

Project SafeCom News and Updates

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SPECIAL: Behrouz Boochani reports

Behrouz Boochani is a journalist and an Iranian refugee held on Manus Island since August 2014. He fled Iran for Australia in 2013, and was sent to a detention centre on Manus Island, where he has been held ever since. His dispatches for the Guardian reveal the true horror of conditions at the Papua New Guinea camp.

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1. Behrouz Boochani: A letter from Manus Island

After four years of detention on Manus Island, the author writes a poet's manifesto for the refugee resistance in which he has found himself to be a central figure. By Behrouz Boochani.

The Saturday Paper
DECEMBER 9 – 15, 2017
By Behrouz Boochani

For many months, the refugees living inside Manus prison have had to endure extraordinarily oppressive conditions orchestrated by the Australian government. During this time, the Department of Immigration used various strategies in order to force refugees out and transfer them into three new camps: East Lorengau, Hillside and West Haus.

They announced October 31 as the deadline for refugees to leave the place.

That date signalled the beginning of extreme force and dictatorship. The government believed October 31 would be the date its vision would become a reality and its plans would be put into practice. When this date arrived, 600 refugees refused to transfer to the new camps. Instead, the situation transformed into a humanitarian crisis that lasted 22 days.

For many watching the events on the island and in the prison from the outside, some central questions have arisen. How could we continue resisting without food, water and medicine for three weeks? How did we keep the character of our protest peaceful throughout this period? How did we continue resisting without ever resorting to violence?

From the standpoint of someone operating at the core of the resistance for this long period of time – that is, the whole three-week period – and privy to everything that was happening inside the prison and the details of the resistance, I think the only thing that helped us persevere for the long stretch of time was our dedication to principles of humanity and human values.

In the community meetings we held every day at 5pm, we stayed true to the principles of love, friendship and brotherhood.

There was nothing greater for us than respect. There was nothing greater for us than equality and camaraderie.

In reality, it was a resistance that was completely democratic. By democratic I mean that every day, right at 5pm, at one fixed location in Delta prison, we gathered and everyone had the chance to express their opinion with the group and discuss. If anyone had a new suggestion, they could outline it and then we would put it to a vote; as a group we would consider whether the suggestion should be put into practice or not.

Debates surrounding how to manage the tasks inside the prison and the rules pertaining to the prison were also resolved by voting. This was in addition to deciding on other methods we should incorporate that could help stand up to power and continue our struggle.

Throughout these three weeks, the gates were completely open and anyone could leave the collective resistance at any moment. They were totally free to go to the new camps and acquire food and water. We were particularly committed to the following point: no one had the right to reproach another for leaving us. In fact, we all had to thank anyone who left the community because they stood with us for as long as they were capable, and we were all grateful for that.

Sometimes, during this period, we smuggled into the prison a limited amount of food in the dead of night, and this food would be distributed equally among the prisoners. This principle also applied to the dogs that live among us: we factored them in. In our meetings we were adamant about the fact we had to show even more compassion to these dogs than before. Feeding them was imperative. These principles applied to the sick, too; we cared for them now more than ever before.

FULL STORY AT <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2017/12/09/letter-manus-island/15127380005617>

2. 'This is hell out here': how Behrouz Boochani's diaries expose Australia's refugee shame

The journalist fled Iran for Australia in 2013, and was sent to a detention centre on Manus Island, where he has been held ever since. His dispatches for the Guardian reveal the true horror of conditions at the Papua New Guinea camp

Guardian Australia
Will Woodward, deputy editor
Behrouz Boochani
Monday 4 December 2017 16.30 AEDT

In 2013, the journalist Behrouz Boochani, an ethnic Kurd, fled Iran after several of his colleagues were arrested. The decisions he took then have defined his life and in turn led to him becoming the essential witness to Australia's hardline refugee policy.

Boochani travelled through south-east Asia and then by boat to Christmas Island, an Australian territory closer to Indonesia. From there he was deported to Manus Island, a remote part of Papua New Guinea (PNG), where he has been held ever since.

Triggered by outcries over people smuggling, contentious arrivals and boat sinkings, Australia's policy – developed by both rightwing Coalition and Labor governments – is that while it will admit refugees, it will not take any that come by sea. "It is not because they are bad people," the Australian prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, told Donald Trump in a leaked phone call. "It is because, in order to stop people smugglers, we had to deprive them of the product. So we said, if you try to come to Australia by boat, even if we think you are the best person in the world, even if you are a Nobel prize-winning genius, we will not let you in."

The human cost is nearly 2,000 people detained on Manus and the tiny island nation of Nauru. Most have been formally recognised as refugees, but live either in processing centres or in the community, unable to leave the islands. The cruelty is largely tolerated, indeed embraced, by politicians in Canberra because it is seen as a deterrent. But detention is expensive – A\$10bn (£5.6bn) since 2013 – and many experts believe the naval policing operation in the Pacific has had more of an impact. The UN, doctors, human rights groups and reporting by media including the Guardian have made detention a public relations problem.

