

Australia continues punitive treatment of refugees on Manus Island

By Max Newman
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Approximately 700 men imprisoned indefinitely by the Australian government on Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Manus Island have faced appalling conditions since their violent removal from an Australian-operated detention centre in late November.

Protests by detainees are continuing. Before they were finally evicted, the detainees had demonstrated for a month against their transfer to insecure facilities elsewhere on Manus Island, and for the right to live in Australia or a safe third country.

The centre's facilities were shut down around them, ending medical services, shutting off power, water and food, and destroying makeshift wells the refugees had dug in a desperate bid to survive.

The shutdown was closely overseen by the Australian government, ratcheting up its punitive drive to force the refugees back to the countries they fled and deter any others from seeking asylum in Australia.

The PNG police and security guards from Paladin Solutions, a firm contracted by the Australian government to oversee the imprisonment of asylum seekers, used batons to beat the detainees, smashed up their possessions and forced them into three insecure and unfinished prison camps on the island—the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre, the West Lorengau Haus and the Hillside Haus.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) regional representative in Canberra released a report on the December 8 detailing some of the conditions that the Australian government inflicted on detainees. All the centres, which were officially ready for habitable use, posed “immediate risks to the physical health and safety” of the detainees, due to “incomplete, sub-standard accommodation and unsanitary facilities.”

Of the three camps only one had cooking facilities

and none had toilets. One of the sharpest risks identified was the lack of health-care facilities. The only access to medical assistance was through a clinic operated by the International Health and Medical Services (IHMS), an Australian government contracted medical service. The clinic's triage system required detainees to request appointments, typically through security staff.

Severe cases were referred to Lorengau General Hospital, a badly-overstretched 120-bed local hospital. As of early November, the hospital was already 33 percent over-capacity, with “50 percent of medical specialist positions (surgeon, anaesthetist and obstetrician) and 43 percent of nursing positions ... unfilled.”

The report said the hospital lacked critical infrastructure, such as ventilators and medical incinerators, and was in desperate need of basic medical supplies, including intravenous fluids. This put many refugees at acute risk. Some have serious medical conditions, including epilepsy, acute abdominal conditions, severe physical trauma, acute psychosis and unstable cardiac conditions.

According to the UNHCR, the influx of asylum seekers will increase Lorengau's population by 8 percent, putting significant pressure on the hospital, exacerbated by the lack of interpreters or translation options for detainees seeking medical care.

Moreover, the detainees must now pay for their own medications, which were previously provided free by the IHMS in the detention centre. The UNHCR was told, during its visit, that many asylum seekers could not afford to pay for necessary antibiotics, leaving them at risk of infection and death.

To further degrade the living conditions of the asylum seekers, the weekly allowance of 100 kina

(\$US31.12) was halted during the standoff at the centre. There is no indication that these payments have been restored.

UNHCR spokeswoman Cecile Pouilly further condemned the Australian government's treatment of the refugees in a briefing in Geneva on December 22. She referred to at least five violent attacks on detainees last month, including an attempt by three people, armed with axes and machetes, to break into one of the centres containing around 150 men.

Local people, who mostly live in poor conditions, have been incited by authorities to react with hostility to Australia's dumping of the refugees in their town.

In one incident, Joinul Islam, a Bangladeshi asylum seeker, was punched in the face and had his money stolen in mid-December. It was the second time Islam had been assaulted. In July 2017, while he was in Lorengau, he had his elbow sliced open with a machete by a local gang and the surgery he received did not heal his arm.

In late November and again on December 19, local landowners blockaded the Lorengau centre, stopping vital food and medical shipments. A Sri Lankan refugee, Thanus Selvarasa, told the Australian media: "These local people attack us, the camp (and) we are hostage people now."

The UNHCR's Pouilly commented: "We are talking here about people who have suffered tremendously, extreme trauma, and are now feeling so insecure in the places where they are staying."

Pouilly rejected Australia's claim that the PNG government is responsible for the Manus situation. "What we clearly are saying is that it's Australia's responsibility in the first place... Australia is the country that created the situation by putting in place this offshore processing facility. So what we are asking is for Australia to find solutions for these people."

Successive Australian governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, have rejected such pleas by the UN.

Already, there have been six preventable deaths on Manus Island, including Hamid Kehazaei who died from septicaemia that spread from a cut on his foot in August 2014. A coronial inquest in December 2016 reported a high likelihood that adequate medical treatment would have prevented his death.

The suffering and deaths on Manus Island are the

result of a bipartisan policy. "Border protection" is cited as the pretext for repelling all refugees arriving by boat, the majority of whom have fled the invasions and wars conducted in the Middle East by the US and its allies, including Australia.

The Gillard Labor government, which was propped up by the Greens, reopened the detention centre in 2012. Labor's policy has been extended and intensified by the current Liberal-National government, setting cruel precedents for other governments internationally to follow.

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