

Human Rights Watch again condemns Australia's inhuman treatment of refugees

By Max Newman
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The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has once more damned Australia's barbaric treatment of refugees and its "failure to protect children in detention," as well as the country's repressive counter-terrorism laws. The indictment was published in HRW's annual *World Report 2017*, which catalogues violations of human rights in around 90 countries.

The report states that throughout 2016 the Australian "government continued its draconian policy of offshore transfers of asylum seekers to Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Nauru." This was despite "growing calls" for the government to address the abuses and "resettle those found to be refugees in Australia."

HRW outlines the ruling last year by the High Court, Australia's supreme court, that upheld the government's indefinite detention of refugees. The report notes that this decision amounted to "authorizing by law" Australia's role in "securing, funding, and participating in the detention of asylum seekers and refugees."

HRW points out that, by contrast, the PNG Supreme Court "ruled that the detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island was unconstitutional" under PNG law. The Australian government initially defied the PNG ruling, insisting that the detainees remain indefinitely incarcerated. As noted in the report, Australia's government eventually agreed to close the Manus Island facility, but gave no timeframe and made clear that the refugees on the island would never come to Australia.

Instead, the government moved, in the subsequent months, to forbid any adult asylum seeker who arrived in Australia by boat after July 19, 2013 from ever receiving a visa, even to visit Australia. This legislation

became an essential component in a US-Australia refugee-swapping deal, in which some asylum seekers on Manus Island and Nauru would be transferred to the US in exchange for some heavily-vetted refugees currently languishing in camps in Costa Rica, having been denied entry to the US.

The announcement of the US-Australia swap came after numerous failed attempts by successive Australian governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, to find a "third option" for the forcible dumping of refugees into poorer surrounding countries. The report highlights the \$A55 million deal struck with Cambodia in 2015 to offload refugees there. It notes that, out of the six refugees from Nauru who were "settled" in Cambodia, only two remain there, with the others returning "to their country of origin," due to the deplorable conditions they faced in Cambodia.

The report also highlights the horrendous conditions on Manus Island and Nauru, where refugee and asylum seekers "face unnecessary delays in, and at times denial of, medical care, even for life-threatening conditions." This was highlighted during the recent coronial inquest into the death of Hamid Kehazaei, 24, a prisoner in Australia's detention camp on Manus Island who died from septicaemia spreading from a cut on his foot in August 2014, after authorities delayed his evacuation for medical treatment.

"Many have dire mental health problems and suffer from depression" the report states, pointing to the two incidents of self-immolation on Nauru in May last year as indicators of the effects of prolonged and indefinite detention on the mental health of those imprisoned.

"The Australian government's offshore operations are highly secretive," the report further notes, and "service providers working for the Australian government face criminal charges and civil penalties if

they disclose information about conditions for asylum seekers and refugees.”

Despite these laws, current and former staff members at the detention centres have revealed some of the abuses. Last year, a leaked cache of over 2,000 incident reports from Nauru “exposed endemic and systematic abuse, predominantly of children.”

The HRW report also highlights the disturbing footage of children being tortured in youth detention in the Northern Territory, involving “teargassing, hooding, shackling” and being stripped naked. Noted as well is the introduction of further counterterrorism laws, featuring provisions that authorise the indefinite detention of those convicted of terrorist offences, even after they have served their sentences.

The HRW report points to a rapid escalation of the erosion of basic legal and democratic rights in Australia over the past year, with the attacks on refugees only the sharpest expression. However, this is not the first HRW report to detail such abuses, nor is it the first to document the horrors of Australia’s refugee camps. Yet, none of these reports has stopped the draconian practices.

All the major political parties—the Liberal-National Coalition, the Labor Party and the Greens—are jointly responsible for these measures. While the current Turnbull Coalition government has ramped up the assault, it was the Keating Labor government that, in 1992, introduced mandatory detention for refugees arriving by boat, making Australia the first country to do so.

In 2012, the minority Gillard Labor government, crucially propped up by the Greens, reopened the detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru, and established the inhumane regime that continues today. To cover their tracks, the Greens have been instrumental in conducting two Senate inquiries into the abuses in the facilities. Both inquiries proposed only cosmetic changes, illustrating the support by the Greens, like the rest of the political establishment, for the underlying “border protection” framework.

As the social conditions of the working class are increasingly attacked around the world by the corporate elite, asylum seekers—tens of millions of whom are fleeing US-led wars—will more and more be scapegoated by governments as a means of diverting social and class tensions in xenophobic and nationalist

directions.

To fight this divisive poison, workers must unify their struggles workers across national borders, break with the political parties responsible for this crisis, and turn to an international socialist perspective. Workers must have the right to live in any country of their choosing with full citizen rights, including to work, study and receive welfare entitlements.

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