Australian journalists have largely been barred from Manus and Nauru, and since he began contributing to the Guardian in 2016, Boochani has offered the most visible, trusted testimony. This year he was honoured with an Amnesty International award. The film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* was shot inside the Manus centre on a mobile phone by Boochani and shown at the London and Sydney film festivals. He is writing an autobiographical novel.

As the Australian and PNG authorities stepped up their plan to disperse the refugees from Manus into smaller, less secure accommodation by 31 October, Guardian Australia asked Boochani to keep a diary alongside his opinion articles; extracts from both are published here. Boochani's English is good but his writing is translated from Farsi by Omid Tofighian from the American University in Cairo/University of Sydney. Boochani has limited access to email and electricity. Sometimes he is simply too hungry to file.

"His courage over the four years of his internment in the face of the horror of Manus – a hell of repression, cruelty and violence – has been of the highest order," the Booker-prize-winning Australian writer Richard Flanagan wrote last month. "Behrouz Boochani kept on smuggling out his messages of despair in the hope we would listen. It's time we did."

FULL STORY AT <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/04/this-is-hell-behrouz-boochani-diaries-expose-australia-refugee-shame>

3. Behrouz Boochani: I write from Manus Island as a duty to history

The treatment of refugees on Manus Island is part of a recurring theme of modern Australia: the annihilation and incarceration of human beings

The Guardian
Behrouz Boochani
Wednesday 6 December 2017 04.00 AEDT

Last week the Guardian requested again that I report on what is happening on Manus. It had been two days that I had not eaten a thing, two days that I had gone without sleep.

The situation had reached crisis point.

I contacted Omid, who translates my work, immediately.

Omid answered my message. Like always, he was worried about my wellbeing.

"Behrouz, I know that this reporting is historically monumental, I know that this is a duty toward history and those people lost to history, and I know that the two of us are totally committed to this work ... but I'm worried about your wellbeing. You need to sleep."

"But we need to write," I replied. "It's no time to sleep. I promise that nothing is going to happen to me. This'll be the last article. I promise I'll sleep then. I promise you, Omid."

This is an excerpt from the dialogues that took place between Omid and me, and an insight into the situation underlying those days when a humanitarian crisis was unfolding in Manus prison.

Those days and those articles are over and finished now, but one question still remains: why do I write continuously right here in this prison?

It is a difficult question – why does Omid pay more attention to the work related to Manus than to his research and other academic work? I must admit that Omid and I have come to a mutual understanding regarding an interpretation of the Manus and Nauru phenomenon. It is that writing is a duty to history.

Only a meta-historical and transhistorical approach can unpack the peculiarities associated with the issue of Manus and Nauru. Only a rigorous analysis of a colonial presence in Australia and its tactics in the region can disclose the reality of violence in these island prisons.

This issue must be understood as the annihilation of human beings, the incarceration of human beings within the history of modern Australia; it is a long history, a comprehensive history, it is intertwined with its colonial history.

This form of affliction, inflicted on people in similarly vulnerable situations, has always existed in the history of modern Australia. Pain and suffering systematically inflicted on defenceless and vulnerable bodies.

People who are not recognised as humans, not recognised as embodying human dignity. People who are debased, people who are subject to discrimination.

Australia is a developed country. Australia has invested significantly in the arts, in intellectual life, in cultivating culture. Australia is generally known for being a country of goodwill.

But one aspect of the history of this country has always been associated with violence and affliction. Modern Australia must not always be interpreted in terms of its successes, its beauty and its achievements.

A central part of Australia's history relates to its forgotten people.

This writing that comes out of Manus is the unofficial history of Australia, a history that will never be authorised by the government.

This writing that comes out of Manus is history from the viewpoint of people who have been subject to systematic violence.

This writing that comes out of Manus is the suppressed history, the marginalised history of Australia.

This writing that comes out of Manus narrates a significant part of Australian history, it narrates a feature of Australian history that continues to manifest time and time again.

We are confined to the task of writing, we are confined to the practice of creativity so that generations to come have resources at hand, resources rendered by those who have always been violated by the official historical narrative of Australia, violated by the beautiful image projected by Australia, violated by the image of a compassionate Australia.

This is history from down below.

Certainly, this writing that comes out of Manus does not only pertain to the articles I have produced, it not only pertains to the film that I co-directed. Soon my first book will be published – an autobiographical novel. In the future I will continue to produce more writing. The history of these prisons, here on these islands, must never be forgotten.

