

Project SafeCom News and Updates

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1. Waleed Aly: The slow-motion death of conservative politics

The Age
March 4, 2016 - 12:00AM
Waleed Aly

Just as well Malcolm Turnbull is such a fan of disruption. Right now, he's in a world of it. This is the week Tony Abbott's wrecking, undermining and sniping campaign went nuclear, or at least marine. His incredulous intervention on the Turnbull government's alleged delay in acquiring new submarines is about as destructively disruptive as it gets, really.

Abbott has already undermined his successor on same-sex marriage (or even bullying), tax policy, industrial relations, even national security. But now even the veneer of respectful disagreement is gone. "I'm not just disappointed, I'm flabbergasted at this decision," he told *The Australian*, before suggesting Turnbull had compromised our "national self-respect".

He's accepted the role of disillusioned commentator on a story about a leak of classified documents. A leak, by the way, the Australian Federal Police have now seen fit to investigate. Even in the event the leak has nothing to do with him, it's a hell of a thing to dignify, and a hell of a way to do it.

And so, inevitably, come the Rudd comparisons. Now, openly from his front-bench colleagues. And sure, it's beginning to look a lot like Labor. But it's perhaps a little too easy a reference point. Rudd's white-anting was really about the fury of a Prime Minister scorned; a man seeking to right a wrong through revenge. Otherwise, it had no real content. That's why when Rudd finally retook the throne, there was no policy reason given and no obvious policy consequence.

I don't doubt Abbott's story is also one of revenge. But there's more to it than that. Abbott's sniping is actually about something. He's trying to rehabilitate not merely his reputation, but his entire brand of politics.

That's why he's constantly choosing totemic issues to agitate: even ones for which he had no appetite as Prime Minister, like industrial relations. That's why his supporters are a crew of ideological warriors and not a reluctant collection of pragmatists as in Rudd's case. And that's why it threatens to do more long-term damage to the Coalition than even the Rudd-Gillard catastrophe did to Labor.

This, I suspect, is the slow-motion disintegration of conservative politics that's bigger than Abbott, or Turnbull, or even Australia. Indeed we're seeing it most spectacularly in the United States, where, following his domination of Super Tuesday, Donald Trump is cruising towards the Republican presidential nomination.

This he has achieved despite the fact almost every Republican elder opposes him. They always have. During the last election season the Republican candidates cancelled a scheduled debate when the relevant news outlet announced Trump would be the moderator. Now, some Republican heads are spitballing ways they can use party rules to deny him the nomination even though his mandate from Republican voters is so strong.

This, too, is a party now out of control. But in truth it has been slowly spiralling out of control for years. Do you think Trump is heinous on immigration because he wants to build a wall to keep out Mexicans? So does the establishment's own Ted Cruz. Do you think Trump's declaration that climate change is a hoax makes him unworthy of office? Here's the other establishment candidate, Marco Rubio: "I do not believe that human activity is causing these dramatic changes to our climate the way these scientists are portraying it." At least he seems to believe the science is in. He just chooses not to accept it.

It's true in a sense that Trump has stolen the Republican party. But it's also true it was there for the taking. There are many reasons Trump is succeeding – anger and disillusionment among a humiliated electorate is one of them. But there's also the fact that the Republicans have been training their voters to indulge every reactionary prejudice for years. Trump simply does this better, louder, and with less varnish than his rivals. Can we be surprised when he vanquishes them? Can the Republican establishment really cry foul when he outdoes them?

And is it so different here? Well, in a way, yes. A moderate is presently in the top job and the reactionary forces aren't yet taking endorsements from former Ku Klux Klan wizards (they'll have to settle for Reclaim Australia for now). But there's an important commonality too: that the contradictions that were once holding conservative parties together, and delivering them political success, have now fallen apart. The most important of these is the contradiction between liberal economics and the politics of "values".

It's hard to be the staunch defenders of family, culture and tradition while you're also staunch advocates of things like high-skilled immigration and workplace "flexibility" of the kind WorkChoices offered. It's hard to believe the market should be free to exploit and commodify whatever consumers will tolerate – sex, culture, children – and yet pretend we are bound together by inviolable, sacred values.

Liberal economics has this habit of being, well, disruptive. Trying to mitigate that by playing the politics of culture will eventually descend into bigotry. The more the culture being defended is hollowed out, the more it can only take the form of finding symbols to rail against. That's why we've seen such an inexhaustible parade of targets: immigrants, refugees, Muslims, greenies, gays, women, blacks, Mexicans.

