

Australian government threatens police violence to remove Manus Island refugees

By Max Newman
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Around 700 male asylum seekers have been languishing in the Australia-financed and run detention centre on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea (PNG) for three years or more. Now they are being threatened with police violence unless they move to a less secure transit centre, where they can be dumped permanently to live in impoverished conditions in PNG.

The detainees fear the move because those who have already ventured to Lorengau, the site of the transit centre, have previously been beaten, robbed or abused by local police and residents due to the anti-refugee rhetoric stirred up by the Australian and PNG governments.

On Monday, a 31-year-old Iranian refugee, Hamid Shamshiripour, was found dead near the transit centre. The local police suggested suicide, though no official report has been released. He is the fifth detainee to die on Manus Island since the previous Australian Labor government reopened it in 2012.

In late July, the Manus Island Processing Centre (MIPC) operational manager issued a letter announcing the centre's Foxtrot compound would be closed, as of July 26, with "the ceasing of water, power and cleaning services" being "imminent." This process is already well underway.

"All residents are required to move effective immediately" the letter insisted. "Should you not move, you may be in violation of PNG law." Anyone occupying the centre "without consent" would be "subject to legal action" and "any non-compliance and potentially illegal activity will be reported to the Royal PNG Constabulary."

Those deemed "genuine" refugees, determined through an extreme vetting process, could temporarily remain in other MIPC compounds, but will "have to relocate in the imminent future" to the East Lorengau

Refugee Transit Centre (ELRTC).

Those classified as "non-refugee" face the prospect of temporary accommodation in Mike compound before an uncertain future that includes forcible deportation to their country of origin. The entire MIPC is scheduled for closure by October 31.

Under the restrictive 1951 international Refugee Convention, the only "genuine" refugees are those with a "well-founded fear" of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality or membership of a social/political group. This bars anyone who fled war, oppression, starvation or poverty.

The Manus Island vetting process also excludes anyone exhibiting "a demeanour incompatible with a person of good character." This PNG guideline targets anyone who challenges the conditions forced upon them in the camps.

The asylum seekers at the MIPC organised protests demanding the Australian and PNG authorities reconnect the power and water. They also demanded that the Australian government abandon its drive to "resettle" them in PNG.

In response, a large group of police gathered to lock the gates and clear the Foxtrot compound. According to the detainees, Australian Federal Police and Australian Border Force officers were directing the local police and centre guards.

Abdul Aziz Adam, a Sudanese refugee, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "They are gathering in a big group of maybe 100 to 120 guys and they are ready. They brought the fire guys in front and the police guards were everywhere and they locked the gate and they are ready to come in and drag people out of Foxtrot."

In the past, the Australian government has orchestrated the use of force against protesting

detainees. In February 2014 soldiers and security personnel were increased before the detainees were told they would never be permitted to live in Australia. Police and guards then set upon angry detainees, killing Reza Barati and injuring 77 others.

It is now clear that few, if any, of the detainees will be sent to the US this year as part of the swap deal announced in November 2016. Australia's Liberal-National government promised to take some US detainees from Costa Rica, in exchange for the US accepting heavily-vetted asylum seekers from Australia's prison camps on Manus Island and Nauru.

The recently leaked phone call between Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and President Donald Trump showed this "deal" was always a cruel hoax. Turnbull told Trump the pact "does not require you to take any" detainees. Turnbull emphasised: "Every individual is subject to your vetting. You can decide to take them or to not take them after vetting ... The obligation is to only go through the process."

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued a press release in late July condemning the Australian government's anti-refugee policy, saying it had caused "extensive, avoidable suffering for far too long." The UNHCR said it had agreed to the US swap deal "on the clear understanding that vulnerable refugees with close family ties in Australia would ultimately be allowed to settle there."

The UN agency said it was "recently informed by Australia that it refuses to accept even these refugees" and that the "only option" for them "is to remain where they are or to be transferred to Cambodia or to the United States."

This is hypocrisy on the UNHCR's part. It claimed it had "no choice" but to endorse an inhumane refugee swap deal that flagrantly undermined the basic legal and democratic rights of asylum seekers that the UNHCR is supposed to uphold.

Nevertheless, the UN agency's public condemnation of the Australian government underscores the extent to which Australia is violating international refugee law.

By incarcerating and now seeking to dump refugees on remote islands, successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike, have pioneered methods now being taken up by governments around the world, amid a worsening global refugee crisis.

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