

Project SafeCom News and Updates

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1. Greece readies to send first asylum seekers back to Turkey as part of 'absolutely illegal' EU deal

ABC News Online / AFP

First posted Sun 3 Apr 2016, 6:45am

Updated Sun 3 Apr 2016, 8:52am

Greek authorities are gearing up to send hundreds of failed asylum seekers back to Turkey as part of a controversial EU migrant deal that has been dubbed "absolutely illegal" by a senior United Nations official.

"Planning is in progress," said Yiorgos Kyritsis, a spokesman for Greece's refugee coordination unit.

Greek state news agency ANA has reported some 750 asylum seekers will be sent back between Monday and Wednesday — the first wave of deportations under the widely-criticised deal.

It said the asylum seekers would be sent back from the island of Lesbos to the Turkish port of Dikili, adding that EU border agency Frontex had chartered two Turkish leisure vessels for the operation.

There will be one Frontex agent onboard for every single asylum seeker, ANA said. Mr Kyritsis declined to comment on the report.

On the other side of the Aegean — a sea crossed this year alone by more than 150,000 people searching for a new life in Europe — work is under way on a centre in the Turkish tourist resort of Cesme to host those sent back, the town's mayor Muhittin Dalgic said.

Another readmission centre is being created in Dikili opposite Lesbos, and Turkish media reports said a new refugee camp was also being prepared further inland in Manisa.

Deal slammed as 'absolutely illegal'

Under the deal, all irregular migrants face being sent back from the Greek islands to Turkey — although the deal calls for each case to be examined individually.

For every Syrian asylum seeker sent back, another Syrian asylum seeker will be resettled from Turkey to the EU, with the numbers capped at 72,000.

Turkey and the EU agreed to the deal last month, as the continent struggles with its worst migration crisis since World War II.

Greek government officials have been tight-lipped on the deal, which has attracted strong criticism on ethical grounds from the United Nations refugee agency and aid groups.

Senior UN migration official Peter Sutherland said on Saturday that the deal was "absolutely" illegal.

"Collective deportations without having regard to the individual rights of those who claim to be refugees are illegal," he told BBC radio.

"Secondly, their rights have to be absolutely protected where they are deported to — in other words Turkey."

Amnesty International said this week that Turkey was not a "safe country" for refugees, reporting that Ankara was forcing around 100 Syrians including children to return to their war-torn country on a daily basis.

But Turkey vehemently denied that it was forcibly returning refugees to Syria.

"The allegations do not reflect reality in any way," the Turkish foreign ministry said in a statement.

"It is sad that this kind of news was shared with the public [by the media] in such an intense way."

It insisted there was "no change" in the open-door policy that for the past few years has allowed any Syrian fleeing the civil war there to seek refuge in the country.

"Turkey is committed to continue to provide protection to Syrians fleeing violence and instability under its international obligations," it said.

'From hell to hell'

"If they make me go back to Turkey, I'll throw myself and my family into the sea," said Mustafa, a Syrian waiting with his wife and children at the port of Chios island.

"We went from hell to hell," he said.

Work is underway on a centre in the Turkish tourist resort of Cesme to host those sent back, the town's mayor Muhittin Dalgic said.

Debt-hit Greece has struggled to manage the influx of asylum seekers, while hundreds have drowned trying to reach its islands from Turkey.

Clashes among asylum seekers have broken out at Greek facilities, dissuading those with families from staying there.

On Friday, hundreds of asylum seekers walked out of a registration centre on Chios following fresh violence, prompting a leading medical charity to pull out its staff.

A Greek government source said some 400 Frontex police officers were expected to arrive over the weekend to participate in the operation.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-03/greece-readies-to-send-first-migrants-back-in-eu-turkey-deal/7295026>

2. Government senators question diplomatic push in wake of Iran 'eye-for-an-eye' human rights abuse

The Age
March 30, 2016 - 12:31PM
Latika Bourke

Australia's Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has described reports of an Iranian man being sentenced to eye-gouging under Islamic sharia law as "deeply concerning" amid warnings from pro-Israel government senators the case exposed shortcomings in Australia's quest to normalise ties with Iran.

Oslo-based NGO Iran Human Rights is highlighting the case of "Saman", whom Iran's Supreme Court has ruled must be gouged, as punishment for allegedly blinding another man in a street fight. Saman has argued he accidentally blinded the other man with a metal rod during their fight.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop told Fairfax Media that Australia has consistently urged Iran to improve its human rights record.

"These reports, if accurate, are another example of Iran's deeply concerning approach to human rights," the minister said.

"Australia raises issues of concern with Iran, including human rights, on a regular basis. We have consistently urged progress on this front, both bilaterally and in relevant United Nations bodies."

On Wednesday, government senators Cory Bernardi and James Paterson expressed their concerns about Saman's case. Senator Bernardi questioned whether Australia should be cosying up to Iran.

"How can we justify opening diplomatic relations with a country that wants Israel destroyed, imprisons Christians and hangs people for being homosexual?" Senator Bernardi said.

"The world needs to wake up to the reality of what is happening in the Middle East."

"We should never turn a blind eye to such injustices," he added.

Senator Paterson said it showed Iran had a long way to go before it would be "recognised and respected" in the international community.

"As Australia and other Western nations seek to normalise our relations with Iran, we cannot ignore its appalling record of human rights abuses and medieval justice," Senator Paterson said.

Senators Paterson and Bernardi are staunch supporters of Israel. In his recent maiden speech, Senator Paterson called for Australia's embassy to be relocated to Jerusalem even though most countries base their embassies in Tel Aviv as an acknowledgment of the Palestinian claim to East Jerusalem. Senator Bernardi is also a strong critic of Islam.

