Detainees on Australia's Christmas Island continue protests against appalling conditions

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Protests have continued at Australia's immigration prison on Christmas Island, with footage emerging on social media of men climbing on top of the roofs of the compounds at the facility as fires were lit around the centre last Saturday.

Detainees are opposing their indefinite detention at the prison, located in the Indian Ocean, and the brutal conditions imposed upon them. This has included being locked in their compounds for 22 hours a day and denied workable internet or mobile access, making it nearly impossible for them to speak to their families.

Unrest initially developed Tuesday last week after attempts by those imprisoned on the island to protest were blocked. When some detainees climbed on rooftops, the Australian Border Force (ABF), a para-military government organisation, issued a statement declaring that they were deploying a "special response team" to the island.

While details of the operation have largely been hidden by the ABF and other government agencies, subsequent videos made by the detainees revealed that medication was withheld from them following the January 5 demonstrations. This was a contributing factor to the eruption on Saturday evening.

Saturday's protest was met with violence from ABF officers and guards from the Serco private security firm. Social media footage shows the compounds engulfed in tear gas, with men lying on the ground covering their faces. Detainees have also alleged that they were targeted with rubber bullet shotguns.

Some of the men, whose compound caught fire, were forced by ABF into punitive segregation units. They have concrete slabs, without mattresses, instead of beds. Some of the men were forced to sleep on the floor and there is no door on the toilet. The unit was also covered in rubbish, vomit and faeces.

Much of the footage released online has been posted on Route 501, a Facebook page run by the organisation Iwi N Aus, which advocates on behalf of New Zealanders in Australia. Filipa Payne, co-founder of Iwi N Aus, told Australia media "the only way I can describe it is like a warzone."

In a video posted to Route 501 a man named Les, who has been in detention for 14 months, said that the protests would have been no surprise to Serco or the ABF, as tensions have been building for months. He is the representative of his compound and had been attending meetings with Serco and the ABF.

"They have been told about this for the last few months," Les said. "All we wanted was to get out, more time free. Two hours is just not enough. There is no socialising, there is nothing. It is driving people insane."

Les outlined a lack of health services for detainees, and stated: "People are being pushed to the limit. There is no family support, and nothing works on the Island. ABF and Serco, they don't care, they treat us like rubbish."

Only after the Saturday protest have some of the detainees been given previously withheld medication. Wi-fi has now been turned back on, so the men can use the internet again, underscoring the punitive character of the earlier shutdown.

The government and media have done much to dehumanise the men who are imprisoned on Christmas Island, contemptuously referring to them as the "501 cohort." They are permanent residents of Australia who had their visa revoked on the grounds of "bad character" under section 501 of the Migration Act. Many media outlets, including the ABF Twitter, refer to them as violent criminals.

This is a lie. In truth, many of those imprisoned

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served short sentences for drug related offenses, drink driving or shoplifting, and other crimes of poverty. The video interviews released on the Route 501 Facebook page reveal the actual circumstances of the detainees.

One documents the case of John Pew, who went to prison for four and a half months for a drink driving charge. Upon his release he was then reimprisoned in a detention centre on the Australian mainland and has now been deprived of his liberty for more than five years.

Pew suffers from a mental illness and has back problems, both of which he requires medication for. At the time of his interview on Christmas Island, he had been nearly five days without medication and was starting to hear voices again.

The men were sent to Christmas Island by the federal Liberal-National Coalition government, under the pretence of freeing up immigration prisons on the Australian mainland to allow for social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Labor Party, as well as the Greens, created the conditions for the indefinite detention of this cohort. In 1992, the Keating Labor government introduced the policy of mandatory detention for non-visa holders, as well as all asylum seekers who arrived in Australia by boat.

The last Labor government, propped up by the Greens after the 2010 federal election, reopened detention centres in the Pacific and excised the entire territory of Australia from the migration zone, stripping refugees of the right to asylum.

The attack on the Christmas Island detainees is part of a broader onslaught against the democratic rights of the working class, and a warning of the repressive measures that will be directed against mounting opposition to social inequality, war and authoritarianism.

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