---->>>> *Behrouz Boochani is a journalist and an Iranian refugee held on Manus Island since August 2014. Translated by Omid Tofighian from the American University in Cairo/University of Sydney. A section of this column was published in an earlier article.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/06/i-write-from-manus-island-as-a-duty-to-history>

4. Behrouz Boochani: Manus police pulled my hair and beat me. 'You've damaged our reputation,' they said

As I was arrested, I realised we were like a small country that had been invaded. The place was really a war zone

The Guardian
Friday 24 November 2017 17.33 AEDT
Behrouz Boochani
(Translated by Omid Tofighian)

I woke up as a thunderous sound echoed through my head. It was the sound of many terrified refugees rushing through Corridor M inside Fox camp. The sound came from out of nowhere and it reverberated right throughout the camp.

“They’re attacking!”

“Run, they’re attacking!”

These warnings are well-known to the refugees in Manus prison. The cries of caution have rung out repeatedly for nearly five years. I immediately pulled out my phone from under my pillow and went towards the fences facing the jungle. The entire prison space was full of refugees running away and dozens of police officers moving in like a swarm of bees.

With rage, the police chief announced repeatedly over a loudspeaker: "Move! Move!" He repeated over and over again that we only had one hour to move out.

I diverted my course and went towards Delta camp. Our plan was that if they attacked we would all go over to Delta camp. The situation there was tense. A group of prisoners had gone on to the roof, and hundreds of individuals gathered in the corner of Fox camp and linked arms together.

On the dirt road outside the prison stood dozens of police officers and other officers wearing uniforms I did not recognise. There were also a number of vehicles waiting to transport us to the new camp.

The police chief and the representative from immigration continued their threats over the loudspeaker. The other officers just kept yelling at the refugees.

I had to find the best possible location: the toilets. From inside the toilets, the entire scene was visible and I could witness what was developing around me. A few people were crying. Worry was spread over the faces of the refugees; their reactions spelt anxiety and terror. But they all shared one thing in common: determination. They were determined to pursue their collective resistance, they were determined to pursue their peaceful resistance.

The immigration officers eventually sprung into action and destroyed the belongings kept inside the accommodation. They threw everything out of the rooms. They even tore apart the sweaty beds with their knives. A group of them smashed the empty water tanks. In the space of half an hour, the area between the corridors looked like a town hit by an earthquake or a flood. It resembled nothing less than a natural disaster – they wreaked havoc throughout the place.

The refugees simply looked on. A feeling of absurdity gripped everyone along with a feeling of being forgotten. It was an uncanny feeling that comes with experiencing explicit violence. The feeling that you have no one, that you have no solace, that you have no sanctuary. In one instant, the equilibrium of the community had been completely unsettled.

Two refugees began having seizures. Dozens of frightened individuals caught them from all sides. Everyone wanted to help. The sick men just moaned, they clearly had no control over the sounds they were emitting. At the same time the officers continued prowling around the corners of the rooms, they continued with their search and destroy mission. Also, the police chief was surrounded by dozens of his furious looking officers and continued shouting: "Move! Move!" The other officers were also swearing, they were looking for a way to escalate the violence.

I had to return to Fox. On the way, two police officers pointed me out and came towards me. I ran away. I knew I would be arrested. But I tried to defer the arrest for as long as possible and remain there. I hid in one of the rooms. The officers entered the corridor. From there I could see the refugees who were monitoring the situation. The officers opened the doors to the rooms with aggression and anger – they told everyone to get out. For a moment there I wanted to hide behind a bed, but I felt a sense of shame. I remembered my time in Iran, I remembered my mother, I remembered how she was always frightened that the government officers would kill me.

They eventually found me. Immediately seven or eight officers grabbed me by the arms and carried me outside in plain view of all the refugees. Like a scene where a dangerous criminal is taken away. Along the way one officer behaved just like a juvenile and pulled my hair. Deep down inside I was laughing. They shoved me aggressively. They struck me over the back, they hit me on the back of the neck, it was not damaging, but they still beat me. Each and every one of them beat me. One of them totally smashed and crushed my sunglasses under his boot.

Everyone was furious and they kept shouting at me: "You're responsible, you're guilty, you've damaged our reputation, you're guilty!" The police chief was pointing to me, making accusations: "You've always been antagonistic towards us, you've damaged our reputation!" I wanted to respond, but he shouted me into silence: "Shut up!"

They tied my hands behind me with rope. I remember how two years ago Australian guards tied some refugees – they tied them up so tight that for one whole week blood had clotted around the rope marks leaving serious bruising. But I know the Manusians well. Even when their anger reaches its peak, they still cannot hide their kindness. This time he tied me up in a way that was tight but did not hurt me.

I was put in jail, they sat me down on a chair. In the distance I could hear only moaning and yelling. They brought a camera and recorded me. They repeated the same accusations, they shouted down at me: "You're guilty, you've damaged our reputation!" And one extra accusation: "You've forced people to stay inside the camp, you're responsible!"