Every broad political movement has its contradictions. Successful ones conceal them long enough to enjoy power – and there's no doubt this neo-conservatism had its glory. But eventually, you face that moment when an earthquake turns a fault line into a canyon; when a movement's contradictions consume it. At that point it either splits, or one side becomes unleashed.

There's no easy resolution for Turnbull because the disruption is deep and determined. And there's no easy response for the Republicans who must now witness what they have unleashed.

Waleed Aly is a Fairfax Media columnist and a lecturer in politics at Monash University.

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/malcolm-turnbull-in-the-middle-of-an-upheaval-of-conservative-politics-20160302-gn93e1.html>

2. Crime commission secretly interrogated Australian who was allegedly tortured by foreign agency

Questioning of the 20-year-old dual citizen by Australia's law enforcement agencies raises concerns about the use of coercive powers on the young and vulnerable

The Guardian
Paul Farrell
Thursday 3 March 2016 15.00 EST

A 20-year-old Australian who alleged he was tortured by a foreign intelligence agency was forced to undergo a coercive interrogation before the Australian Crime Commission and questioned more than five times by Australian Security Intelligence Organisation operatives.

The Australian dual citizen, who can only be named as ZZ due to a non-publication order, was questioned by the ACC as part of its investigation into foreign fighter recruitment and funding in 2014.

The ACC can compel people to attend hearings in secret and force them to answer questions.

After refusing to answer a series of inquiries to the ACC's satisfaction, ZZ was charged and found guilty of contempt by the federal court and imprisoned for a month until he agreed to answer questions.

Guardian Australia can reveal that in the course of the federal court proceedings, ZZ disclosed to forensic psychiatrist Richard Furst that he had been subjected to "severe torture" by a foreign intelligence agency.

Well before the crime commission hearings, Asio officers had been made aware of the allegations, after they questioned him five times in early 2013. During the course of this questioning, he told officers about his treatment at the hands of the foreign intelligence service.

A report by Furst said: "He travelled to [redacted] when he was 18 years of age, apparently being detained at the time for just over one month. ZZ said 'I was just travelling. I was locked up. I had a rough time.' He said that he was subject to 'severe torture' and 'interrogation' by the [redacted] intelligence service."

Guardian Australia has obtained and published the full transcripts of ZZ's secret hearing before the commission. Ordinarily it would be unlawful for these transcripts to be made public.

They reveal ZZ was subject to heavy interrogation by the crime commission and was placed under immense pressure in his examination.

The case raises concerns about the use of the ACC's coercive powers on young and vulnerable people who may have some connection to terrorism investigations, and whether it could be creating community resentment of law enforcement agencies.

The president of the NSW Council for Civil Liberties, Stephen Blanks, told Guardian Australia the "draconian powers" of the ACC were of great concern.

"There is almost no scrutiny or accountability with how the ACC works. And it is entirely possible that its activities are a significant factor in deterring people in the Australian community from cooperating with law enforcement agencies because of the fear that draconian powers will be used against them," he said.

"We need to return to a system where people cannot be forced, against their will, to give evidence which incriminates themselves or their spouses, children or parents. The privilege against self-incrimination is a fundamental freedom. Any government concerned with fundamental freedoms would turn their attention to the operation of the ACC and reduce its powers."

Birchgrove Legal solicitor Moustafa Kheir, who has experience dealing with ACC cases, said the way it held proceedings was a “form of intimidation”.

Both the state and federal crime commissions are increasingly being relied on in terrorism matters to help the Joint Counter Terrorism Team (JCTT) build cases against terrorism suspects.

The chief executive officer of the ACC, Chris Dawson, told Guardian Australia the powers granted were similar to those given to royal commissions, and the ACC was called in where “traditional law enforcement methods are not effective”.

“The Australian Crime Commission is supporting the national effort against terrorism through its foreign fighters taskforce,” he said.

“Working under Project Ridgeline, the Australian Crime Commission is increasing the national understanding of the evolving threat posed by foreign fighters, identifying previously unknown threats, and contributing to domestic monitoring and disruption activities.”

Dawson said the coercive powers “have the potential to save lives by identifying additional terrorist suspects or their facilitators, domestically and offshore”.

The ACC “adopts measures to accommodate young and vulnerable witnesses”, he said, and would be protected under general administrative law principles.

