

Refugee Trauma: Australia's Remorseless Detention Camp on Nauru

Leaked Incident Reports

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“Do I have to kill myself to go to Australia?” — Asylum seeker, Nauru, March 2, 2015

Human sensibility has been given another sound beating with the leak of 2,116 incident reports from Australia's remorseless detention camp on Nauru. The reports total some 8,000 pages covering the period of May 2013 to October 2015 and were published by the *Guardian* on Wednesday.[1]

The newspaper notes that children are heavily, in fact “vastly over-represented in the reports” featuring in a total of 1,086 incidents despite making up only 18 percent of the detained population. Even the bureaucratic “ratings” of harm and risk given by the private security firm Wilson's can't varnish the brutalities.

Interspersed in this horror story are the features that are meant to make such detention conditions modest. Such is the cynicism of refugee and asylum seeker management – part torment, part amelioration. Internet facilities are provided; children undertake classes, though the incident reports note instances of sobbing and depression within them.

Other features of a grotesque system have also been noted in the sordid pile, one that has been growing for some years now. A security guard in one incident report from January 2015 is noted as threatening a fleeing child after being “jokingly tapped”. After resettlement had been obtained, the guard issued a solemn promise to the fearful youth: “I will kill you in Nauru.”[2] Hardly cheerful banter.

There are numerous instances of self-harm, denoted in the leaked files as “actual self-harm”. One asylum seeker slashed his left wrist on March 29 last year, leaving “blood on the floor and drops of blood in the hallway leading to the room.”[3]

Others focus on instances of starvation or threatened starvation, that great weapon of anti-establishment disaffection. Described as a “major” incident, one case is reported as involving an asylum seeker who “had informed the staff that he will not eat or drink anything until he gets to Australia.”[4]

The incident reports also note the disturbed and disrupted world view of those in the facility. Hemmed in and closed, fearing indefinite detention, claustrophobia sets in, with desires to inflict self-harm. Accompanied by a mental health nurse and interpreter, one asylum seeker expresses her desire to perish. Asked whether she had been eating, the response is glum. “Eating? I don't want to eat; I want to die.”

According to the report, she then “threw the top half of her body around and hit her head on the end of the bed metal railing.”[5] She was subsequently restrained by the security staff, held down to prevent attempts to “punch herself in the face.”

Then come fears of what will happen to those yet to be born. Another mother noted to a case worker in October 2015 about her refusal to have her baby in the complex. “If I am made to have my baby on Nauru, I will have a baby in my tent and kill myself and my baby.”[6]

The waters in light of this disclosure should still be warm after the revelations of persistent and brutal treatment of youths in Australia’s own Northern Territory juvenile detention system. What is good for Australia’s internal system of mistreatment of youths is evidently good for children who arrive under designated “illegal” conditions.

Both instances demonstrate the chronic hypocrisy in the approach of the Australian political and security establishment to those it designates as outside the legal frontiers of society. Beyond the contrived letter of the law, lawlessness on the part of security guards and brutal conditions within the facilities are permitted - even against children.

The difference, however, is that the Australian prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, enfeebled by the reactionary elements of his party, is unlikely to consider a Royal Commission or any such panacea regarding Nauru. Nor is the opposition Labor Party going to buck the trend.

Both major sides of politics have previously been inundated with reports of sexual abuse by guards, non-consensual sex within the community, instances of self-harm, and the dangers of the system to children.

In January this year, to take one example, Nauru’s police forces confirmed it was investigating the sexual molestation of an Iranian six-year-old girl, along with that of her father, by an individual in the camp complex.

The Nauru Police Forces, in an attempt to mollify any initial outrage, released a statement claiming that the alleged assaults had been inflicted “against a refugee by another refugee” and that it had taken place in the “community/workplace, not processing centre.”[7]

There is one heartening matter about this squalid affair: no legislative regime attempting to close off the borders of information has worked. The Australian Border Force Act passed last year in an effort to criminalise whistleblowing touching upon material connected with the camp, was a crude attempt at shutting off the flow of information and keeping discussion about Nauru down to a minimum.

For all that, the detention complex continues to leak evidence of abuse and mistreatment like the very sinking vessels the Australian government repels with corrupt determination. May it continue to spring more over time, eventually stunning an otherwise indifferent public to indignant reaction.

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Notes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/aug/10/the-nauru-files-2000-leaked-reports-re>

[veal-scale-of-abuse-of-children-in-australian-offshore-detention](#)

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2016/aug/10/the-nauru-files-the-lives-of-asylum-seekers-in-detention-detailed-in-a-unique-database-interactive#incident=sca150091>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2016/aug/10/the-nauru-files-the-lives-of-asylum-seekers-in-detention-detailed-in-a-unique-database-interactive#incident=sca150253>

[4] <https://interactive.guim.co.uk/2016/08/nu-files/pdf/sca150449.pdf>

[5] <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2016/aug/10/the-nauru-files-the-lives-of-asylum-seekers-in-detention-detailed-in-a-unique-database-interactive#incident=sca150216>

[6] <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2016/aug/10/the-nauru-files-the-lives-of-asylum-seekers-in-detention-detailed-in-a-unique-database-interactive#incident=sca150718>

[7] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-07/refugee-child-allegedly-sexually-abused-on--nauru/7073452>

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