From there I could see the gate to Mike camp. Moments later they forcibly transferred a group of refugees to the buses. In front of the gate they laid one more kick into them. We were like a small country that had been invaded. I could still hear the sound of moaning and yelling. That place was really a war zone. What was going on over there? Once again, I remembered Iran. The shouting continued: "Move! Move!"

---->>>> Behrouz Boochani is a journalist and an Iranian refugee held on Manus Island since August 2014. He writes regularly for the Guardian, including a diary on the closure of the Australian-run detention camp. On Thursday he was arrested.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/commentisfree/2017/nov/24/manus-police-pulled-my-hair-and-beat-me-youve-damaged-our-reputation-they-said>

5. Behrouz Boochani: There was our silence and their violence as Manus camp was evacuated

Of all the violence and abuse inflicted on refugees on Manus Island, the emotional trauma is hardest to endure

The Guardian
Friday 1 December 2017 04.00 AEDT
Behrouz Boochani

After more than 20 days of resilience in a harsh situation, having no food, water and medication, refugees in Manus prison were forced to a new camp. The transfer was conducted by absolute force and, as always, the Australian government denies the truth and has declared it a “voluntary and peaceful” transfer.

Conversely, what we experienced – and what the huge volume of footage and photos distributed in the news and social media reveal – is something different from the government’s claim.

A day before the “massive transfer”, while I was handcuffed and kept at the back of the prison, I personally witnessed that in Mike compound (one of the four camps of Manus prison), a group of officers attacked people with metal poles and sticks and, after just a few minutes, forced 40 refugees onto two buses and transferred them to the new camp using violence. They dragged one of the refugees while he was vomiting. After a while, he was transferred by an ambulance. He stayed at a local medical centre for three days and rumours about his death spread around the camp, making us dreadfully worried.

Mike compound was shut violently, and officers raided other camps and besieged Fox compound to give them more control over the situation. One of the refugees who was moved to the new camps along with 40 others described what had happened:

When they attacked, I hid under one of the containers for a few hours, I was trapped by fear. In the darkness of the night, when police and locals were transferring people, or more precisely, were plundering refugees’ belongings, I was found by police’s dog and dragged out violently by police.

This setting reminds me of the 2014 riot more than anything. It reminds me of absolute brutality in Mike compound when Australian officers, along with locals, attacked and Reza Barati was murdered. Every person’s life matters. I vividly remember that some of the refugees had been hiding under the containers due to well-founded fear for 48 hours. They were about to faint when they got out.

What is obvious is that the violence has not only been physical; it has been a series of actions conducted by police and immigration officers, from filling our well with rubbish and damaging our water tank to destroying our personal belongings and removing our beds and shelters; all happening in front of our eyes while we watched them silently.

Their verbal abuse, addressing us with insulting terms, was their tactic to try to provoke us to become like them; become violent. But from our long experience of living in the prison camp we knew that we would continue to watch them and only watch them in deep silence.

It was sunset when the Mike compound was shut and there were still 300 people in the camp. Next day, early in the morning, they returned. Metal poles in hand, they entered the camp and called out the names of some of the refugees, supposedly “the leaders,” telling them to identify themselves.

Once again there was our silence and their violence; they attacked the men who were gathered in Delta compound, beating the men with hands, feet, wooden sticks and whatever was available to them, and in minutes forced the men to get into the buses. When the four buses arrived in Lorengau after driving 24km, dozens of men appeared out of the buses with bruises and blood on their bodies. Men were scared but, more than this, were traumatised. There is one reflection that has been communicated between all: it is so hard and painful to be beaten and insulted in such a manner after years of imprisonment.

Dozens of men, still traumatised by this violence, were transferred to the East Lorengau camp. This camp has a capacity of 280 people, but by the end of the day they had relocated almost 400 men there. About 60 people remained homeless for two days. Eventually police relocated 25 of these 60 men to a classroom, which the men have had to fit out themselves as best they can in order to sleep there.

When I went to West Haus camp, workers and construction equipment were still operating. A large number of containers were distributed throughout a field the size of a soccer pitch in the middle of a jungle. Last night it rained, creating red mud throughout the camp, making it difficult to walk. It was like hell created for the “exiled dangerous criminals”.

I saw a large number of relocated men with bruises and wounds on their bodies, clearly caused by their recent beatings with metal poles. I visited a man, semi-naked and with bare feet, sitting in the dirt. His face was bloody. I spoke with him, but he was completely silent. Others told me that police had beaten him, he had lost his personal belongings, and they killed his dog that had been living with him. Witnessing this man’s story was too much to bear.

I went to Hillside camp. It is in the middle of a tropical forest, but they cut all the trees and built the camp there. There is no electricity and water there yet. Workers are still constructing the buildings. It is a metal structure at the top of a small hill. There also I became so depressed and disappointed. On the same day, Medecins Sans Frontieres were at Manus prison, with doctors trying to see the injured refugees but the immigration officials did not approve or permit them to enter the prison.