Ms Bishop said Iran's human rights record is subject to scrutiny by the Human Rights Council and the Special Rapporteur on the Situation on Human Rights in Iran. She reiterated that she raised human rights with her Iranian counterpart Dr Mohammed Javad Zarif during his historic visit to Australia a fortnight ago.

But in one of his final comments before departing Australia, Dr Zarif criticised as "unconscionable" Australia's human rights record because of the way it detains asylum seekers who travelled by boat, hundreds of whom are Iranians. He said Iran held

concerns about the human rights records of governments that frequently criticise his own. This angered former cabinet ministers Eric Abetz and Phillip Ruddock who told News Corp Iran was in no position to lecture Australia.

The Coalition's primary interest in improving ties with Iran is about returning home failed asylum seekers who have travelled to Australia by boat. The government was optimistic in the lead-up to Dr Zarif's visit but was swiftly rebuffed. A twin focus is trade and Australia will reopen an Austrade office in Iran from the second half of 2016.

But there are wider concerns across the Parliament about Australia's expanding relationship with Iran. Earlier this month, the Senate quietly forced an inquiry into Australia's partial suspension of sanctions against Iran, even though it was in line with the rest of the world following the completion of an historic nuclear deal that restricted Iran's nuclear activity in return for the easing of international restrictions.

The Senate inquiry, which was established on March 17, came on the same day Dr Zarif became the first Iranian foreign minister since 2002 to visit Australia. The Senate's foreign affairs committee will examine the "nature and scope" of public consultation prior to the softening of sanctions and the decision to reopen an Austrade office in Tehran.

The Labor Party was approached for comment about Saman's case but did not respond before deadline. The opposition's foreign affairs spokeswoman Tanya Plibersek has previously accused Ms Bishop of turning a blind eye to Iran's human rights records.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/government-senators-question-diplomatic-push-in-wake-of-iran-eyeforaneye-human-rights-abuse-20160329-gntmbx.html>

3. Mike Secombe: The taxpayer's billions spent on government advertising

The government's \$70m budget for border protection propaganda is the latest in a long line of taxpayer-funded "messaging" exercises.

The Saturday Paper
Mike Secombe
Apr 2, 2016

It was May 25 last year that Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young asked Mike Pezzullo for numbers on the cost of his department's propaganda campaign directed at stopping the people smuggling trade. The secretary of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection flicked the question to his offsider, Major-General Andrew Bottrell, newly installed head of Operation Sovereign Borders. Bottrell requested a couple of minutes to add up some large numbers.

At length, he came back with a number that would have gladdened the hearts of market researchers, copywriters, ad agencies, production houses, media buyers and news organisations on several continents.

"I have a figure of \$70.7 million over 2013 through to 2018-19 – so, over a six-year period," he said.

Next question: "What exactly is this money going to be spent on?"

A "very comprehensive strategic communications campaign", said Bottrell, to be delivered in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Albania, Indonesia, Vietnam, India, Malaysia, Thailand and Australia.

The means by which it would be delivered, he said, would include "television, radio, press, print, online, social media, billboards, transit advertising, leaflets, stickers, community workshops and even street theatre".

Sadly, how street theatre would be used to stop people smuggling was not further explored. Hanson-Young was more interested in another initiative: a telemovie for which, Bottrell said, \$4.1 million had been allocated.

"I reckon Screen Australia would like that kind of money," Hanson-Young said, before going on to confirm that an obscure production company called Put It Out There Pictures was in the process of casting, but had not yet begun shooting.

Full story at <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2016/04/02/the-taxpayers-billions-spent-government-advertising/14595156003073>

4. Voters in marginal seats want more compassionate asylum policy, poll shows

Exclusive: A ReachTel poll of Victorian seat of Indi, New England in NSW and voters in South Australia finds just 26% support policy of sending all boat arrivals to offshore detention

The Guardian
Shalailah Medhora
Thursday 31 March 2016 13.07 AEDT

The majority of voters in key marginal electorates want the federal government to take a more compassionate approach to asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat, new polling has found.

ReachTel surveyed voters in South Australia, where a Senate battle is expected at the next election, and voters in the rural Victorian seat of Indi and the regional New South Wales seat of New England.

The polling, commissioned by the Australia Institute, asked respondents how they would like to see asylum seekers who arrive in Australia managed.

In all jurisdictions, the majority of respondents said they would like people who are assessed as refugees to be resettled in Australia.

In South Australia, 58% said they wanted refugees resettled in Australia, compared with just over a quarter – or 26% – saying all boat arrivals should be sent to offshore detention centres, which is the existing policy for both Labor and the Coalition. Just over one in 10 respondents – or 11.5% – want all asylum seekers to remain in Australia.

In New England, 59% of respondents want refugees resettled in Australia, compared to 31% who support offshore processing and resettlement. Only 5% want all asylum seekers to be allowed to stay in Australia.

The voters of Indi are the least likely of the surveyed respondents to support offshore processing and resettlement, with just one in five – or 21% – backing the policy. By contrast, 63% of voters want refugees to be allowed to resettle in Australia, and 10% want all asylum seekers to be allowed to stay.

The independent MP for Indi, Cathy McGowan, said the results did not surprise her.

“There’s a very strong sense that children shouldn’t be in detention,” she told Guardian Australia. “Compassion is very strong in this electorate.”

McGowan said she was often asked by members of the electorate how she voted on asylum seeker issues, which she says are separate from concerns over border security.

“Rural Australia has always had a warm heart for people,” she said.

McGowan holds the seat on a wafer thin majority of just 0.3%, and will face a battle from Liberal party stalwart Sophie Mirabella – who McGowan unseated in the 2013 poll – in the upcoming federal election.

But McGowan insists that on the matter of asylum seekers, the Coalition will not “win the hearts and minds” of voters in Indi.

“Despite a political perception that current refugee policies are popular, this poll shows that most Australians reject the idea that the government should lock up and never resettle asylum seekers who arrive by boat,” the executive director of the Australia Institute, Ben Oquist, said.

