

Mental health crisis in Australia's refugee camps

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Reports have emerged of a wave of suicide attempts by refugees incarcerated by Australia on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island since the May 18 federal election, in which the Liberal-National Coalition was returned to power.

Sudanese refugee Abdul Aziz Adam, back in Manus after recently receiving a human rights prize in Geneva, last Thursday tweeted that at least 31 men had tried to commit suicide since the election.

Another Manus detainee, Iranian-born journalist Behrouz Boochani, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the situation was "out of control." He reported that numerous detainees also were not eating due to depression, and the poorly-equipped local hospital at Lorengau was over-run. "I have never seen Manus Island like this," he said. "I have never seen people like this."

Boochani told Australia's SBS News that Lorengau hospital staff were frustrated because they were unable to cope with the sudden, large numbers of refugees arriving at the hospital.

So torturous are the conditions confronting the more than 500 asylum seekers still on Manus—some for nearly seven years—that many have inflicted bodily injury to themselves. Photos published on Aziz Adam's Twitter account show a man being led off to a medical van with deep bloody lacerations along his torso, abdomen and arms.

Manus Island chief of police David Yapu described the situation as "very critical," saying it is something the Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Australian governments needed to look at "because the more they [the refugees] live [here] they develop this stress and depression."

Yapu later announced the deployment of a heavily-armed paramilitary police unit, notorious for violent

abuses, to Manus because of "daily" suicide attempts and rising tensions. "Attempted suicide is usually by weapons, overdose on medicines and hanging," he said. "It's become a concern to us."

The dispatch of the riot squad indicates the readiness of the PNG authorities to once again unleash brutal repression against the refugees. Police violence has been used repeatedly in the past in order to suppress resistance to the barbaric indefinite detention imposed on them by the Australian government, most recently in November 2017. Police killed one detainee and seriously wounded several others in February 2014. What followed was a blatant official whitewash.

Accurate reports on the latest unrest have been limited, due to government censorship. Australia's Border Force Act, adopted with the backing of the Labor Party, makes it a crime, punishable by two years' imprisonment, for anyone providing medical or other services to the detainees to publicly disclose any information on the conditions in the detention facilities.

The Liberal-National government has made no direct comment on the situation in the camps, which currently imprison 906 men and women: 547 on Manus and 359 on Nauru.

The medical crisis worsened immediately after the Australian election. Many detainees evidently saw the Coalition's re-election for another three years as the death knell of any possibility of freedom.

During the election campaign, Prime Minister Scott Morrison sought to deflect rising working class discontent by blaming immigrants for "congestion" in Australia's major cities and announcing a cut in the annual immigration quota.

Morrison also stepped up the assault on refugees, vowing to repeal recently passed medical evacuation legislation, which supposedly permits seriously ill

detainees requiring medical treatment to be temporarily transferred to Australian hospitals.

Since the legislation came into effect in February, only 40 emergency transfers have taken place. The legislation gives the home affairs minister and the intelligence agencies veto power over the transfers.

Morrison is remembered for his time as immigration minister, during which he launched “Operation Sovereign Borders” in 2013. This military operation set a global precedent for repelling refugees, utilising the Australian navy to seize refugee boats and forcibly turn them around. Because of the operation’s military secrecy, the number of boats that were intercepted or sank at sea is unknown.

In reality, however, the election of a Labor Party-led government would have done nothing to change the horrors faced by the detainees. Labor leader Bill Shorten had vowed that a Labor government would “fully resource” Operation Sovereign Borders.

Moreover, it was the Gillard Labor government, kept in office by the Greens, that re-opened the prison camps in 2012. Prime Minister Julia Gillard specifically declared that refugees would be detained for many years, in order to deter asylum seekers.

During this year’s election campaign, Labor leaders claimed it was never their intention to detain refugees indefinitely. This was a lie. In 2013, Labor’s reinstalled Prime Minister Kevin Rudd decreed that no detainee would ever be permitted to enter Australia, effectively consigning them to languish in the camps indefinitely.

In a bid to head off the growing public support for the refugees, Labor had promised to accept an offer by New Zealand to transfer 150 asylum seekers from the camps annually, but this would still have left many more incarcerated for years.

Whether or not Labor would have honoured this arrangement, it would have changed nothing for those who remained imprisoned. In the election, the Socialist Equality Party was the only party unconditionally defending the basic democratic right of all refugees and immigrants to live, study and work in Australia, or anywhere in the world, with full citizenship rights.



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