

Australia's Refugee Hub and the Politics of Manus Island: Responsibilities and Contracts

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In what has been a nightmare at Christmas, the plight of refugees relocated to other sites on Manus Island after the closure of the facility at Lombrum Naval Base has worsened. The latest scenes at East Lorengau Transit Centre, where 300 men have been since December 19, have been ugly and pitiable. In the broader scheme of things, they have been far from surprising, expected with the dread that has become all too natural.

Local landowners have been none too pleased at the political machinations of the Papua New Guinea government and officials in Canberra. They were the ones frozen out of negotiations about how best to solve the refugee problem. They were the ones side-stepped in another arrangement that sees Australia ignore those responsibilities outlined in the Refugee Convention.

From November 29, they have been engaged in a campaign of protest against staff management and the refugees, notably JDA Wokman, the contractor charged with resettlement services. They, so goes the argument, want compensation for not getting the necessary contract for running the new detention facilities. The company in question there is Peren Investments. Keep it brutal, but keep it local.

The scenes on that day in November worsened. Access to the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre was blocked. The police were called in. As Manus Province police commander, [David Yapu](#), explained,

“Because the situation was tense and level of threats was high, Police intervened and acted as a middle person to negotiate with PNG Immigration and Citizenship Service Authority, Peren Investments and JDA to come to some mutual understanding and clear the road block and allow the services to flow into the centre.”

There was one group conspicuously absent: the refugees themselves.

As Kurdish-Iranian refugee [Behrouz Boochani](#) has observed with characteristic grimness,

“Some powerful [people] in island are competing & using us as tools for their aims. Nobody here to guarantee our safety. Anything bad happens to us, those who took us here by force are responsible. We resisted because situation outside predictable.”

Boochani's observation has relevance beyond the plight of his fellow refugees on the tropical island itself. It speaks to the vulgarity of the refugee debate in Australia, the refusal by the major parties to consider the human element, preferring electoral gains, political mileage.

Locally, the situation is perpetually volatile. Various members of the local populace are starting to show that their bite is every bit as effective as their irate bark. According to Sri Lankan refugee [Thanus Selvarasa](#),

"These local people attack us, the camp (and) we are hostage people now."

[Boochani's sentiment](#) is similar:

"We are now hostages of landowners. There is no food and medicine here and if they continue it will be a critical situation."

For Selvarasa, there are scenes of war, combat, the language of conflict and struggle.

"We have some rice only but today it's mostly finished," he claimed on December 20.

The contractor has attempted to deliver food by stealth, but was halted on being stopped by protestors.

Meetings duly took place between the various groups - landowners, immigration officials and members of JDA Wokman. Accordingly, some breathing space was given, with the blockade being lifted.

"Money and political interests," lamented a depressed [Boochani](#), "are their priority, not people's life."

Such arrangements are only temporary.

The Australian angle on this has been painfully familiar. Despite the contract regarding the new camps being an Australian one; despite being fuelled on the money of Australian tax payers, responsibility is being ignored.

"This is a matter for the Government of PNG," came the dismissive remark from the Department of Home Affairs.

Not so, came the comment from [Cecile Pouilly](#) at a UNHCR briefing in distant Geneva prior to Christmas Eve.

"In light of the continued perilous situation on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island for refugees and asylum seekers abandoned by Australia, UNCHR has called again this week on the Australian government to live up to its responsibility and urgently find humane and appropriate solutions."

It is exactly the sort of thing Australian politicians do *not* want. Before them stand such figures as Boochani, who inhabit a world where borders are asserted to restrict rather than permit. Boundaries are drawn, fictional doodles that are treated as reality. It was the destiny of Kurdistan to be parcelled after the First World War, and since then, Kurds have inhabited a world without borders, or least of their own. There is, for Boochani, only one recourse in the face of this absurdity: a form of stateless humanism. Even in deracination, roots can be put down.

For the bloodless managers, the populist number crunchers, the procedural, paper-driven fanatics, the refugee is a removable contrivance. The borderless concept suits the apparatchiks in Canberra, those who insist that refugees are creatures of the vanishing, disposable refuse in the game of higher politics.

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