

Detainees protest inhuman conditions on Australia's Christmas Island

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On Tuesday evening a protest erupted inside Australia's notorious immigration prison on Christmas Island, a remote outpost in the Indian Ocean. A number of male detainees, who denounced the "indefinite cruelty" they faced in the facility, set mattresses on fire, as well as some buildings.

Footage posted on social media showed a man on the roof of one compound saying, "we can't see our children, we can't see our family." He said some detainees had been locked up for "five or six years," declaring "enough is enough."

Other footage shows a detainee saying: "This is how frustrated people are in detention... Arab people, white people, African people, they're sick and tired of [Home Affairs Minister] Peter Dutton and Scott Morrison, the prime minister of Australia, they're treating us like a dog... We are human beings."

According to witnesses, between 10 and 20 detainees were still staging a sit-in on Wednesday. At least two detainees had been on top of a roof on Tuesday night inside the facility, which currently houses about 230 detainees.

Tensions have been building inside the detention centre for months. In August, the Liberal-National government fully reopened the facility—formerly used to incarcerate thousands of refugees—in order to detain indefinitely non-citizens who had previously served prison sentences but who could no longer be deported because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of the detainees are locked inside the compounds for 22 hours a day. They have been denied workable internet or mobile access, so they are unable to speak with their families. Many of the detainees suffer physical and mental health problems, and the facility lacks specialist treatment services.

"Everybody wants to be reunited with their family,

and this is how we get treated. It's mental torture," Rey, a detainee involved in the incident told the *Guardian*. He said that the incident was sparked only after the prisoners were denied the right to peacefully protest. "Everyone just had enough, of all the empty negotiations and empty words," he said. "We always tell them what needs to be fixed on the island, and we're always ignored."

"We're locked inside our compound for 22 hours a day, all our movements here are controlled, everything is locked down and we get escorted from building to building like prisoners."

The Australian media immediately branded the incident a riot, seeking to poison public opinion, cover up the causes of the unrest and justify retribution against the protesters. The Australian Border Force (ABF), the para-military government organisation in charge of imprisoning and deporting refugees, said an "operation is underway to restore order" at the centre. This included sending a "special response team" to the island on Wednesday.

Neither the ABF nor the media have provided any information on the measures being taken to suppress the protest and punish the participants, and social media videos and messages from detainees appear to have been shut down.

This development has all the hallmarks of similar so-called riots inside Australia's immigration detention centres over the past three decades. Governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, have often known of discontent building for months, forcing those imprisoned to act out of desperation. That is met with harsh law and order responses, which have resulted in injury and death.

This incident is the direct result of the torturous treatment of those imprisoned. Morrison's government

has transferred detainees from facilities on the Australian mainland to Christmas Island, under the guise of relieving capacity pressure as a result of COVID-19 distancing measures.

When concern was raised in a tweet by Amnesty International that the refugees being transferred to Christmas Island should be allowed to live in the community, ABF twitter responded by stating: “No refugees are being transferred to CI [Christmas Island]. The cohort consists of those who have been convicted of crimes involving assault, sexual offences, drugs and other violent offences.”

This has been the tactic, adopted by successive governments and the media, to tar these detainees as violent criminals. In reality, they are the victims of anti-democratic and draconian immigration laws.

Referred to as the “501” cohort, these are permanent residents of Australia whose visas have been cancelled on the grounds of “bad character” under section 501 of the Migration Act. They are imprisoned until deported, even though they may have been convicted of only minor offences, and have served their time in prison. Many have lived in Australia for much of their lives and have long-established families in the country.

Under amendments to the Act in December 2014, the “bad character” clause was expanded to include those who have served prison sentences totalling 12 months or more. This meant people who had served sentences for crimes such as shoplifting and drug possession were imprisoned, facing deportation.

This quickly led to a larger number of permanent residents, including a significant number of New Zealand nationals, being deported from the country.

When speaking to the *Guardian*, Rey said the conditions are “worse than jail.” He explained: “In jail, you know when you can go home, in detention they don’t have a timeframe for you to go home. You wait around, and you don’t know what’s happening.”

Grievances that detainees had reportedly raised with the ABF include access to the exercise area (at present each compound has only a two-hour rostered time a day); the price of cigarettes; access to personal property; and the lack of proper access to a mobile network. Other issues included the use of handcuffs for transfers from detention centres and the chronic ill-health, both physical and mental, of long-term detainees.

Australia became the first country in the world to indefinitely imprison people without valid visas, when the Keating Labor government introduced the mandatory detention regime in 1992. It received bipartisan support and has been deepened by every government since.

The last Labor government, that of Prime Ministers Rudd and Gillard, also oversaw the imprisonment of people whose visas had been revoked under section 501, forcing them into substandard and atrocious conditions in detention centres. In 2008, while the Rudd Labor government was in office, a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report called the facilities a “disgrace” and demanded they be “demolished.”

Instead the Labor government extended the detention system, reopening prison camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island, as well as Christmas Island.

Christmas Island also has housed a Tamil refugee family, imprisoned there since August 2019, after a last-minute court injunction prevented their deportation. In a deliberately punitive move, they were flown to Christmas Island, some 5,000 km from their hometown of Biloela, in rural Queensland.

As with the detained former prisoners, the removal of Priya Murugappan, her husband Nades and two infant children was designed to cut them off from their sources of personal and political support. Residents of Biloela have been waging a sustained fight for their release, which has been stopped at every turn by the government. According to reports, they were housed in a different facility to where the protest has taken place.

The brutal treatment of asylum seekers and visa holders in Australia is a warning to the working class and must be opposed. As health, economic and social tensions mount and workers enter into struggle against the continued assault on basic working and living conditions, such measures will be turned against working people more broadly.



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