“The poll indicates the public does not support the current policy setting of sending all boat arrivals to offshore centres and demonstrates a depth of compassion in the Australian community for people who are fleeing persecution and hardship.”

Deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce, who faces a challenge by former long-time MP Tony Windsor in his seat of New England, has spoken publicly of the need to resettle more refugees from Syria.

“We are doing our part in Tamworth and I’ve been part of those meetings to help the resettlement of refugees from Syrian crisis,” he told reporters. “To be quite frank, it is something I’m very passionate about.”

The Greens oppose the offshore processing and resettlement of asylum seekers, but face a challenge to retain Senate seats in South Australia, as support for Nick Xenophon’s party gathers steam.

The polling was conducted by ReachTel on 10 March, and gathered responses from 1,077 South Australians, 656 residents of Indi and 662 residents of New England.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/31/voters-in-marginal-seats-want-more-compassionate-asylum-policy-poll-shows>

5. Tom Ballard: I've cried researching my show on refugees. And that's just from reading my own jokes

The Guardian
Tom Ballard
Wednesday 6 April 2016 15.34 AEST

When it comes to Australia's treatment of refugees who arrive by boat, there's at least one thing everyone agrees on: the seriousness of the dilemma. Laborites, Liberals, Greens, advocates and rightwing columnists alike always preface their comments on the debate with a sombre acknowledgement of just how "complex", "difficult", "uneasy", "uncomfortable" and "heartbreaking" it all is.

I'm tempted to use another term: a term that begins with the sixth letter of the alphabet and rhymes with "ducked".

The situation is ducked. It's ducked up and it's been ducked up for a long time.

We've never been overly fond of outsiders around these parts. We became a federation so we could defend ourselves against the "Chinese Pest" and boot out the Pacific Islander labourers we'd brought here to exploit.

After the second world war we viewed the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons in Europe as economic assets who could boost our population. They were welcomed here despite the fact they were refugees, not because of it.

Indeed, Australian representatives who travelled to DP (displaced persons) camps rejected some refugees for resettlement because they had the gall to be single mothers or amputees. Others were knocked back because they were obese, others for their drunkenness.

Personally, I think such drunken fatty boom-bas would have made great Australians.

The White Australia policy was ended and Malcolm Fraser did the decent thing after the Vietnam war, but the good times didn't last. Hawkie had no time for the "queue-jumpers" and Paul Keating condemned all boat arrivals to indefinite mandatory detention (an "interim measure" that's lasted for 24 years).

We declared all out war on the people smugglers and refused to show any sympathy for their desperate customers, caught in the crossfire. The story of "Ms Z" is chilling.

She arrived by boat in 1994, seeking asylum from the People's Republic of China and its draconian one-child policy. Ms Z fell pregnant while in immigration detention. In 1997 all her legal appeals were exhausted and we deported her back to China. She was eight-and-a-half months pregnant. A week after her return, Ms Z was subjected to a coerced abortion.

Almost 20 years later, the horror stories keep coming: Abyan. Human teeth being found in the food on Manus Island. Claims of guards on Nauru sexually abusing refugee children. Kids in detention as young as seven attempting suicide. Footage of Wilson Security employees joking about shooting people seeking asylum.

Earlier this year we found out that suicide attempts are such a regular occurrence on Nauru that guards have been issued with special knives so they can "cut down a transferee who is hanging".

As per above – ducked.

None of this really smells like hilarity. And yet, at this year's Melbourne Comedy Festival, I've been performing Boundless Plains To Share: a comedy lecture about the history, cost and future of Australia and "border protection".

Yes, I was very nervous about it, too.

Researching this show has been depressing. I have been wracked with guilt and shame and despaired for humanity, and that's just from reading over my own jokes.

I have stood in Peter Reith's living room, flabbergasted at his defence of the Border Force Act. I have looked into the eyes of people who have been broken by our detention system. I have cried. A lot.

And yet I have hope.

I haven't found a big fat "solution" for all this. What I have found is that while the question of how to deal with people who come to us seeking our help often brings out the very worst in human nature, it can also bring out the very best.

German company Mutanox lost half a million euros last year when it refused to sell razor wire for a fence to keep out refugees.

When train drivers went on strike in September, Melbourne commuters channelled their frustration into raising over \$40,000 for the Syrian refugee crisis.

After seeing images of refugee children drowning in the Mediterranean, a British engineer spent months working for free to come up with a revolutionary piece of sea-rescue equipment called the Centifloat. "I can't do anything about the bigger problems in the world," he said, "but I can do this".

Through the Bicycles for Asylum Seekers Project, a Melbourne man has helped repair and distribute 437 bikes to people on bridging visas. A surf-lifesaver from St Kilda volunteered to go to Greece to help save refugees from drowning. The prime minister of Finland offered to open up his own home to people seeking asylum. In Austria, Syrian refugees were greeted with food and toys and smiles. Tens of thousands people are demanding our government Let Them Stay.

My mum and dad welcomed a Sri Lankan refugee family into our home in Warrnambool.

And there are the stories of the people at the heart of all of this. Sam repaid the \$18,000 he received from Centrelink when he first came to Australia. Najeeba has a degree in medical science. Mohammad was school captain in Shepparton and a few weeks ago he went to Geneva to address the UN Human Rights Council.

Yes, the status quo is ducked. But I believe a fundamental sense of decency lives in the hearts of my fellow citizens and that sense of decency compels us to recognise things cannot go on like this. We can't change what has gone before but we can – and we must – change things now.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/06/ive-cried-researching-my-show-on-refugees-and-thats-just-from-reading-my-own-jokes>

6. Refugee Council accuses Australia of 'cherry picking' Syrian refugees for resettlement

ABC-TV - 7.30

By Middle East correspondent Sophie McNeill

First posted Thu 31 Mar 2016, 4:28pm

Updated Thu 31 Mar 2016, 6:52pm

The Refugee Council has accused Australian immigration officials of "cherry picking" Middle Eastern refugees to be resettled in Australia.