The law enforcement body could be set to grow more powerful. Several bills are before federal parliament that could result in it being merged with Crimtrac and other agencies.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/04/commission-secretly-interrogated-australian-who-was-allegedly-torture-by-foreign-agency>

3. Russia ‘stoking refugee unrest in Germany to topple Angela Merkel’

Analysts at Nato centre claim to have found evidence of ‘information war’ over migration crisis with links to Vladimir Putin

The Guardian
Daniel Boffey in Riga
Saturday 5 March 2016 16.02 EST

Russia is trying to topple Angela Merkel by waging an information war designed to stir up anger in Germany over refugees, Nato’s most senior expert on strategic communications has claimed.

The attempt to provoke the removal of the German leader, who has been a strong supporter of sanctions against Vladimir Putin’s regime, is said to have been identified by Nato analysts.

Jānis Sārts, director of Nato’s Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, based in Riga, Latvia, told the Observer that Russia had a track record of funding extremist forces in Europe, and that he believed there was now evidence of Russia agitating in Germany against Merkel.

Insisting that he could talk only as an expert, and not as a spokesman for Nato, Sārts said: “[Russia] is establishing a network that can be controlled. You can use it as they have tried to do in Germany, combined with the legitimate issue of refugees, to undercut political processes in a very serious way. Angela Merkel has been a very adamant supporter of continued sanctions against Russia. If it was just punishment, that would be OK – but it is testing whether they can build on pre-existing problems and create a momentum where there is political change in Germany.

“I think they test whether they can – in such a big country, with not so many vulnerabilities in normal times – actually create a circumstance through their influence where there is a change of top leadership. They are using Russian speakers, social media, trying to build on the existing faultlines. Use the far right narrative and exploit that.”

Sārts, who has access to intelligence briefings, added: “In general terms, you can trace Russian funding to the extreme forces in Europe. Either left or right – as long as they are extreme, they are good to come into the Russian picture as of possible use in their tactics.”

More than 1 million refugees – many from war-torn Syria – have arrived in Germany over the past year, many attracted by Merkel’s claim that she would not put a limit on the number who could settle in the country.

The movement of people has fed the rise of the rightwing populist party Alternative für Deutschland, with a recent poll suggesting 81% of German citizens believe Merkel has lost control of the situation. Voter sentiment will be tested for the first time since the crisis on 13 March, when elections are held in three of Germany’s 16 regions – Sachsen-Anhalt, Rheinland-Pfalz and Baden-Württemberg.

Sārts, who before his Nato appointment last year was the most senior civil servant in Latvia's ministry of defence, said that the impact of Russia's attempt to stir up unrest in Germany was being diminished because the problem had been discovered, but he warned that other countries were turning a blind eye to Putin's propaganda war.

He said: "We saw it in Germany. The best misinformation tool is when your opponent doesn't notice. That is when it is most effective. I would submit that there are a number of countries who have not yet noticed, or have chosen not to notice."

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/05/russia-refugee-germany-angela-merkel-migration-vladimir-putin>

4. Tom Ballard: Busting some myths about asylum seekers and refugees

The Age
March 12, 2016
Tom Ballard

At this year's Melbourne Comedy Festival, I'll be performing Boundless Plains To Share – a humorous lecture on Australia's treatment of refugees.

The issue of what to do with desperate people who arrive on our shores on leaky boats has plagued Australian politics for more than four decades. In January 1969, eight West Papuans – later dubbed "raft men" – fled the Indonesian occupation of West Irian and set out for sanctuary. A month later they landed at Moa Island in the Torres Strait. The group's leader Alexander Toembay declared: "I hope that Australian people give us political protection and allow us to live in peace."

We didn't. We whacked them on a plane to New Guinea and their claims for political asylum were quickly processed and denied. All eight were then returned to West Irian, to the very government they were running from.

At the same time we were dumping border-crossing West Papuan refugees in a poorly resourced camp on a delightful little getaway named Manus Island. There the refugees held little hope of gaining employment or education and they become depressed and unmotivated and called their new home "Devil's Island". Good thing we learnt our lesson there, then.

Here are a few of the more remarkable fact-nuggets that I've come across over the past few months.

Since the first wave of "boat people" rocked up in Darwin Harbour in 1976, Australia's population has increased by over 10 million people. How many of those people were refugees arriving by sea? Less than 70,000.

