

Australia's Manus Island Refugee Detention Camp

Mild Punishment and Exoneration: The Killing of Reza Barati

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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"I wish those people could also have been charged, but sometimes some countries are very powerful and they can protect their own people from being charged."

-Benham Satah, Manus Island detainee, ABC News, Apr 19, 2016

In February 2014, Reza Barati, architecture graduate and Iranian asylum seeker who found himself in the wars of history, died at the hands of Louie Efi and Joshua Kaluvia in the sordid place of pain known as the Manus Island Detention Centre.

The offshore processing facility acts as a meat grinder for Australia's refugee policies, a costly, cruel mechanism that has little to do with international law and everything to do with sovereign selfishness. It keeps company with another stain of ill-treatment - the Nauru Detention Centre.

Efi and Kaluvia, the Papua New Guinean Supreme Court heard, twice hit Barati with a nail-spiked piece of timber and dropped a rock on Barati's head as he helplessly lay on the floor during the riots of February 16-18, 2014. These had been precipitated by the realisation that refugee claims, even if successful, would not assure settlement in Australia.

The medical accounts of Barati's demise are grim, noting "a high level of pressure on the brain and a catastrophic cranial injury. His skull had an open fracture".[1] Both assailants received sentences of 10 years, with a suspension of five. Given the time served, the Court calculated that the men would be free in a touch over three years.

The judge engaged in a compendium of rationales as to why Barati's killers needed to be given shorter prison terms. Justice Nicholas Kirriwom reasoned that shorter terms were justified because others had been involved in the killing. In effect, the guilt lay in a range of agencies and areas, the bloodied hands of other perpetrators. "I bear in mind that in sentencing these two prisoners, I do not make them 'guinea pigs' to bear the brunt of punishment of those who are not here and have not been prosecuted.

Behind the claims made by Kaluvia and Efi about a "set up" exists some kernel of painfully evident truth, one starkly noted in Justice Kirriwom's appraisal. They were the local riff raff caught in the melee of the protest. They were the ones who had been egged on, inspired and motivated to act at the behest of their sponsoring Australian masters. Both claimed from Lorengau prison that, "They want to convict us so that nobody else, no Australians or New Zealanders, who are responsible, have to face justice." [2]

The official Australian government report on the riot also notes the degree of involvement of other individuals, an effective spread of harsh complicity.[3] The report is replete with

savage undertones, a blood lust encouraged by all against asylum seekers who felt that indignant protest was necessary. The actions of the private security firm G4S are also noted, including various efforts to drum up local support.

One of the company's chronology reports takes aim at the inmates (or transferees, as the report designates them). On February 17, for instance, "Lots of missiles were thrown from Mike compound" at G4S personnel. There was a hunt for improvised weapons. There was "looting and breaking [of] everything" by transferees. A guard hut was torn down. There were "chants of freedom" in the Oscar compound. All, described by personnel shocked at the behaviour of humans isolated, caged and penalised. The *victims*, went the tenor of such evidence, were responsible.

Statements made to the police by various inmates point to the involvement of various guards and G4S personnel in the violent exchanges that left 69 people injured. At least two G4S guards are said to have kicked Barati in the head as he lay exposed and bleeding at the top of a staircase. Other witnesses refused to speak to the PNG police, fearing retribution.

A witness given the name T3 (subsequently revealed as Benham Satah) told the Australian review that he "saw the killing of my friend out of the window of my room. I saw how he was killed brutally." Barati's death had been the handiwork of the "MOBO Squad" and G4S. "If you have the face of those officers who work at night, I can recognise all of them, it was including PNG locals, PNG guards and Australian expats."

The refugee processing system is incarceration by another name, a replica of torment and brutality that many asylum seekers flee. A calculus is at play: braving the lethal seas in the hope of arriving in Australia, only to be rendered to foreign Pacific centres with the charming hotel credentials of Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo. The only difference lies in the fashion sense: an absence of colourful jumpsuits.

The offshore gulag that Australian policy makers insist on running has effectively enacted the greatest grotesquery of an imperial project, a modern anti-refugee manifestation of the White Man's Burden. It has strong-armed weaker, poorer states into a policing enterprise. It has done so through buccaneering private security firms. It has corrupted local officials in the higher goal of Australian security while brutalising segments of the local population.

Finally, in so denigrating the human inmates in such centres, it has also created parallel systems of justice: one for inmates, one for local detention guards, and one for non-PNG and non-Nauru personnel. This takes the form of a thuggish, expatriate free-for-all. In the words of Manus MP, Ronnie Knight, "One law for the locals, and no laws for the expats. The locals don't matter, and the expats get off, they do what they like."

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes:

[1] <http://www.border.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/reviews-and-inquiries/review-robert-cornall.pdf>

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/sep/21/men-accused-of-reza-baratis-death-in-manus-detention-centre-stand-trial>

[3] <http://www.border.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/reviews-and-inquiries/review-robert-cornall.pdf>

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