"I don't think anyone expected that the program would be weighted as strongly towards Iraqi Christians as it now appears," Paul Power, the council's CEO, told 7.30.

"No-one can argue that those who are getting resettlement to Australia need resettlement.

"But there are millions of refugees in the middle east in need of resettlement and for Australia to cherry pick people from perhaps 1 to 3 per cent of the refugee population in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon really doesn't reflect at all well on Australia."

Mr Power said it was wrong to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis with a program that prioritises persecuted minorities, when the vast majority of Syria's nearly 5 million refugees are Muslim — many who have suffered their own persecution at the hands of the Assad regime and Shia militias because they are Sunnis.

"It's pretty clear that religious minorities are not the only people who have fled," Mr Power said.

"In fact, the religious minorities are represented in only a small way amongst the refugee populations in Jordan and Lebanon."

Over 1,400 refugees referred to Australia now remain in limbo

Australia has two ways of accepting people under the new intake.

One through UN referrals, the other through a "special humanitarian" stream, which identifies people for resettlement.

Last September, in the wake of outrage over the drowning of the Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi, former prime minister Tony Abbott announced Australia would take in 12,000 extra refugees fleeing conflict in Iraq and Syria.

The Government will not reveal how many of the extra 12,000 refugees will come from that program and how many from the UNHCR.

Head of the UN refugee agency in Jordan, Australian Andrew Harper, showed Immigration Minister Peter Dutton around the camps last September.

Mr Harper has now openly criticised Australia's approach.

"The concern that we have is that these may not be necessarily the most vulnerable people," he said.

"When the government announced it was going to take 12,000 Syrian refugees and was going to be working through UNHCR, we would expect that those 12,000 refugees would come from UNHCR.

"What we have probably seen is ... possibly a change in the criteria, where many more people are going through parallel programs to UNHCR.

"We are aware that some countries would prefer to take Christians or other minorities but that does not necessarily mean that they are the most vulnerable.

"We don't choose submissions based on religion or ethnicity — we choose it on whether people can survive or not."

There is concern at why so many UN referred cases have not been accepted yet.

7.30 has learnt that over 1,400 vulnerable Syrian refugees were referred to Australia by the UN but are currently stuck in limbo.

Until Australia officially rejects these cases the UN cannot try and send them anywhere else.

So in the meantime they may have missed out of being referred to another country like Canada, which has taken 25,000 refugees since last November, or the US, which is looking for 11,000 case referrals in the next three months.

"We have referred quite a few Syrians to Australia," Mr Harper said.

"We are now trying to determine how we can help move that forward, because we obviously need to ensure those people who are in need of international protection and who are considered the most vulnerable are moved out.

"Canada moved very quickly. The US is moving very quickly. We now have to see how we can help Australia move quickly."

Mr Dutton said Australia would not rush the processing of any referrals.

"I don't have any complaint about the referrals they're making," he said.

"But ultimately the Government decides who it is we accept in this country and we're not going to step back from that."

The lucky ones: 'We were so happy at the news'

In November Manhal Al Fadous was told Australia was considering taking him and his family as part of its Syrian refugee program.

Four years earlier they fled fierce fighting and daily raids on their home town of Homs in Syria.

Their home was destroyed and they lost everything.

"When they rang me I was asleep," he said.

"I was so happy I quickly woke up, woke up the whole family, we celebrated, we were so happy at this news."

But since then only 29 refugees have actually arrived in Australia as part of that program.

When 7.30 first spoke to him, Manhal and his family were still in a small town in Jordan near the Syrian border — they had heard nothing since the telephone interview.

Mr Dutton is unapologetic about the pace of processing. "My first responsibility is to the Australian people, to make sure that we keep our community safe," Mr Dutton said. "I want to make sure we have a look at each of the applications in fine detail and we're working through that very carefully. "And I think what people have seen in Brussels, what they've seen in Paris and elsewhere is only a taste of what is to come."

A day after 7.30 visited Manhal Al Fadous and his family, he finally got the call he had been waiting for. They had been accepted under the Australia program. "Of course we are happy," Manhal said. "Our life will change soon; we won't be worried and stressed as we are now. "The other important thing is, where is the location with the least amount of snakes and crocodiles?"

They are the lucky ones — thousands of others remain in limbo.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-31/australia-'cherry-picking'-syrian-refugees-says-refugee-council/7289918>

7. 'Deliberate ploy': Refugees waiting years for citizenship under Turnbull government

The Age
April 7, 2016
Nicole Hasham

It has been 18 months since Sayed* passed the Australian citizenship test, successfully answering questions such as why we celebrate Anzac Day and the colours of the Aboriginal flag.

But the Afghanistan-born man is not yet an Australian citizen. He has not been invited to make his citizenship pledge, and his application to bring his wife and three children to Australia is languishing, unprocessed, somewhere inside the Department of Immigration.

Sayed is one of hundreds of refugees in Australia who say their citizenship applications have been ignored by the federal government, in what one migration agent described as a "deliberate ploy" to punish people who arrived without a valid visa. The department denies this, saying there has been a flood of applications to process.

The Refugee Council of Australia says the delays deny refugees a sense of belonging, and effectively stop them from sponsoring family members to Australia.

"Two times I complained to Immigration, they said 'process, process'. Still I'm waiting," Sayed said.

"Recently my smallest son has had some mental [health] problems. He all the time cries and says 'come back home, I miss you'."

Sayed says he fled persecution and torture by the Taliban in Afghanistan. He sold his land, said goodbye to his young family and travelled to Australia in 2010.

After six months in a detention centre he was granted a permanent protection visa.

