

Refugees killed and maimed in Australian detention camp on Manus Island

By Mark Church
19 February 2014

One Iranian asylum seeker was killed and 77 other detainees reportedly injured, two critically, in violent attacks by police and security guards against protesting refugees inside the Australian government's detention centre on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG) on Monday night. The horrific incident underscores the criminality and barbarism of the "border protection" regime that is defended by the entire political establishment in Australia.

At least 13 refugees are said to have serious injuries, including a man in critical condition with a major skull fracture and another who was shot in the back. The Iranian man who died had reportedly suffered head injuries.

Despite intensive efforts by the Australian and PNG governments to cover up what happened—including bans on journalists going near the facility, or interviewing hospitalised victims—the truth has started to emerge. After a day of obfuscation and lies, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison finally last night admitted that PNG police fired shots during the operation to suppress the detainees.

While all the circumstances are not yet clear because of the official blackout, it is now known that live ammunition was used by the police, from a notorious Australian-funded mobile squad that functions as a paramilitary wing of the Royal PNG Constabulary. Video footage taken at a distance and screened by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation also showed security personnel armed with long batons.

The Australian government dispatched 130 extra security officers to Manus Island at the beginning of the month, in preparation for anticipated protests when the 1,340 detainees were told Sunday afternoon that they would be permanently settled in PNG. After months of indefinite detention in subhuman conditions,

the refugees were furious that they had no chance of receiving asylum in Australia or another safe country.

During a demonstration on Sunday evening, some asylum seekers reportedly threw rocks and plastic chairs at guards. About 35 people apparently escaped the detention centre as part of the protest, but were quickly captured. About 19 refugees were injured that night, with three suffering broken bones.

The following night, after protests over Sunday's arrests, asylum seekers said the power was cut and they were set upon by a mob armed with rocks, bats, pipes and machetes. It is unclear whether the security personnel supplied to the centre by G4S, a commercial contractor, were involved. PNG police then went in and later fired shots at the detainees.

Refugees were taken to hospital suffering cuts, bruising and other injuries from being beaten. One asylum seeker told the *Guardian* that "about 15 persons were wounded—cut in neck, cut in shoulder, cut in thigh, back damage, head cut." A Sudanese refugee said: "We tried to hide under the containers, but they dragged us out and beat us. We couldn't get away." An Iranian asylum seeker stated: "They came in my room ... they dragged me out of my bed and beat me. They had huge rocks in their hands and they hit my head and my body with them."

Both the Australian government and G4S initially denied that any attack took place inside the centre.

Immigration Minister Morrison described the death and injuries as "tragic," but blamed the refugees and defended the violence used against them. "What we saw last night was a professional response by our service provider, by our own staff and from the PNG authorities," he declared. "When there are people who are charged under Papua New Guinea law to maintain law and order in that situation, now if you behave an

unruly way and in a disorderly way, then you subject yourself to the response of law enforcement.”

Morrison later announced an internal departmental review of the incident, emphasising that it would be conducted in the same manner as previous inquiries into incidents on Manus Island under the former Labor government. In other words, the review will seek to whitewash the events and justify the repression.

The government knew that unrest was building in the centre. Tensions have been high since it was reopened by the Labor government in 2012. According to documents obtained via a Freedom of Information request by the *Guardian*, there were 110 “incidents”—such as hunger strikes, self-harm, and assaults—in the four months from March to June last year alone.

The oppressive conditions in the centre, where people are kept imprisoned in hot, humid, cramped quarters with poor hygiene and little privacy, create anger and desperation. The regime is deliberately designed to coerce refugees into abandoning their bids for asylum and to deter others from seeking to reach Australia.

Morrison accused the refugees of starting riots to “disrupt” the centre. He claimed that guards were deployed to prevent it being badly damaged, as happened last year in the similar detention camp on the remote Pacific island of Nauru.

As in the past, the government will use the events on Manus Island to further demonise refugees and justify its illegal and criminal measures to stop them reaching Australia. The brutal repression will be used to send a message to other refugee seekers that they will be treated in the same way if they seek asylum in Australia.

The callous treatment of refugees has the full bipartisan support of the opposition Labor Party. Labor’s immigration spokesman Richard Marles declared that the Manus Island facility must remain in operation at all costs, because it “has had the biggest impact on stopping boats coming to Australia.”

Marles boasted that the previous Labor government’s pact with the PNG government last July to transport all new boat arrivals to Manus Island and deny them any settlement in Australia was the most critical factor in halting refugee voyages. His only criticism of the government was for “losing control” at the Manus Island camp, sending it into “meltdown” and thereby

threatening its capacity to keep operating.

Asylum seekers, who are among the most vulnerable members of the international working class, are being deliberately scapegoated and victimised under conditions of deepening economic crisis and Coalition government attacks on living and social conditions.

The violence, thuggery and flagrant denial of the most basic democratic rights, now being inflicted on refugees is a stark warning of the methods being prepared against working people as a whole as opposition develops against the austerity program being demanded by the corporate and financial elite.

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