The Australian and PNG governments eventually succeeded in shutting the Lombrum camp by force. Really, they have only succeeded in transferring this long lasting problem 24km away.

This is the reality of life for men in these Manus camps. They have entered into another stage of suffering and this new phase means living without security. The internal suffering, the emotional trauma, is the hardest to endure. There are no psychiatric facilities in Manus, but there is more need now than ever before as the men feel that they have been abandoned; they are desperate, lonely. The feeling of isolation has surrounded them and I am worried.

Behrouz Boochani is a journalist and an Iranian refugee held on Manus Island since August 2014

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/01/there-was-our-silence-and-their-violence-as-manus-camp-was-evacuated>

6. Refugee and journalist Behrouz Boochani released after arrest on Manus

Boochani held by PNG’s paramilitary Mobile Squad and says he was pushed, had his belongings broken and was accused of ‘reporting against us’

The Guardian
Helen Davidson and Ben Doherty
Thursday 23 November 2017 17.26 AEDT

Papua New Guinea’s paramilitary police officers detained and then released refugee and journalist Behrouz Boochani during a raid on the Manus Island detention centre.

On Thursday morning PNG police, the paramilitary Mobile Squad and immigration officers entered the centre to force out the remaining hundreds of refugees who for more than three weeks have camped in deteriorating conditions.

Refugees reported that about 40 men had been forced on to buses, presumably heading to the transit accommodation. There were several reports of buses carrying refugees leaving the centre and at least three arriving at one of the alternative accommodation sites.

The men have refused to leave the facility – which formally closed at the end of last month – because of their safety fears in the town of Lorengau.

It was not clear on Thursday afternoon where Boochani had been taken, or whether he had been charged. Manus Island police officials could not be reached.

Boochani has been one of the most prominent of the group, reporting for the Guardian and a number of other publications around the world on the conditions inside the centre.

On Thursday afternoon several refugees confirmed Boochani had been taken away from the camp by members of the Mobile Squad. Pictures of the event showed him being led away, flanked by officers.

Boochani had been reporting from a hiding place in the toilets while officers confiscated phones and destroyed the belongings of refugees.

However, according to witnesses, officers specifically searched for him and others reporting events to the outside world.

Amnesty International said it wasn’t clear why Boochani had been arrested but it appeared to be “a deliberate attempt to isolate human rights activists from the wider group”.

“The arrest of Behrouz Boochani as a so-called ringleader of the peaceful protest on Manus Island is deeply misguided,” said Kate Schuetze, Amnesty International’s Pacific researcher.

“It violates his rights and sends a terrible signal about PNG’s intentions with regard to the remaining 400-plus men. He must be immediately and unconditionally released from police custody.”

Australia’s Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance union said if Boochani had been targeted because of his reporting then it was “an egregious attack on press freedom”.

“His reporting in the finest traditions of journalism has been critical when the Australian and PNG governments have done everything they can to prevent media from having access to the asylum seekers on Manus Island,” said the MEAA chief executive, Paul Murphy.

“We call on the Australian and PNG governments to release him from custody, assure his safety, and not to hinder him from continuing to perform his role as a journalist.”

The International Federation of Journalists joined the MEAA’s calls.

“The arrest of Behrouz Boochani, if it is because of his work as journalist, is a blatant attack of press freedom and an attempt to silence a critical voice,” it said.

“Journalists should never be stopped from doing their work.”

Boochani tweeted late in the day that he had been released after being held for more than two hours near the camp. A source on Manus Island said Boochani had not been charged with any offence.

Boochani wrote that he had been kept handcuffed while in custody and had his belongings broken.

This month Boochani was awarded an Amnesty International Australia media award for his body of journalistic work reporting from Manus.

The award’s judges said his work “delivered under very difficult circumstances, is powerful, courageous and extraordinary. Its currency, its emotion, its credibility all combine to make it really special”.

Boochani, an ethnic Kurd from Ilam city in the west of Iran, bordering Iraq, was a freelance journalist in his homeland, and began his career writing for the student newspaper at Tarbiat Modares University in Tehran where he studied geopolitics.

He wrote for several newspapers in Iran, including the Kurdish language magazine Werya.

Boochani spent several years under surveillance because of Werya’s promotion of Kurdish language, culture and politics. His membership of the Kurdish Democratic party, outlawed in Iran, and the National Union of Kurdish Students, brought him even closer attention.

In 2011, Boochani was arrested and interrogated by Iran’s Sepah – the country’s paramilitary intelligence agency. In 2013, Werya’s offices were raided and his colleagues arrested. Escaping arrest, Boochani fled the country.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/nov/23/refugee-and-journalist-behrouz-boochani-arrested-in-manus-as-squad-steps-in>

7. Ben Doherty & Helen Davidson: Australia's offshore detention regime is a brutal and obscene piece of self-delusion

The billions spent on an armada to Australia’s north and west is stopping people smugglers, not the government’s needlessly cruel stance

The Guardian

Ben Doherty and Helen Davidson

Thursday 30 November 2017 04.00 AEDT

The most dangerous mistruth in current Australian politics is that in order for lives to be saved at sea, other people – accused of no crime – must be indefinitely and arbitrarily punished offshore.