He says he successfully passed a citizenship test in October 2014 and is now "waiting for the ceremony" to officially become a citizen.

Refugee Council chief executive Paul Power said without citizenship, refugees found it difficult to travel to visit family overseas, and were all but prevented from bringing their family to Australia after years of separation.

"They are technically able to apply [for family reunion visas] ... but they have no hope at all of family reunion while they are permanent residents and not citizens," he said.

The department's website states that from early 2014, "lowest priority" has been given to applications by people on protection visas to bring family to Australia. The government claims that more than 80 per cent of citizenship applications are decided within 80 days.

However a Refugee Council report last October found that survey respondents from refugee backgrounds had been waiting an average 215 days – and it is understood most are still waiting. Twenty respondents had been waiting more than a year and one had waited 682 days, and counting.

Migration agent Marion Le said long citizenship delays had become "very common" under the current government, and applicants from Afghanistan were most affected. "This is a deliberate ploy by this government to further punish boat arrivals .. it's horrible, absolutely horrible," she said.

A department spokesman said each citizenship application is assessed "individually on its own merits" and some take longer to process than others. "There is no separate government policy regarding citizenship applications by humanitarian visa holders who arrive by boat," he said.

The spokesman said the number of people applying for Australian citizenship increased from about 87,000 to 192,000 in the four years to mid-2015, including those by humanitarian entrants.

He said all citizenship applicants, including those who received an approval letter, "are subject to ongoing assessment should further information become available. In these circumstances an applicant will not be allocated to a citizenship ceremony or, if they have, they may be advised that they cannot attend the ceremony".

* not his real name

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/deliberate-ploy-refugees-waiting-years-for-citizenship-under-turnbull-government-20160405-gnz1xp.html>

8. Brisbane maths teacher blows the whistle on detention centre 'misinformation'

Canberra Times
April 9 2016 - 9:08PM
Lisa Yallamas

Brisbane maths teacher Jacob Rice taught at the Manus Island immigration detention centre in 2014 when a 23-year-old Iranian man name Reza Berati was bashed to death by security guards during a riot by hunger strikers.

One of the friends the teacher-turned-whistleblower made while working on Manus for nine months was a Rohingya maths teacher.

His friend is still in indefinite detention as his application for asylum had just been rejected on the grounds that he was educated. The man has told his family that they should consider him dead.

Mr Rice said the Immigration Department had rejected his friend's asylum claim because they concluded he could not be a genuine Rohingya person because members of this religious minority in Burma were not allowed to be educated. He holds a masters degree in mathematics.

One of his daughters was studying medicine while the other had won a maths competition.

"We are defying this law," Mr Rice explained because these people have no voices to speak for themselves.

Sometimes people's or government perspectives on events did not reflect the actual facts, Mr Rice told a gathering of more than 100 people at the "Whistleblowers Speak Out" event held by the Refugee Action Collective on Saturday.

For example, Mr Dutton had assured Australians that the water had not been deliberately cut off to the 900 men in detention on Manus Island in the lead up to the deadly 2014 riot.

From their perspective the detainees on the remote Papua New Guinean island saw only that a forklift was removing their only source of water, a stockpile of bottled water, Mr Rice said.

However, he said, the many former security guards who had worked on Manus were back in Australia telling a different perspective.

Mr Rice was one of four former detention centre workers speaking out against the Australian Border Force Act 2015 that makes it a criminal offence to advocate for the human rights of people seeking asylum.

Sydney paediatrician Professor David Issacs, who established a refugee children's health clinic 11 years ago at Westmead Children's Hospital, was another speaker.

He visited families on Nauru in December 2014 before publishing an article in the Journal of Medical Ethics saying that the psychological damage caused by long-term, immigration detention was greater than the physical torture Guantanamo Bay prisoners of war experienced.

By speaking out he not only breaks the law but breached a contract he signed when he agreed to provide pediatric services on Nauru for International SOS, a company that had earned more than \$1 billion of taxpayers money on Nauru, he said.

"It's appalling legislation, which is there to silence freedom of speech," he said.

On a visit to Nauru in December 2014 to see children and families in detention, Professor Issacs treated a six-year-old girl who "nearly killed herself".

"She had strangulation marks on her neck where she tried to strangle herself with fence ties," he said. "The children weren't involved in any decision to seek asylum. The effect is devastating."

He saw 30 children over five days, all of whom were "deeply traumatised" and whose families were in "meltdown".

"They were the most traumatic five days in my working career," Professor Issacs said.

"I could not believe what I saw there, I had a sense of horror at what was being done in our name."

<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/queensland/brisbane-maths-teacher-blows-the-whistle-on-detention-centre-misinformation-20160409-go2jzg.html>

9. Martin McKenzie-Murray: Wilson Security's appalling record on Nauru

As stories emerge of contractors beating children on Nauru, Wilson Security's entire operation looks increasingly broken.

The Saturday Paper
9 April 2016
Martin McKenzie-Murray

The fuse was lit three weeks ago, when seven teenagers living in the family compound of Nauru's detention centre began to protest. They had written a letter to the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection, and daily would sit on the compound's roof awaiting a reply. Relations between asylum seekers, their guards and Nauruan locals have long been embittered, and they continue to deteriorate. In the week before this week's riot, graffiti appeared on a compound wall that placed the initials of the Australian Border Force beside a Nazi swastika. It is a febrile atmosphere.

This Wednesday, a representative of the department presented a letter to the protesting boys and their families. The letter attempted to answer their anxieties about their limbo and conditions on the island. "It is important to note," the letter read, "that people who arrived illegally by boat on Nauru can elect to return to their country of origin or, if found to be a refugee, apply for resettlement in Cambodia."

On another matter of concern to the families, the letter said: "The education you are receiving in Nauru is similar to Australia and follows the Queensland state curriculum."

