

Papua New Guinea soldiers attack refugees in Australian-run prison camp

By Max Newman
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Escalating tensions at the Australian refugee detention centre on Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Manus Island erupted last Friday when armed soldiers fired shots into the camp and assaulted detainees. Videos posted on-line showed terrified asylum seekers seeking shelter as gunfire peppered the centre.

Eye-witness accounts indicate that a vehicle rammed the entrance gates, and rocks were thrown at refugees. Anxious to whitewash the assault, the Australian government continues to claim that only a single shot was fired, into the air, despite photos and videos showing multiple bullet holes.

The violence highlights the mounting dangers confronting the nearly 900 refugees who have been incarcerated on the remote island for four years. Those classified as entitled to asylum face being dumped permanently in PNG, an impoverished former Australian colony, when the Australian government officially closes the prison camp in October. Other detainees, arbitrarily denied refugee status, are threatened with deportation back to the countries they fled.

According to initial statements by the PNG defence force, Friday's incident was triggered over the use of a football field on the naval base that surrounds the detention facility. Colonel Ray Numa said asylum seekers were told to vacate the oval at 6pm but some refused to leave. In a statement on Sunday, the PNG Constabulary claimed that drunken soldiers retaliated by entering the detention centre.

Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian-born journalist imprisoned in the compound, reported on Facebook that three asylum seekers and some Australian staff members were seriously injured. Two Sudanese asylum seekers were injured, one from a rock thrown at his head and the other in his chest, and a Pakistani man

was badly severely injured in the stomach, causing him to urinate blood.

As of last month, Manus Island held 888 male asylum seekers, many of whom have been imprisoned there since the detention centre was reopened in 2012 by the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, which was kept in office by the Greens. In 2013, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced that no asylum seeker who tried to arrive by boat would ever be permitted to settle in Australia, effectively permanently barring all the refugees locked up in Manus and Nauru, Australia's other Pacific detention camp.

The Manus camp has a history of inhumane living conditions, inadequate health care and violence. In February 2014, during a protest by detainees, in what had all the hallmarks of a calculated provocation by the Australian government, Kurdish-Iranian asylum seeker Reza Barati was murdered. The investigation into the death of the 23-year-old was deliberately obstructed by the Australian government, which blocked the return of expatriate staff members to give evidence during the trial.

Hamid Kehazaei, another Manus Island victim of Australia's refugee regime, died in August 2014 from a preventable bacterial infection from a small cut in his leg. During a coronial inquest it was revealed that the sub-standard medical facilities on the island, coupled with the government's refusal to fly him back to Australia, resulted in his preventable death.

Last April, the PNG Supreme Court ruled that the centre was unconstitutional because of its unlawful deprivation of personal liberty and ordered its closure. Together with the PNG government, the current Turnbull Liberal-National government effectively defied the ruling, kept the centre running under slightly modified conditions and reiterated that no asylum

seeker on the island would come to Australia.

Earlier this month, however, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said the centre would be closed by October, while the Nauru camp would remain open. He said those imprisoned would be “resettled” in PNG, returned to their country of origin or transferred to the US under the refugee-swap deal announced last year.

Contemptuously defying the widespread popular opposition in Australia to the prison camps, Dutton declared: “They [the detainees] are not coming to Australia and the advocates can bleat all they want, they can protest all they want, we have been very clear.” He was reinforcing the bipartisan policy adopted by Labor in 2013.

Over the past year, the Australian and PNG authorities have rapidly determined the refugee status of most of those in the camp via a limited vetting process. It was found that of the 888 asylum seekers, 614 were “genuine” refugees and 205 were “non-refugees,” with 69 “awaiting processing.”

Fearing deportation to their countries of origin, where they would face torture, imprisonment and death, Boochani and 730 other applicants launched an application to the PNG Supreme Court last November, seeking interim orders to restrain the PNG government from deporting them.

The Supreme Court rejected the application, declaring that the PNG government had “complied with the [April 2016] Court order and closed the MIRPC (Manus Island Regional Processing Centre).” The basis for this ruling was that those imprisoned could now move freely in and out of the facility, which had become part of the adjacent naval base.

In reality, the prisoners are still living in the same housing units as before, now enclosed by the navy base, with permission to enter the nearby town of Lorengau during daylight hours, where local officials have whipped up antagonism against the detainees.

Last Friday’s incident appears to be a product of the resulting pressures on both the refugees and local residents. The bloody attack by military personal also further highlights the repressive conditions of the continuing incarceration. The political responsibility for the cruel treatment of these asylum seekers rests with successive Australian governments and the entire political establishment, including the Greens, who support the underlying anti-refugee framework.

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