Asserted with increasing confidence as fact, this unproven link is used to justify Australia’s brutal regime of offshore detention as a necessary condition for a policy that, however harsh, ultimately serves a greater good.

The need to be seen to be “tough on borders” has outweighed all other considerations, pushing successive governments towards increasingly extreme positions, grotesque cruelties and risible rhetorical contortions in insisting their actions are reasonable, legal, or morally defensible.

Since its inception the policy has been roundly and repeatedly criticised – but mostly outside Canberra. Failure, scandal, abuse and death has occurred under the watch of both main parties. In recent weeks the world has watched aghast as the Papua New Guinea arm of the policy lurched towards its bitter end, driven along by swinging metal bars and the enforced thirst of hundreds of men.

Reduced to its basest element, Australian government policy is to begrudgingly treat those who legally sought its asylum – by one mode of transport, by boat – with axiomatic cruelty, in order to discourage others from paying people smugglers and hopping into leaky boats across south-east Asia. This policy saves lives, they say, because it deters others.

But it's not this policy that's stopping the boats from reaching Australian shores. Australia has spent billions of dollars putting an armada to sea in the waters to the country's north and west.

Asylum boats continue to ply the waters of the region and attempt to reach Australia. They do so in much smaller numbers now because they are intercepted, boarded and their passengers and crew forcibly turned around. Protection assessments are conducted at sea – a policy considered illegal under international law by almost every expert opinion, including that of the United Nations.

But were Nauru and Manus to be emptied tomorrow, Australia's "ring of steel" – in immigration minister Peter Dutton's phrase – would continue to stop boats.

When Australia abdicated responsibility for its detention centre on Manus Island, withholding food, water and electricity, hundreds of men stayed in the centre they loathed. They felt – and had evidence to back their claims – that they would be unsafe on alternative sites in the main town of Lorengau.

The Guardian reported from the detention centre on what Australia's policy had become reduced to: the poisoning of wells and the gouging of water tanks, police destroying food supplies and using metal batons against refugees whom Australia is legally required to protect.

Among the refugees holding out there – drinking dirty water and rationing their dwindling food – there was defiance amid the decay, and a solidarity born of new agency. After four-and-a-half years of having to line up for every meal, of having to fill out a form to request medical treatment that might never come, of being corralled and quarantined behind high steel fences and sequestered into smaller and smaller cells, the men on Manus were briefly back in charge of their lives. Each night, the refugees took great ceremony in locking the main gate to the detention centre. They were guards of their own prison but it was they who were in control.

Throughout the standoff, practical solutions were proposed. Australia's top medical professionals offered to arrange and conduct medical assessments at their own cost if the Australian government could help with their visas.

New Zealand offered – again – to resettle 150 people, only to be rebuffed once again. When that was refused, New Zealand offered cash to improve conditions on the Papua New Guinea island. That too was refused. The Australian government says the New Zealand offer dilutes the "stop the boats" deterrent, at the same time as continuing to prosecute its plan to send even greater number of refugees to the US. The same rules seemingly do not apply. The argument that refugees who resettle in New Zealand could not, then, be prevented from coming to Australia is hopelessly flawed: there are already New Zealand citizens Australia prevents from travelling to Australia.

Last week the joint PNG police and immigration operation changed its code name from "Helpim Friends" to "Klinim Base" and officers moved in, clearing the site in less than two days. The journalist Behrouz Boochani, a regular contributor to the Guardian, was hunted, arrested and beaten. Médecins Sans Frontières was denied access to the men. After five days of asking politely the humanitarian medical aid group went public. MSF rarely goes public with complaints or criticisms, preferring to maintain relationships with host countries and continue their work with patients, but felt it was warranted in this instance.

Australia said little. The prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, and Dutton parroted the line that the men had accommodation to go to and were simply trying to pressure the Australian government.

Speaking through the safe mediums of Twitter and Ray Hadley's radio show, Dutton furiously declared it was everyone else who was wrong. Dutton said he knew the truth of the lies spread by detainees, advocates, the United Nations, Amnesty International, Médecins Sans Frontières, the Australian Council for International Development, the Australian Medical Association, the Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Watch, the New Zealand government, PNG's supreme court, PNG's grand chief, Sir Michael Somare, multiple member nations of the UN, Australian voters, even the front page of News Corp's Daily Telegraph.

Whether a symptom of the post-truth era or simply stubbornness, the government dismissed eyewitness accounts and even pictures and footage that clearly showed only one of the three alternative accommodation sites was fit for habitation.

There has always been a disconnect between the frustrated self-defence of the Australian government and the accounts of refugees, human rights groups, independent observers and foreign governments, but it has never been more stark than the past month.