The boys were distraught. The department official – and the letter itself – made clear that they would never be relocated to Australia, nor did the department give the impression that their concerns about living and education standards were legitimate. The boys began pounding the walls of the meeting room with their fists. Then they began to throw chairs. "They did not throw at anyone," the teenage sister of one of the boys, and who was present at the meeting, told me by phone the following morning. She sounded drowsy, the result of only being released from the compound's medical centre at 3am. "They were just taking out their anger. This has been three years of our lives. Guards came in and started hitting them. We hugged the boys to stop the punching of them. After the meeting there was one guard who started hitting a kid and two guards had to hold him. They couldn't control him, he was that bad that other guards had to go to him. They later beat one of my friends so hard."

Full story at <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2016/04/09/wilson-securitys-appalling-record-nauru/14601240003105>

10. Nauru: Two asylum seekers injured in disturbance at detention centre

ABC News Online
By political reporter Stephanie Anderson
First posted Thu 7 Apr 2016, 6:28am
Updated Thu 7 Apr 2016, 9:34am

Two asylum seekers on Nauru have received medical treatment following a disturbance at the immigration detention centre on the island.

It is understood fighting broke out after a group of boys received a letter rejecting their request to be transferred to Australia.

A group of children had written to authorities wanting to know why some asylum seekers who had arrived on the same boat — and after July 19, 2013 — had been allowed into Australia, yet they had not.

The responding letter from the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection cited Government policy regarding boat arrivals, stating they "will not be permitted to resettle in Australia".

It went on to describe the "safe environment" provided on Nauru, as well as the school maintenance project.

The Department has not released information about the condition of the two transferees who were treated, though the ABC understands both are adults.

In July 2013 the then Labor government announced it would never resettle any person who came to Australia by using people smugglers, even if found to be genuine refugees.

Protest was 'de-escalated': Department of Immigration

A spokesperson for the Department said security "de-escalated" the protest action.

It said Nauru police are in attendance and the centre is now calm.

The Department has not released information about the condition of the two transferees.

The violence is the latest in rising tensions at the centre. Asylum seeker advocates have circulated photos of graffiti, they claim is from inside the centre, insulting Australian Border Force workers.

Further comment has been sought from Immigration Minister Peter Dutton.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop would not be drawn on the reports today, saying that it was a matter for Mr Dutton.

'Minister would prefer that people were left in the dark'

Greens immigration spokesperson Senator Sarah Hanson-Young said the Government has to address the public in the wake of the alleged violence.

Senator Hanson-Young said reports that tensions had boiled over in the camp were "very concerning".

"The Government needs to start being up front about what is going on," she said.

"The Minister would prefer that people were left in the dark."

Senator Hanson-Young used the reports to ramp up calls for Wilson Security to be stripped of its contract for the Nauru centre, following its links to a corruption scandal which were unveiled earlier this week.

She could not outline any action that may be taken by the Greens when both houses return to Canberra later this month, but said she and her colleagues would do "everything we can".

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-07/two-injured-in-disturbance-at-nauru-detention-centre/7306224>

11. 'They are hitting us': frightening video emerges of overnight riot involving children on Nauru

The Age
April 7, 2016 - 10:33AM
Nicole Hasham

Two detainees received medical treatment following an alleged riot involving children at the Nauru detention centre overnight, in a dramatic escalation of tensions on the remote Pacific island.

Video footage obtained by Fairfax Media shows frightening scenes including young people crying and saying "they are hitting us", before screams and loud banging can be heard.

The disturbance is believed to have occurred in the family compound.

A former worker at Nauru who is in close contact with asylum seekers and refugees said she was told that members of the Wilson Security emergency response team hit teenagers who had been protesting.

She said the detainees locked the response team members out of part of the camp, and retaliated by throwing rocks and chairs.

It is understood screaming in the video occurs when security guards attempt to enter the compound.

A spokesman for the Department of Immigration and Border Protection said it was aware of "an incident in Nauru involving a disturbance at the Regional Processing Centre".

"The garrison services provider and centre personnel de-escalated the protest action.

"Two transferees are receiving medical treatment following the disturbance. Nauru police are in attendance," it said, adding "the centre is now calm".

The department did not confirm other details including whether children were hit by guards.

Refugee Action Coalition spokesman Ian Rintoul said there had been ongoing daily protests at the family compound.

He said child detainees had recently written to the Australian Border Force asking why other asylum seekers who arrived on the same boat were given preferential treatment by immigration authorities.

Mr Rintoul said the response from Border Force was "dismissive rubbish" that advised detainees to accept resettlement in Cambodia, or return to their country of origin.

"People got angry with this response and things just deteriorated from there. There were chairs tipped over and then the guards started lashing out," he said.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/they-are-hitting-us-frightening-video-emerges-of-overnight-riot-involving-children-on-nauru-20160406-go0ac6.html>

12. Nauru detainees claim they were assaulted by guards during 'disturbance'

Immigration department confirms two people receiving medical treatment after claims disturbance sparked by an altercation between guards and young boys who had been holding protests

The Guardian
Helen Davidson
Thursday 7 April 2016 10.41 AEST

A disturbance at the Nauru immigration regional processing centre on Wednesday night has led to accusations from detainees they were assaulted by guards.

The Australian immigration department confirmed a "disturbance" and said two people were receiving medical treatment following the incident.

Several sources on the island said the disturbance was sparked by an altercation between guards and a group of young boys who had been holding protests for several days, which then escalated to a violent disturbance argument and spread to the main area of the compound.

Guards are accused of punching detainees including children, and detainees have said they threw rocks and plastic chairs.

Following several days of protest the boys had been instructed to write to Australian Border Force with their concerns. The letter, seen by Guardian Australia, referenced the federal government's recent decision to grant community detention to all asylum-seeker families who had been transferred to Australia from Nauru and Manus for medical treatment.