Our annual humanitarian intake of around 20,000 people really ain't that generous when placed in a historical context: back in 1949, when the global refugee population was at 60 million (as it is today), Australia gave refuge to almost 75,000 people.

Yes, there are heaps of refugees out there in the world, but only a tiny number of them are coming to us on boats and we can easily accommodate more of them. "We Can't Help Everyone" has somehow mutated into "We Won't Help Anyone".

The only countries between the Middle East and Australia that are signatories to the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees are Afghanistan and Iran (not ideal if they're the countries you're fleeing from), China (always in the market for new people!), Cambodia and Timor-Leste (countries with plenty of their own shit to deal with) and Nauru (*cough*).

Why can't all the pesky boat people just "wait in the queue"?

Mainly because they're not immortal. The UNHCR only resettles about 73,000 people every year, worldwide. In Syria, about 42,000 people are displaced every day. So jumping on the end of that queue could mean a wait time of around 64 years.

In Indonesia the wait is slightly shorter, but with over 13,000 people sitting there scratching their noses and just 300 people being resettled every year, you're still looking at something like a wait of about 40 years with no work rights or schools to send your kids to. I think it's fair to say that would, at the very least, get a bit tedious.

Of course, we never jump queues here in Australia - except when we use MenuLog or BeatTheQ or illegally park or speed or minimise our tax or buy scalped tickets or use the special line for airport security even when we're not even close to being gold frequent flyers.

In the 1950s we believed that Nauru had been ruined so badly as a result of phosphate mining that we considered resettling the entire population of the tiny island nation in Australia. Fraser Island and Curtis Island in Queensland were offered up as potential locations, but the Nauruans chose to stay and gain their independence and then spent a bunch of their money funding Leonardo the Musical: A Portrait Of Love, which is widely considered to be one of the biggest flops in West End musical history.

If you listen to some folks, you'd get the impression that refugees are nothing but marauding terrorists hell-bent on visiting thievery and Centrelink fraud upon our peaceful society. That's bollocks. People seeking asylum who are living in our communities are 45 times less likely to commit crimes than the local population. Much of white Australia is descended from dodgy, bread-stealing Cockney convicts – perhaps refugees should be locking us up?

In fact, someone seeking asylum is 24 times less likely to commit a crime than a federal politician. Hello? "Delicious irony" for Table One?

Realities such as these are the antidote to our cancerous fears. They must be calmly administered to the public debate and help us re-evaluate and reengage with this dilemma as a humanitarian issue, not a national security crisis.

My reading brought me to a theory known as "panspermia": the notion that life could have actually been seeded on earth when asteroids crashed here, bringing almost indestructible tiny organisms (known as "tardigrades") to our planet's surface. So forget about "Australian" and "boat people" and "illegal immigrants" – perhaps we're all fundamentally "asteroid people".

Perhaps we've all journeyed billions of light years across the galaxy in the name of survival, only to invade this blue dot here and naively conjure up some foolish notion of sovereignty over our pathetic little patch of billion-year-old rock?

I don't know. All I know is that no matter who you are or where you come from, you're more than welcome at my show. Less so if you're concession.

->>> *Tom Ballard is an Australian radio presenter and comedian.*

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/busting-some-myths-about-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-20160309-gnf7ti.html>

5. Team Refugee: Australia puts forward Rio Olympics hopefuls

ABC Radio CAF - The World Today

By Penny Timms

First posted Fri 4 Mar 2016, 1:37pm

Updated Fri 4 Mar 2016, 1:41pm

Australia has nominated several athletes to be part of Team Refugee, a team made up entirely of refugees who will be competing at the 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil.

Their inclusion is part of an International Olympic Committee (IOC) pledge to help elite athletes who have been displaced.

Team Refugee will march under the Olympic flag, and will walk out ahead of host nation Brazil, during the opening ceremony in Rio. If any of the athletes win gold, the Olympic anthem will be played as the winner takes to the podium.

Fiona de Jong, the CEO of the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC), said the sheer number of refugees around the world currently living in refugee camps was staggering.

"I think the latest is something like 7 million people, and then the other statistic that I became aware of is the average time they spend in a refugee camp is about 17 years," Ms de Jong said.

"So you can imagine some amongst those population of people may well of once had ambitions of going to an Olympic Games and pursuing a particular sport.

