

Lawsuits against Australian government reveal horror in refugee camp

By Max Newman
24 January 2019

At least four lawsuits have been filed against the Australian government and the security giant G4S, which the government contracted to guard its refugee prison camp on Papua New Guinea's remote Manus Island. The former employees allege that G4S and the government deliberately put the security staff at risk, resulting in physical and psychological damage.

Roderick St George, who worked as an occupational health and safety (OHS) manager, alleges that the conditions on the island were misrepresented to him. He says he was told there were approximately 130 men, women and children detained on the island and they were "in good spirits."

Instead, only men were imprisoned on the island. A statement of claim filed in the Victorian state Supreme Court states: "Many of the male detainees at the centre were not in good spirits and some were predisposed to inflicting physical violence on themselves, on each other and on staff at the centre."

The claim says G4S and the Australian government had a duty of care to provide their employees with a safe workplace, free from the risk of psychiatric injury. St George's submission paints a picture of a tinderbox ready to explode. The camp had inadequate medical facilities, no running water, no electricity and mould forming on the tent walls.

St George alleges that the staff lacked the correct training and resources to deal with the circumstances in the centre. As OHS manager, he claims he had a "manifestly excessive workload," responsible for health and safety in a centre that was woefully under-equipped. Moreover, he was given further duties that included quality assurance, risk assessment and intelligence.

After a disturbance broke out in April 2013, in which a number of detainees physically attacked the staff,

including St George, he says he began to fear for his life due to the unpredictable and explosive tensions.

In truth, the April riot was a predictable outcome of a string of events from January to April 2013, including mass hunger strikes and protests, as well as multiple self-harm incidents and suicide attempts.

St George was so horrified by what he experienced while working for G4S that he resigned and became a whistle-blower. In a July 2013 interview with the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) "Dateline" program, he said "words really can't describe" the conditions on Manus Island. "I have never seen human beings so destitute, so helpless, and so hopeless before."

St George said he took the job with the intention of making the place safer, but that it "proved quite rapidly to be an impossibility. In Australia, the facility couldn't serve as a dog kennel. The owners would be jailed."

St George told "Dateline" the place was a tinderbox waiting to explode. "I believe it's just a matter of time."

Seven months later, St George's warning came true. Three days of protests erupted in February 2014 after authorities organised a meeting of the approximately 1,300 detainees. They were informed that they would never be permitted to enter Australia and that the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government also refused to guarantee resettlement. G4S called in the notoriously brutal PNG Mobile Police Force which is Australian-funded. Joined by local thugs armed with machetes, and local security agents, they stormed the area, firing live ammunition at the detainees.

More than 60 people were injured in the resulting carnage. In what amounted to a state-sanctioned murder, Iranian-Kurdish asylum seeker Reza Barati

was hit twice with a block of nail-pierced wood, before a large rock was dropped on his head. Barati died from a heart attack triggered by his catastrophic head injuries.

Labelled a “riot” by the Australian political establishment and the media, the WSWs explained at the time that the conflict bore “all the hallmarks of a calculated provocation orchestrated by the Australian government.”

Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott and current Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who was immigration minister at the time, bear particular responsibility for these deaths, along with the previous Greens-backed Labor government that in 2012 reopened the Manus camp, and another on Nauru, an equally remote Pacific island.

St George claims he suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression and alcohol abuse. According to an opinion piece he wrote for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in March 2014, he resigned when “instances of sexual abuse and torture of vulnerable inmates at the hands of fellow detainees were uncovered” and the facility’s design made it impossible to “protect the victims.”

Gregory Wisely, a former security officer, has submitted a claim that after the violence broke out in February 2014 he was struck in the head with a rock, causing a brain injury. As a result, he suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, neck and spine injuries and ongoing psychiatric problems, including depression.

Wisely alleges that G4S provided him “with little or no training as to the manner in which he should handle the traumatic or stressful situations” and failed to listen to his complaints about the stress of the job.

Wisely’s submission further alleges that the Australian government failed in its duty of care to the staff at the detention centre because it failed to process detainees in a reasonable time frame, leading to high levels of stress and anxiety. Moreover, the government failed to keep detainees informed about what was happening.

Another former security officer, Grant Potter, alleges that G4S knew by at least September 2013 that tensions at the centre had increased due to frustration among detainees because of the government’s policies.

Moreover, Potter says G4S employed “incompetent

and malicious security staff, who escalated the violence at the premises during the riots and contributed to the death of one transferee and the injury to other transferees.”

Another former officer at the centre, Peter Baehnisch, alleges he was injured during the same riots. In its defence filed to the court, G4S says it acted on behalf of the Australian government, which “asserted control and direction over provision of services” to detainees.

These cases point to the level of prior knowledge that the government, the immigration department and G4S had about the escalating tensions on the island. The February 2014 disturbance was used as a springboard to further worsen the conditions of asylum seekers. Morrison blamed the asylum seekers and exploited the violent crackdown as a deterrent to other refugees seeking asylum in Australia.

Since 2010 there have been 37 deaths in Australia’s detention centres, both the “offshore” facilities on Manus and Nauru and the “onshore” camps on the mainland and Christmas Island, an Indian Ocean outpost.

The entire Australian political establishment is culpable for these crimes, including the Labor Party, the Greens and the Liberal-National Coalition. They pioneered the cruel treatment of refugees that was later imposed across Europe and in the United States.

The author recommends:

Twenty-two deaths reported in immigrant detention centers since Trump took office
[8 January 2018]

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>