reaching Australia.

The bipartisan character of this policy was underscored yesterday when Labor Party leader Bill Shorten insisted that Kristina Keneally, Labor's candidate for a December 16 Sydney by-election in Bennelong, agreed with her party's determination to ensure that none of the Manus Island detainees would ever be allowed to live in Australia.

Earlier, Prime Minister Turnbull had denounced Keneally for having once written a newspaper article advocating that the Manus Island refugees be settled in Australia. Turnbull accused her of "wanting to throw out the welcome mat for asylum seekers," something to which Shorten quickly provided a response, insisting that the candidate's position was now in unison with Labor Party policy.

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