"And so to their credit the IOC recognised that and thought, well why should they be denied the opportunity to pursue their dream and their talents because they don't happen to have a passport?"

Under the program, an athlete needs to have official refugee status and meet other qualifying standards.

Australia has nominated several athletes to be part of the team, but the Olympic Committee is searching for more.

Ms de Jong said when the IOC announced the opportunity for refugees they knew Australia had taken in a number of refugees.

"In the spirit of the intention of this initiative we did write to all of our sports and encourage them to identify any athletes that may be in local clubs or part of their talent program or part of their national program," she said.

"So we did have a number of sports that came back to us; they are taekwondo [and] wrestling.

"And there's an athlete who is a runner in athletics who hasn't yet arrived in Australia but we have been in touch through the UNHCR about this individual who is likely to be coming to Australia."

Questions over athlete qualifications

But Ms de Jong said there had been logistical issues to overcome - such as how to get an athlete to an international qualifying competition when that person does not even have a passport.

Ms de Jong said the AOC was also appealing against a decision to reject another refugee athlete's bid to qualify.

"The international federation determined that he didn't have sufficient international competition to go to the qualifying event," she said.

"We are of the view that he does have that international level of competition and we helped find him a pro-bono legal representative and submitted an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport seeking for him to be able to continue to have the opportunity to qualify at one of the other qualification events."

Taekwondo athlete narrowly misses out

Arash Arian came to Australia as an asylum seeker from Afghanistan in 2010, where he spent nine months in a detention centre, before being granted refugee status.

He described arriving in a new country without his family as a difficult time for him in the beginning.

"It's very hard to go to a different country without your family, without friends and didn't know how to communicate with them, you didn't know how the system works, you have to find out about everything and then trying to survive," he said.

Mr Arian said he spent much of his time in the detention centre time contemplating what to do with his life, and decided that he would try his hand at taekwondo.

He said fortunately he was a natural to the sport.

"After a few months, I actually got my black belt. [I was] competing at a state level so I became a full-time state champion, and then [I started] competing at national champion and got gold medal," he said.

Recently Mr Arian tried out to be part of the newly announced Team Refugee. He narrowly missed out on qualifying, but he said he thinks the inclusion of a refugee team is a great idea.

"I think this is a great message to the world to say that it doesn't matter if you're a refugee, if you're a disadvantaged person around the world, you have that potential to do something great," he said.

He now has his eyes set firmly on the 2020 games in Tokyo.

"For me, it's just the beginning and this time I couldn't make it next time for sure I will," he said.

"I will by that time have become an Australian citizen as well and it would be great to represent this great country."

Australian Olympics officials said they will also do all they can to support Mr Arian.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-04/australia-puts-forward-olympic-hopefuls-for-team-refugee/7220708>

6. Tasmania's arms wide open for Syrian refugees as screening slows down resettlement process

March 5, 2016 9:00pm
ANNE MATHER
The Mercury

DELAYS in processing Syrian refugees hoping to enter Australia have placed a question mark over Tasmania's promise to resettle 500.

While the Tasmanian Government is still hopeful the state can play its part in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, the Federal Government's screening process has seen refugees enter Australia at a "trickle".

It is understood that so far less than 30 of Australia's promised 12,000 Syrian refugees have arrived, and most have gone to Perth in Western Australia.

The Settlement Council of Australia said there had been a lag time because the refugees were being placed through a rigorous screening process.

The council's membership officer Kat O'Neill said the process included security checks, health checks and character checks.

"They are coming in at a trickle," she said.

Ms O'Neill said that at this point there were no immediate plans to settle anyone in Tasmania.

"But that doesn't mean they are not going to," she said.

She said the refugees would be resettled in communities with appropriate services and social networks.

The Tasmanian Government said it remained committed to investing \$1.2 million over four years to establish a Safe Haven Hub for the refugees.

"As it is the Federal Government that processes applications, the timing and arrival of refugees and asylum seekers is not in our hands," a State Government spokesman said.

The office of Federal Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said there had never been a guarantee Tasmania would receive 500 refugees.

A spokesperson for Mr Dutton said the Federal Government had made no commitment about where the refugees would settle, and the figure of 500 had come as an invitation from the Tasmanian Government.

Last September, the Tasmanian Government wrote to the Federal Government outlining the state's willingness to accept 500 asylum seekers and refugees to settle in Tasmania following the Syrian and Iraqi humanitarian crisis.

