

Hunger strike in Australian refugee detention camp on Manus Island

By Will Morrow
17 January 2015

The barbaric character of the anti-asylum seeker policies of the Australian government is once again on display. Security forces have reportedly been sent to repress a desperate hunger strike by hundreds of people incarcerated in Australia's refugee prison camp on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea.

All of the reports from the centre are based on comments and photos sent by detainees and staff to the media, due to the ban enforced by the Australian and Papua New Guinean governments on journalists entering the facility.

The hunger strike began on Tuesday, reportedly triggered by the shutoff of water in the facility and fears that some of the detainees who have been granted refugee status were about to be removed from the centre and forced to settle permanently on Manus Island. A notice to the detainees in the centre—published by the *Guardian*—stated that detainees would be without running water for toilets and bathing indefinitely.

The protest is said to involve between 400 and 500 of the 1,053 detainees, many of whom have been imprisoned at the camp in inhumane conditions for more than 15 months. An article published by the *Guardian* in December 2013 stated that one dormitory was so bad that Amnesty International considered the accommodation of people in it as a violation of the convention against torture and ill-treatment.

The *Guardian* wrote today that 100 people are receiving medical care for severe dehydration. Dozens have also reportedly engaged in other desperate acts of protest. The newspaper documented that four people have swallowed detergent and another two have swallowed razor blades. Between 15 and 30 people are believed to have sewn their lips together, and photos of some have been published.

Detainees have expressed grave fears that the PNG government, on the prompting of Canberra, will order the violent suppression of the protest. Last February, in response to an earlier protest, paramilitary police, backed by thugs armed with machetes, stormed into the camp, firing live rounds and assaulting refugees. One man, Reza Berati, was brutally beaten to death. Seventy-one other detainees were injured, including one by a gunshot wound and another whose throat was slit.

Evidence suggests that the February protest was deliberately provoked in order to gather footage of its violent repression for the Australian government's media campaign to deter refugees from attempting to exercise their right to claim asylum in Australia. (See: "Australia: Senate inquiry whitewashes killing at Papua New Guinea refugee camp")

In an indication that an attack is imminent, staff on the island told the *Guardian* yesterday that the centre had been placed under lockdown because of a "high security alert," meaning they are not permitted into the compounds where detainees are held. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported yesterday that it had received unconfirmed photos showing detainees with head wounds.

The *Guardian* published a photograph yesterday of security forces at the facility clad in riot gear. The newspaper claimed that security had already entered the detention centre's Delta block. One refugee said: "The police and guards attack us... it is a really bad situation."

The PNG government has denied that police have gone into the camp. A spokesman told the ABC today that "security were on standby for safety reasons," but claimed there was "no physical engagement between asylum seekers and security personnel."

The situation on Manus Island is an indictment of the criminal anti-refugee policies of the Australian state. Under a regime imposed by the former Greens-backed Labor government, and then continued under the Abbott Liberal-National government, all refugees who travel to Australia by boat are automatically detained and incarcerated in hell-hole prisons on Christmas Island, Manus Island, and Nauru.

Even those who manage to meet the extremely narrow United Nations criteria for refugee status are denied any ability to settle in Australia. To “deter” asylum seekers, the Labor government ruled that they could only settle in PNG, one of the poorest and least developed countries on earth, or return to where they came from. Last September, Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced that he made an equally barbaric arrangement with the Cambodian government, allowing refugees to be transferred and dumped in that country as well.

As part of its “Operation Sovereign Border,” which is shrouded in military secrecy, the Abbott government has towed boatloads of asylum seekers back to Indonesia. It has also returned asylum seekers to the countries they sought to escape, such as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The Abbott government is now seeking to codify into law its flagrant violation of the international Refugee Convention prohibiting the “refoulement” of refugees.

Every aspect of Australia’s refugee regime is blatantly illegal. It was erected by Labor and has been maintained by Abbott in a crude attempt to divert class and social tensions into the xenophobic vilification of asylum seekers.

The Abbott government, having explicitly denied reports of the Manus Island hunger strike until Thursday, stressed yesterday that its refugee policy will not be changed. Recently-appointed Immigration Minister Peter Dutton stated: “My message today is very clear to the transferees on Manus and in other facilities... the absolute resolve of me as the new minister and of the government is to make sure that... they will never arrive in Australia.”

The Labor Party has maintained a complete silence about the latest protests on Manus Island, underscoring its bipartisan support for the persecution and criminal treatment of refugees.

Greens immigration spokeswoman, Senator Sarah

Hansen-Young, has issued statements declaring that Australia is “a better country than this” and that what is needed is a “little more heart and a little more compassion and empathy”.

Hansen-Young’s posturing is entirely cynical. While the Greens occasionally criticise the most barbaric aspects of the anti-refugee policies, they fully agree with the underlying reactionary premise of “border protection,” which is the assertion by national states and governments that they can deny people their fundamental right to enter and live in any country they choose.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>