With the scant faith in the US deal waning still further among refugees, the government's ideal resolution is that the men give up, settle in at East Lorengau transit centre where the conditions are good or in one of the two unfinished places if they were unlucky enough to end up there, and stop complaining. Alternatively, the hope goes, the men could be resettled away from Australia or repatriated, and Australia and PNG could declare the centre closed.

The government throws money at its problem, but this issue requires fewer dollars and more imagination. Thousands more will be spent to coerce people to return to the known dangers of their homeland; some \$250m has been earmarked for Manus Island alone this year.

An alternative to Australia's current regime would be that people seeking safety by dangerous boat journey were intercepted – even rescued – and taken to a place of safety. These people can be processed and resettled to third countries where possible. This new regime would need commitments of money, of expertise, and political capital. It would, like any system, be imperfect and a small minority would seek to exploit it.

But the guiding principle must be: do Australia's actions increase the amount of protection in the world for those who need it? Australia's current arrangement categorically fails this fundamental question.

Stopping boats at sea does not necessarily mandate that those stopped must then be punished, month after month, year after year, in indefinite and arbitrary detention. The two are not linked.

That's why the current suffering on Manus is especially confronting: it is unnecessary. There has been no war, no natural disaster. It is a catastrophe of conscious and political creation.

---->>>> *Ben Doherty and Helen Davidson cover immigration and asylum for Guardian Australia*

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/nov/30/australias-offshore-detention-regime-is-a-brutal-and-obscene-piece-of-self-delusion>

8. Richard Flanagan: Australia built a hell for refugees on Manus. The shame will outlive us all

My country is now known as the inventor of a vile form of repression. Instead of thanking a refugee reporter for alerting us to what was happening, we enabled his imprisonment

The Guardian
Richard Flanagan
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So this is what we have come to as a nation.

The wretched of the earth, because they were no longer safe where they lived, sought to come here. With a determined cruelty, we kidnapped and imprisoned them in Pacific lagers. These lagers became synonymous with the idea of hellholes because it was important to our government that they be – and be known as – hellholes.

On this policy of deterrence, as it was called, which had as its declared purpose to make innocent human beings suffer indefinitely, we spent billions of dollars. To this end we had truck with vile regimes such as Sri Lanka's. And to this end we began forsaking our democratic rights.

In the camps the refugees were made to answer to numbers given to them as their new identity. Denied their names they were not even allowed their stories. Every attempt that could be made was made by the Australian government, from the petty to the disturbing, to deny journalists access to the Pacific lager. When it came to imprisoned refugees free speech became a crime: for some years any doctor, nurse or social worker in the camps who publicly reported on the many instances, now well-documented, of rape, murder, suicide and sexual abuse of refugees was liable to two years' imprisonment.

And why?

Because evil was being done to the innocent, and to that truth there is finally no justification that even the most powerful could make. And so it mattered that Australians not know of the mounting crimes for which all Australians will be finally accountable.

All this too was done in our name by our governments, of both left and right. And, more or less, if we didn't tacitly agree, few of us disagreed enough. And perhaps we didn't really want to know.

Once we Australians had led the world in democratic reform. Once it seemed possible that we might overcome the violence of our wars of invasion and reconcile with our Indigenous brothers and sisters. Once it seemed that we might make of ourselves a beacon for freedom and tolerance, a country of many peoples that welcomed the newly dispossessed as we had

in turn once been welcomed. We were a nation born out of the evils of invasion and convictism. It was not that we saw ourselves as infinitely perfectible. It was rather that we were aware of what the alternatives were.

Now we are seen globally as the inventors of a particularly vile form of 21st century repression, in which the innocent are subjected to suffering in a prison where the crime is never named, no sentence is ever passed, and punishment is assured. For this achievement Australia now enjoys the praise of European neo-fascists and American white supremacists.

Some praise. Some achievement.

It is hard to say what is most horrifying in this long saga but the intent of the Australian government to now abandon the refugees it kidnapped, scattering them across an impoverished and corrupt country with a notorious reputation for violence, is an affront to any notions of humanity or decency.

When, out of fear for what might befall them should they leave, some hundreds of refugees refused to move from the Manus compound, there began a protest in which the refugees used the only thing left to them: their bodies.

Over the years we had taken away their rights, their future, even their hope. Three weeks ago we cut off their water, food and medical supplies. Risking starvation, dysentery, cholera and violence, some hundreds of refugees asserted with their flesh the one thing which Australia could not steal: their human dignity.

On Wednesday the UNHCR described what was now unfolding on Manus as a humanitarian crisis that was entirely preventable and a “damning indictment of a policy meant to avoid Australia’s international obligations”.

On Thursday 12 Australians of the Year signed an open letter calling on the government to restore water, food supplies, electricity and medical services to the refugees, warning it was a “human disaster that was unfolding” and that “it was inevitable that people will become sick and die”.