Multicultural Council of Tasmania chairman Alphonse Mulumba said he understood some of the Syrian refugees had expressed an interest in coming to Tasmania and he hoped they would be allowed in soon.

"My hope is that this can be hurried up quite quickly," he said.

Labor MP Madeleine Ogilvie said the State Government needed to argue Tasmania's case for receiving refugees.

"There are about 80,000 people on the border of Greece and Macedonia and I can't believe 500 wouldn't want to come to Tasmania today," she said.

<http://www.themercury.com.au/news/tasmania/tasmanias-arms-wide-open-for-syrian-refugees-as-screening-slows-down-resettlement-process/news-story/d4039a0032a164af1d32866fa50b8315>

7. Students urge Malcolm Turnbull to end immigration detention of children

Pupils send 'strong message' to prime minister over the 'horrific trauma' of detention on Nauru and Manus Island

The Guardian
Melissa Davey
Thursday 10 March 2016 15.35 AEDT

A group of primary school students in Melbourne have called on the prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, to release children from detention centres and encouraged school students from around Australia to support their campaign.

At a school assembly at St Bernard's Primary school in Coburg East, attended by the Greens senator Janet Rice, the pupils displayed a colourful chain they had made out of individual links of paper, which has been placed on the school fence as a show of support for asylum seekers.

They are encouraging other schools to do the same as part of their project, Links, Not Chains.

"I'll be able to take your message back to Canberra with me," Rice promised the students at the assembly on Wednesday.

"I'm not part of the government and I can't tell the government what to do, unfortunately. But the people who can tell the government what to do are all of you and you can send a very strong message that these children should be allowed to be free."

Year 5 and 6 students from St Bernard's addressed parents, teachers and the senator.

Student Sienna Galioto told them: "We at St Bernard's want all children seeking asylum to be released from detention centres in Australia and Nauru.

"We are the first school in Australia to do this and we hope many others will follow our example."

Another student, Caterina Warrick, told her peers that there were rights that every child should have, including the right to belong to a religion and believe in their own god.

"They have the right to have a home or shelter and an adult to take care and support them," she said.

“They deserve an education and medical attention. They are also entitled to have a voice and be heard, to have freedom and live a happy, healthy, safe life.

“Most of all, every child has a right to protection from any violence and the right to seek asylum in another country if you are being persecuted in your own.”

Ruby Hoare said asylum seeker children were “just little kids who come by boat with their family or some on their own”.

“I am talking about young kids from ages between two and 12,” she said. “These little kids have small bones and a small body but a heart just like us, with lots of love. They don’t have the strength to go through this horrific trauma.”

The school’s principal, Joanne Doherty, said students wrote their names on each of the individual links before adding them to the chain. It was now so long, the whole thing could not fit into a photograph, she said.

The students’ speeches had moved some of the parents and teachers to tears, she added.

“It was an incredibly heartfelt assembly,” Doherty said. “We welcome difference and embrace diversity here, and we want students to leave school knowing that they can make a difference. This entire project was student-led.”

The school community had been overwhelmingly supportive, she said.

“I did read someone having a go at us on Senator Rice’s Facebook page, saying something about schools being used to politicise things, but I haven’t heard anything negative, not one thing, from the school community itself.

“These children have made something happen and they should have a great sense of pride in that.”

A parent present at the assembly, Lisa Leening, described it as “incredibly moving”.

“It was so empowering for the students and they were stoked to have their voices heard,” she said.

“I think people underestimate the empathy of children. What they see in the media really affects them. Even my five-year-old can’t understand why people are being imprisoned for not doing anything wrong.”

The move by the school follows a similar call in October from staff at the Royal Children’s hospital in Melbourne. Dozens of hospitals from around the country subsequently joined their protests against the incarceration of asylum seeker children.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/10/end-immigration-detention-of-children-students-urge-malcolm-turnbull>

8. Some voters believe asylum seekers get \$10,000 and Nike shoes

The Age
March 10, 2016 - 3:47PM
Nicole Hasham

Some Australians wrongly believe asylum seekers and refugees in this country are given a \$10,000 lump sum, Nike shoes and preferential treatment for public housing, according to research that also found religious prejudice against Muslims is largely driving negative attitudes towards the newcomers.

The University of Melbourne study also revealed many people concerned about the "Islamisation" of Australia were "unshakably convinced" Muslims were universally overpowering Christian traditions, such as Christmas cards and the singing of carols in schools, despite having no such direct or second-hand experiences.

