

# Cruelty in Papua New Guinea: Hunger Strike on Manus Island

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Global Research, January 20, 2015

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

*An update on the Australian asylum seeker saga, which will seem awfully like the previous updates on the situation, is in order. Now, the hunger strike on Manus Island is assuming the force of an imperative, though at this writing, it seems to be dissipating. Almost 700 detainees on the Australian offshore detention centre were protesting Canberra's plans to seek permanent resettlement on the island.*

The very idea of settling processed residents in Papua New Guinea has been deemed a nightmare of population planning. Detainees fear the locals in the event of being moved to Lorengau. An indigent state such as PNG, with limited infrastructure and facilities to process refugees, let alone resettle them, actually imperils applicants once their claims are fully processed.

In November 2014, PNG's Immigration Minister refused to give any guarantee for the safety of detainees who were resettled. PNG's politicians know that the policy is unpopular. As Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young explained, "They [the detainees] were attacked in the camp and they'll be attacked on the outside" (Greens, Nov 13, 2014).

The protests began last Tuesday, with reports that detainees have been undertaking action previously seen at other detention centres: swallowing blades, consuming washing powder, sewing lips together. There have been reports of specific detainees being refused water, though the general requisite dosage is generally not abided by.

This disturbing psychological portrait does not conjure up sympathy among the Australian political classes, who merely accuse the detainees of sentimental, heart-tugging indulgence. "The scale of the humanitarian disaster on Manus Island," writes Nick Riemer, "defies our basic capacity to imagine it" (The Guardian, Jan 19).

Riemer finds it disturbing that the same politicians that lined up with funereal respect for the victims of the Sydney hostage taking and Charlie Hebdo attacks would prove selective in dealing with victims of another traumatic situation. "How selective we are in the victims that provoke our outrage." The Australian state, instead, has inflicted "needless, intense and protracted suffering on vulnerable people who have done nothing more than ask us for our help."

The hunger strikers saw a chance in overwhelming the facilities with their well channelled anxieties. Medical staff and various refugee advocacy groups have noted that the centre is inadequate for handling the health demands posed by such an action. Doctors for Refugees member and Sydney-based general practitioner Barri Phatarfod was quoted as claiming

that, “They don’t have the capacity to handle a hunger strike of even one-tenth of that size” (Sydney Morning Herald, Jan 19).

The authorities may well have known that, and for that reasons, resolved to break it. Australia’s Prime Minister Tony Abbott is assuming that what he has termed a “blockade” was “defeated”. “There was a well-organised, well-coordinated protest in some parts of the Manus centre. It amounted to a blockade.” The blockade had been “lifted,” though Abbott was not forthcoming about injuries, the “important thing” was that “order has been restored”. Up to 30 men have been removed from the Oscar and Delta compounds, with some of them sent to isolation.

Ian Rintoul of the Refugee Action Coalition told the BBC that 58 individuals have been arrested, which goes to show in rather perverse fashion that those in seemingly interminable detention can also suffer arrest.

The new Immigration Minister Peter Dutton merely follows the standard position the Liberal National Coalition and the Australian Labor Party have taken since the 1990s, give or take various extremes: asylum seekers are the problem; processing such offensive human material offshore in distant, indigent places, is the solution.

Accord to Dutton,

“Whilst there has been a change of minister, the absolute resolve of me as the new minister and of the government is to make sure that for those transferees, they will never arrive in Australia. They will never be settled in Australia.”

Dutton has also adopted a stock standard technique from this predecessors: blame the activists for “coaching” asylum seekers about their rights. While this should be deemed a necessary function of discharging obligations under the Refugee Convention, Canberra has deemed it a hindrance, limiting contact with the detainees. “My very clear message today is to people that would seek to misinform these transferees, that somehow if their behaviour is changed or that they become non-compliant, that somehow that will result in them settling in Australia: it will not” (The Guardian, Jan 16).

The policy has assumed a gospel like force, becoming an immovable assumption of Australian politics. It is measured in terms of boats stopped rather than people saved from persecution – a single one in 2014 compared to 401 in 2013. This statistic is sugared with humanitarian pretence: in doing so, less drowning took place, though verification of this is always shrouded in operational mystery. The core of the policy is that people cannot arrive in Australia via different channels, evading the fictional premises of a queue which is miraculously found in zones of conflict and persecution.

In the Australian context, the offshore resettlement policy remains more than a travesty. It has been an unnecessarily cruel measure of unimaginative, and ultimately selfish, political classes.

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

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **[Dr. Binoy  
Kampmark](#)**

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)