Detainees told Guardian Australia the group had met with officers on Wednesday night. One person who claimed to be at the meeting said the group had been told their situation – that they would not go to Australia but could stay in Nauru or apply to go to Cambodia or go home – would not change.

"We said it's not fair," the witness said. "She had no answer for that ... she said [the asylum seekers currently in Australia] will be back."

The witness said when the officer left some boys punched the wall, and other guards came inside and "held and then hit" the boys. The parents were in another nearby tent and tried to get in when they heard the disturbance, they added.

"I didn't punch anyone, I just saw the guards were hitting the boys. I just went to them and tried to hug them to stop them hitting the walls," the witness said.

"A father was outside the tent and I tried to pull him in and one of the security pull me from my back and threw me into the wall with my face. Then they started hitting me. One mum fainted, she had a panic attack."

Guardian Australia has seen photos which the sender claimed show facial injuries after the alleged assaults.

Several reports, all unconfirmed by officials, say the disturbance spread further into the camp as the group ran down the hill away from the guards. Guards are again accused of assaulting detainees in the main area of the camp, and detainees admit throwing objects including rocks and plastic chairs at the guards to drive them out of the gate. The detainees said they closed the gates behind them, and demanded to speak to "a boss".

A video purported to be from inside the centre shows a group of people in distress.

"The officers start to kick them," says one man in the video.

"They assaulted us," says a woman. "They hit all the children."

A large group then erupt into screams and shouting can be heard. Individuals are shown throwing plastic chairs.

The incident follows more than two weeks of protests at the centre by groups of asylum seekers demonstrating against the length of time they have been in detention – more than 1,000 days for some – and conditions on Nauru.

A spokesman for the immigration department said they were aware of the incident.

"The garrison services provider and centre personnel de-escalated the protest action," he said. "Two transferees are receiving medical treatment following the disturbance. Nauru police are in attendance. The centre is now calm."

Guardian Australia understands at least some of the allegations raised by detainees are in dispute, but the immigration department did not address any specifically put to them.

Broadspectrum, which is contracted to operate the centre, referred all questions to the immigration department.

The boil over on Nauru comes as tensions also simmer at the other Australian-run immigration centre at Manus in Papua New Guinea.

There are moves by PNG and centre authorities to separate people based on refugee status. Some detainees have spoken of resisting the efforts to move people either into the community or deport them.

Extra police are believed to have been brought in to Manus, according to sources at the centre who add they have seen groups of officers patrolling the perimeter, holding drills.

Asylum seekers denied refugee status under Papua New Guinea's controversial determination system are to be housed in a separate compound before leaving PNG, voluntarily or by force.

Those with positive refugee determinations have been moved to other compounds ahead of moving to the transit centre in East Lorengau – an interim placement before moving into the PNG community.

Detainees are being given individually addressed slips of paper ordering them to meet at gate houses for "compound movement."

Guardian Australia was told six people have already moved to the transit centre, and at least two were detained after they attempted to resist.

Kurdish journalist Behrouz Bouchani, currently in detention at Manus, said four men had returned to Manus from Port Moresby, after one sold his computer for air tickets, but were refused re-entry to the centre at East Lorengau and spent several days homeless.

Bouchani said refugees and asylum seekers felt they were being left in dangerous situations without help, in order to convince them to return to their home country.

"If you stay in the centre you must endure much traumatising pressure and live in a hell prison," he said.

"If you leave the centre you must live in East Lorengau with no safety and a deep feeling of insecurity and loneliness. If you leave the island you must live as a homeless person and endure hunger and live like a poor man."

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/07/nauru-detainees-claim-they-were-assaulted-by-guards-during-disturbance>

13. MEDIA RELEASE: Teenagers injured by guards in Nauru protest

Thursday April 7, 2016
Refugee Action Coalition
Ian Rintoul
mobile 0417 275 713

Around 7.30pm Wednesday night, eight teenagers and their families were summoned to receive a letter from Australian Border Force in reply to their protest letter sent two days ago. (Letter attached)

As the dismissive quality of the ABF letter became obvious - including absurd statements about the quality of medical conditions and education on Nauru, or going to Cambodia - an angry protest developed.

(The Nauru school is dilapidated and conditions are rudimentary at best -- see photo attached - others available on request)

Australian Wilson guards lashed out at the teenagers, inflicting minor injuries (photos attached). Others in the family compound, including women, compound were pushed over by the guards.

"Guards hit us and kicked us," one of the teenagers told the Refugee Action Coalition.

One woman who was pushed over in the fracas has suffered a heart attack and was taken to the IHMS clinic. Another woman who swallowed washing powder in the aftermath of the protest is also in the IHMS clinic.

The guards eventually retreated from the compound.

The protests continued late into the night, with cries of, "We are not animals", "You don't answer."

The head Wilson guard refused to respond to the complaints about the assaults and injuries inflicted on the asylum seekers. The guard told the protesters that the complaints about the assaults would be taken 'to the big boss tonight' and there would be a response, today Thursday, 7 April.

The escalation in the protests comes after 18 days of daily protests at the family compound. A sign of the deteriorating situation on Nauru was the graffiti, ABF - , which appeared on a wall inside the family compound on Sunday night.

"Until the government addresses the fundamental problem with Nauru, the protests will continue," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition, "The asylum seekers were selectively discriminated against when they were sent there. Some have waited 'in hell' for three years without having a refugee determination.

"The Minister has boasted that getting children out of detention was always a goal of the Turnbull government, but that claim is at odds with the fact that children, women and men are being held on Nauru - and that the 267 who are presently in Australia are still being threatened to be returned to the prison island."

Video clip available on request.

For more information contact Ian Rintoul 0417 275 713.

14. Dramas in detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island

ABC Radio CAF - PM
Peter Lloyd
Thursday, April 7, 2016 18:05:00

MARK COLVIN: New signs of tension have emerged at the Australian-funded asylum seeker detention centres in Papua New Guinea and on Nauru.

