

Leaked files reveal brutal regime in Australia's Nauru refugee camp

By Max Newman
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The levels of trauma and abuse inflicted on asylum seekers imprisoned in the Australian-run “offshore detention centre” on Nauru were partly documented last week when more than 2,000 leaked incident reports were published by the *Guardian*.

Covering the period from May 2013 to October 2015, the Nauru files make public, for the first time, officially suppressed and buried cases of violence, mistreatment and suicide attempts among the over 600 refugees, including 104 children, indefinitely detained on Nauru. This inhuman regime, in violation of international law, was established by the previous Greens-backed Labor government and has been maintained by the current Liberal-National Coalition government.

In numerous incident reports, asylum seekers described brutality at the hands of guards, including violence directed toward their children. Guards were accused of assaulting or choking children, or coming in to “restrain” or “remove” children who were supposedly fighting or yelling.

The reports include complaints about a guard grabbing a boy and threatening to kill him and guards slapping children in the face. In another report, a mother stated that a female security guard would not let her take her daughter to the toilet. When her daughter attempted to go to the toilet on the ground in front of the guard, the guard shone her torch directly on the child, making the child unable to urinate.

Children, who made up 18 percent of the population imprisoned on Nauru, were overrepresented in the incident reports. More than half the 2,116 reports, or 1,086, involved children and included allegations of sexual assault.

One report detailed how a young boy was allegedly molested in a car by a security guard when being transported from one area to another. There are also

reports of rape, as well as women complaining of threats of sexual assault by guards or Nauruan men, and fearing for their safety.

The Nauru files paint a picture of the camp in squalor, with dirty tents, no chairs for children in schoolrooms, and water not being provided or prioritised at the school despite stifling heat. Mice ran around on the floor, and children needed tetanus shots after being bitten.

The reports demonstrated the psychological impact of indefinite detention. In one incident, a young female asylum seeker took an entire month's supply of contraceptive pills in attempt to commit suicide. In another, a woman attempted to overdose on her medication because a guard had trampled on her son's photo and kicked her and her husband in their tent.

A further report recorded that a man attempted to hang himself with a rope before being physically stopped by guards. Three months later, a young woman tried to kill herself by hanging. In another incident, a woman vomited after ingesting baby bottle steriliser tablets.

According to one shocking report, a girl walked into her classroom, grabbed some cleaning liquid from the shelf and proceeded to drink the entire bottle before she was physically stopped by her teacher. In September 2014, four unaccompanied minors sliced their forearms with knives while another two kicked and punched the walls of their tent.

Hundreds of such reports were classified under the label of “self-harm,” designed to minimise the severity of the incidents, blame the victim and hide the reality of acts of desperation born from severe oppression and mental harm.

The files constitute the most extensive leak of its kind from inside Australia's offshore detention centres on

Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. They indicate significant opposition among the camp staff to the abusive character of the detention and the Australian government's efforts to suppress the evidence. Amendments to the Border Force Act introduced last year impose lengthy jail sentences for anyone who publicly divulges any details.

Some of the incident reports appear to originate from records kept by the Salvation Army and Save The Children, charity organisations that had Australian government contracts to provide welfare, education and recreational services to the detainees. Other reports came from Wilson Security, the security firm employed by the head contractor, Ferroviol (formerly Transfield and Broadspectrum).

Former staff members have previously defied the government's secrecy. They include Dr. Isaacs, a paediatrician who published a medical journal article demonstrating that the conditions constituted torture. In the recently released film *Chasing Asylum*, former employees risked jail time by showing themselves on camera, exposing the barbaric conditions.

Alongside these courageous actions, official reports, issued by UN agencies, Australian human rights agencies and parliamentary committees, have confirmed the appalling conditions. The overwhelming evidence has generated widely-supported social media and other campaigns, pleading with the government to bring the detainees to Australia.

But none of these reports has shifted the Coalition government or the opposition Labor Party one inch from their determination to continue the "offshore" regime as a deliberate means of deterring refugees from seeking to reach Australia.

The government responded to the Nauru files by accusing asylum seekers of falsely reporting abuses in order to come to Australia. Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton declared that "some people have even gone to the extent of self-harming and people have self-immolated in an effort to get to Australia."

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Labor leader Bill Shorten both flatly dismissed calls for a royal commission into the incident reports. In any case, such an inquiry would only serve to whitewash the abuses and bury the evidence as much as possible.

Shorten reiterated Labor's ongoing support for the

camp, which were re-opened by the previous government—in which he was a key minister—reviving the "Pacific solution" imposed by the Howard Coalition government in 2001.

At the same time, conscious of the public disgust, Shorten fraudulently claimed to oppose indefinite detention. In fact, Labor deliberately consigned the detainees to Nauru and Manus Island for indeterminate periods, declaring that they must have "no advantage" over the millions of refugees who wait endlessly in Middle Eastern and African camps.

The Greens joined Labor in proposing yet another parliamentary inquiry into the latest revelations, but this will only seek to channel the widespread outrage back into the hands of the same parliamentary establishment. The Greens are just as culpable as Labor for the detainee abuses, having propped up the last minority Labor government as it reopened the camps. Moreover, for all their claims to oppose this regime, the Greens advocate an alternative form of "regional processing" in impoverished Asian countries, and are fully committed to the underlying framework of "protecting" national borders.

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