Instead of this moderate course of action, on the same day police in Papua New Guinea began clearing the Manus compound. According to witnesses, refugees were beaten with sticks to forcibly relocate the remaining hundreds of protesting men. This violence against the most powerless and weak was supported and promoted by the Australian government, as it has previously supported and sanctioned the poisoning of the refugees’ water collected in from sumps and rainwater, the destruction of the few pieces of property they possess, and the destruction of their scant remaining food and medicine supplies.

And then there came the news the Iranian journalist and refugee Behrouz Boochani had been taken away by PNG’s much-feared mobile squad, a notorious paramilitary police unit which, according to a report in the Age in 2013, is “allegedly responsible for rapes, murders and other serious human rights abuses” and funded by Australia’s immigration department “to secure the Manus Island detention centre”.

Behrouz Boochani was targeted for one reason and one reason only: he has been the voice of truth speaking from the appalling reality of the Pacific lagers.

It is difficult to believe that all this is not being masterminded – if the word is not too grand for such thuggery – at the highest levels of the Australian government.

Released some hours later, Boochani tweeted that he had been left handcuffed for two hours while he was “pushed several times”, had his belongings destroyed by the police, and was yelled at by the police commander that he “was reporting against us”. Boochani knows now, more than ever, that he is a marked man.

And in these circumstances he has, in characteristic fashion, continued to report.

His courage over the four years of his internment in the face of the horror of Manus – a hell of repression, cruelty, and violence – has been of the highest order. Behrouz Boochani kept on smuggling out his messages of despair in the hope we would listen.

It’s time we did.

All states commit criminal and sometimes wicked acts. The necessary mark of a democracy is the freedom to tell the truth about these crimes so that they can be ended and the guilty punished.

To be a writer is not to simply believe in freedom but to practise it every day with your words. Each word allows us to find ourselves in others, and in others to know we are not alone.

In the vacuum of reportage that the Australian government created one man kept getting the truth out. Behrouz Boochani’s words found me as they found so many others.

Now I hope mine find him.

We choose whether we live or whether we wait for death. Through his words Behrouz chose to live. His words showed that while our government had jailed his body, his soul remained that of a free man.

I am not sure if I would have had his courage were I to find myself in his situation. Perhaps that is why I admire it deeply.

Behrouz Boochani reminded Australia of what it had become. We should thank him and honour him for his warnings of what was happening to our country. Instead we enabled his imprisonment, and who can say what this marked man's fate may yet be?

His detainment yesterday highlights the moral bankruptcy of the Pacific solution, its essentially criminal nature, and the growing dangers it presents to our democracy.

The shame of this time will outlive us all. Our children and grandchildren will have to remake the broken trusts, the sacred freedoms, the necessary liberties, that we traded away in our ignorance and our gullible fear. They must rekindle as necessary national virtues kindness and compassion to the weakest.

But we must begin the work now, with urgency, with determination, of rebuilding our nation's honour, and our collective dignity. Because if we don't, if we think it doesn't affect us, the alternative is that what is happening on Manus will begin to happen here.

At the time of writing, Manus remains in crisis, with 300 refugees still in the compound. Who knows what fresh onslaught of violence is awaiting them? While outside wait the paramilitary thugs, inside the refugees search in the darkness for drinkable water, they scrounge for what little food was not destroyed, these 300 men who now face the determination of our government that they vanish from the face of the earth, and with them their terrible story that shames us all.

But that story demands investigation, not obliteration.

There must be a royal commission into the Pacific camps, the grotesque amounts of money wasted on them, the lies, the deceit and undemocratic practices used to ensure their ongoing existence, to determine the extent of Australian involvement in the PNG police's latest acts, and to ascertain and if necessary prosecute those responsible for the many well-documented cases of the abuses of human rights on both Manus and Nauru.

If we can muster no feeling for the starving, sick and thirsty refugees waiting in the ruins of their prison for the next attack, spare a thought for what our future might look like if Peter Dutton begins persecuting journalists here with his newly acquired secret police powers. We should not forget the plans in 2015 for Dutton's newly militarised Border Force officials to patrol Melbourne streets checking people's papers, abandoned only in the face of overwhelming public anger.

Behrouz Boochani may be the first journalist to be detained for revealing the evil of our Pacific gulags. But how can we be confident he will be the last, and who knows what new government folly will need a repressive cloak of secrecy to safeguard its many failings?

In Boochani's writings is a spirit Australia has lost: brave, honest, generous and free. Once he wanted to come here. Now we need him and all that he stands for more than ever.

And if, in these next few days, any harm should come to Behrouz Boochani, for whose safety many now fear, the responsibility for that crime will not fall to the PNG government or its police. It will be Peter Dutton's.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/nov/24/the-shame-of-the-evil-being-done-on-manus-will-outlive-us-all>