On Manus, fights have broken out between detainees during an operation to separate people according to their refugee status.

Refugee advocates say Manus is no longer safe for one man in particular.

That's Behnam Satah, key witness in the murder of Reza Barati.

After the escape from custody of one of the two alleged killers, campaigners are pleading with the Immigration department to bring Mr Satah to Australia under witness protection.

Meanwhile on Nauru, chairs and tables have been hurled during a violent disturbance between some asylum seekers and security guards.

Peter Lloyd reports.

PETER LLOYD: A sixty second video clip that's been sent from Nauru to refugee advocates captures some of what appears to be the aftermath of a clash between asylum seekers and security guards.

(Sound from video: crying voices, panting)

PETER LLOYD: It's dark, the camera is shaky and after a further 20 seconds, there are shrieks of panic.

(Sound from video: screams of panic)

PETER LLOYD: In a statement, border force says seven service provider staff were injured, restoring order after a fight started by asylum seekers.

FULL STORY AT <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2016/s4438918.htm>

15. Dutton says no children involved in Nauru incident, accuses media of 'peddling misinformation'

ABC Radio CAF - PM
Mark Colvin
Thursday, April 7, 2016 18:10:00

MARK COLVIN: The Immigration Minister Peter Dutton joins me now.

Mr Dutton, you would have heard that audio, there's a lot of screaming, but we can hear somebody saying 'officers are starting to kick people', and then at the end, 'they're hitting heads now' - something along those lines, it's quite hard to make out.

But that's the basis of what's being said.

What's your version of what happened there?

PETER DUTTON: Well Mark, the advice that I've got is something quite different, and that is that there was an assault on seven officers within the centre.

Now look, people want to settle in Australia, they don't want to be on Nauru, they don't want to be on Manus, they don't want to be anywhere else but Australia and they've paid their money to people smugglers.

MARK COLVIN: An assault by adults or an assault by children?

PETER DUTTON: No, an assault by adults, but I'm happy to clarify that for you, but that's the advice that I've got.

MARK COLVIN: Well I'd like you to clarify that, because there are accounts that say that there are children involved in this.

PETER DUTTON: Well that's not the advice that I've got but I'm happy to provide the advice, because there is a lot of misinformation being peddled frankly, and this video, which I've watched online, I think is a complete outrage, because there is no evidence that people are being assaulted there, that's not the advice that I've received.

And people who are on Nauru need to hear this very clear message from me, and I'll repeat it again today: that we do expect people to work within the arrangements to help them settle back in their country of origin, or back to a third country.

They are not coming to Australia and they should conduct themselves within the law and assaulting people on Nauru is not going to influence me one little bit.

FULL STORY AT <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2016/s4438919.htm>

16. Nauru asylum seekers contradict Minister's account of fight

ABC Radio CAF - PM
Peter Lloyd
Friday, April 8, 2016 18:05:00

MARK COLVIN: Asylum seekers on Nauru are contradicting the Immigration Minister's assertion on PM last night that no children were involved in a fight there this week.

They also claim that Wilson security guards threatened to kill them during the disturbance.

Asylum seekers don't dispute Mr Dutton's statement that seven security officers were injured, but they insist those security officers struck the first blows.

Peter Lloyd reports.

PETER LLOYD: PM has obtained photos of two boys that show bruising to the left shoulder on one, and a scratch under the left eye on another.

They've both been identified as 16 year olds.

We've been told that they were among eight young people with ages ranging from 14 to 18 involved in the melee with Wilson security guards.

DETAINEE 1: The whole officers start to kick the underage and the women.

DETAINEE 2: They hit us, they started to hit us.

DETAINEE 1: Lloyd, they line up everyone tells them they will hit them.

PETER LLOYD: A 60 second video clip sent from Nauru to refugee advocates captures some of what appears to be the aftermath of that clash.

FULL STORY AT <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2016/s4439747.htm>

17. MEDIA RELEASE: Nauru asylum seekers lodge assault complaints against guards

NAURU ASYLUM SEEKERS LODGE ASSAULT COMPLAINTS AGAINST GUARDS AS MORE PHOTOS OF ABUSE EMERGE

Friday April 8, 2016
Refugee Action Coalition
Ian Rintoul
mobile 0417 275 713

Seven teenagers assaulted by Wilson Guards during a protest on Nauru on Wednesday night (6 April) night have lodged a complaint with authorities on Nauru.

A complaint signed by at least 75 other asylum seekers in the family compound has also been handed to authorities at the camp. (See attachments).

The complaints and the photos put the lie to the denial by the Minister Peter Dutton that children were neither involved nor assaulted by guards on Wednesday night (6 April) in the Nauru family camp.

Another photo of the bruised arm of the mother of one of the teenage boys (see attachment) has also emerged as more evidence of the force used by Wilson guards during the protest.

"The evidence that children were involved and were hit by Wilson guards on Wednesday night is confirmed by photographs and by the complaints signed by the teenagers and by scores of adult witnesses," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition.

"It is not the first time that the Minister has been looses with the truth. No matter how many times he denies it, there is no resettlement arrangement with Nauru. The deal with Cambodia is a failed political fix, too.

"The Minister's excuses and cover-ups for the abuses on Nauru get weaker and weaker. There are hundreds of asylum seekers from Nauru in Australia because Nauru is not safe and asylum seekers and refugees cannot be properly cared for.

"The Australian government brought them here and families are now in community detention. It is shamefully inconsistent and hypocritical for the government to do one thing in Australia and another on Nauru and Manus.

"It is time to end the hell of offshore detention."

More protests are planned for this afternoon (Friday, 8 April) at the gates of the family camp. It will be the 20th consecutive day of protests at the family camp.

For more information contact Ian Rintoul 0417 275 713