

Australia's Manus Island refugees blockaded after sewage leaks

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Asylum seekers detained by the Australian government on Papua New Guinea's remote Manus Island were blockaded in their prison camps by local people on January 12. Barriers were set up outside the West Haus and Hillside Haus sites and security guards ordered refugees not to leave.

Local residents were concerned because the unfinished camps were leaking sewage into their houses and land. A video surfaced from the location, near the island's main town of Lorengau, showing raw sewage streaming out of a toilet and flowing out near a mess hall. Residents held signs saying: "please fix sewage," "sewage smell not tolerable" and "we are not invisible."

This anger is a direct result of the Australian government forcing some of the nearly 700 detainees on the island into unfinished buildings, after it forcibly closed the previous detention centre last November. Despite numerous photos showing the buildings half-finished and unsuitable, the Australian government claimed they were liveable.

Police cleared the crude barricades that night. Manus Province police commander David Yapu said: "What transpired yesterday was unacceptable and an illegal road block. Last night I had to use my authority and got my mobile squad into the Hillside and physically removed the road block."

It was the fourth blockade in recent weeks. Previously barricades were erected to demand that local contractors, rather than Australian-based firms, be awarded the multi-million dollar contracts to operate and guard the camps, and for compensation for the damage and disruption caused by them.

Referred to as "landowners" by the Australian media, the local people come from communal villages where different kin groups have customary land tenures

granted by the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government. The Australian and PNG governments have deliberately sought to whip up animosities between impoverished villages and refugees, who have been incarcerated for years then dumped in inadequate accommodation.

Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian refugee and journalist imprisoned on Manus Island, was nevertheless sympathetic to the plight of villagers and blamed the Australian and PNG governments for the intolerable conditions.

"The local people are complaining about the hygiene situation because it is making people sick. The new camps are very close to small villages and make the life hard for people there. It's a problem created by the government and the government should take responsibility," he said.

Commenting on the poor conditions on the island, Boochani said: "Manus Island has no hospital with advanced medical equipment and if people become sick there are not enough medical facilities here to provide medical treatment for them."

In April 2016, the PNG Supreme Court declared the Manus Island refugee detention camp established by Australia unconstitutional because it involved the unlawful deprivation of personal liberty. The Australian government initially defied the ruling, before finally announcing it would close the centre but provided no details of where the detainees would be sent.

Eventually it became evident that the detainees would be relocated to insecure and unfinished facilities, where they feared for their lives. As a result, some remained in the centre while it was shut down around them. The Australian government violently ended the standoff, with the support of the PNG police and security forces. Refugees were beaten with batons and their belongings were smashed to force them to the new

locations.

Since then the asylum seekers, many already traumatised after fleeing war-torn countries, have lived in continual anxiety, uncertainty and anguish. One 29-year-old Iranian man was treated at hospital after harming himself twice. No mental health services have been provided to the re-located refugees. Some men were attacked by local people.

The Australian government awarded Paladin Solutions, a PNG-registered firm, an \$18 million-a-month contract last year to operate the sites. However, local security guards from another company, Kingfisher, stopped Paladin Solutions personnel entering the centre.

Some Paladin Solutions guards were eventually allowed into the camps, but the dispute remains unresolved. PNG chief immigration officer Solomon Kantha rejected more than half the 94 visas applied for by Paladin Solutions, citing “local content issues.” PNG Immigration and Border Minister Petrus Thomas said the government was “telling Paladin to give jobs to local workers, and to use local capacity ... on the ground.”

Boochani reported that the dispute fills those imprisoned with fear and dread. Paladin Solutions guards worked with the PNG police in violently removing the detainees from the previous detention centre. “We have already had bad experiences inside the detention and many times we were attacked by guards and police while we were inside Lombrum [the detention centre], so events like this make us worried,” he said.

Australian Green Senator Nick McKim criticised the government, saying: “The security situation for refugees on Manus Island and people seeking asylum here is an absolute shambles.” But the Greens propped up the previous Labor government that reopened the prison camps on Manus and Nauru in 2012.

The Greens continued to support the minority Labor government when it announced in 2013 that no refugee trying to reach Australia by boat would ever be allowed to settle in the country. The current Liberal-National Coalition government has continued and deepened this policy, so that tens of thousands of asylum seekers have been forcibly imprisoned or captured by the Australian navy and returned to sea, setting a deeply reactionary global precedent.



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