The qualitative research involved 10 focus group discussions in metropolitan, regional and remote locations in NSW, Victoria and Queensland between August 24 and September 3 last year.

The researchers said, based on previous opinion polls, voters who held strongly negative views on asylum seekers far outnumbered those with strongly positive views, and that the Australian public largely supports the Turnbull government's tough stance on "unauthorised" boat arrivals.

The focus groups, involving 80 people, revealed the single most important driver of negative attitudes towards asylum seekers was "religious prejudice", sometimes expressed as concern about the "Islamisation" of Australia.

This involved two views: seeing Islam as a religion intolerant of non-Muslims, and seeing Islam as synonymous with the terrorism threat.

The researchers heard "countless anecdotes – none based on first-hand evidence" that public places such as schools and shopping centres had abandoned Christmas carols and nativity plays to avoid offending Muslim sensibilities, and that ordinary people sent "happy holidays" cards rather than Christmas cards to avoid offending Muslims.

"Doubtless instances occur of all these phenomena, but those who wish to believe in a nascent Muslim ascendancy assert that they happen everywhere," the research said.

Late last year, the Victorian Labor government was accused of trying to secularise schools by banning the singing of Christmas carols. The government strongly rejected the claim, saying Christmas decorations and carols were allowed at schools, but if visiting groups wanted to "sing religious songs" it must be done before or after school or during lunch, to avoid proselytising.

Racism towards asylum seekers mostly seen to be from "the Middle East" played a lesser role in negative attitudes, as did "materialist anxieties" that newcomers received preferential treatment for services such as public housing and welfare.

The study found this factor most prevalent among people who were themselves struggling - primarily blue-collar workers and people in western Sydney.

One focus group participant said: "They are running around in new Nike shoes. They had all been given a place, you know ... You have homeless people that haven't even got a place in Sydney, yet these people just walk in get a place [and] \$10,000, new shoes."

A refugee resettlement service told Fairfax Media that asylum seekers living in the community received partial Centrelink benefits and help to find affordable rental housing in the private market, usually in outer suburbs, and may receive furniture and clothes donated by community groups.

Refugees received a package of basic household goods and were eligible for Centrelink benefits, and were helped to find private rental accommodation. Neither group received \$10,000.

The study also found there was scant knowledge of Australia's international legal obligations to people seeking asylum - leading to a general readiness to accept labels such as "illegals" and "queue-jumpers". It found support for boat turnbacks and offshore processing was conditional on there being no other way that was more fair and humane, while still minimising deaths at sea and ensuring proper screening of entrants.

The research was designed and conducted by Dr Denis Muller, senior research fellow at the university's Centre for Advancing Journalism.

It concluded that a more constructive public debate on the asylum seeker issue required the correction of misconceptions and knowledge gaps, the promotion of community tolerance and respect, and more discussion over whether Australia was doing enough to help alleviate the world's humanitarian crisis.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/some-voters-believe-asylum-seekers-get-10000-and-nike-shoes-20160310-gnfbdo.html>

9. Turnbacks underway when Indonesian waters breached, FOI documents reveal

Disclosure of previously blanked-out details from review of six Australian breaches of Indonesian territory puts end to two years of speculation

The Guardian
Australian Associated Press
Friday 11 March 2016 00.47 EST

Australian maritime patrols were involved in turning back asylum-seeker boats when they breached Indonesian territory six times, secret government documents reveal.

The disclosure puts an end to two years of speculation that the incursions involved the federal government's controversial turnback policy.

Previously blanked-out details from the joint Defence and now-defunct Customs and Border Protection Service review of the breaches have been disclosed to AAP after a two-year Freedom of Information battle.

The Office of the Information Commissioner forced the Immigration Department to disclose more information but specific details of the six incidents have been withheld.

The new revelations include:

- Confirmation there were 13 boat arrivals in Australian waters between 1 December, 2013 and 20 January, 2014.

- When returning six of the boats, Australian naval vessels entered Indonesian waters.
- They did not know they were in Indonesian waters because boundaries do not appear on nautical charts.
- A directive from the commander of Operation Sovereign Borders to personnel was silent on the conduct of turnback activity within Indonesia's territorial sea limits.
- Headquarters approved patrol plans even though they included details of incursions into Indonesian waters. The miscalculations were not noticed in the approval process or post-operations reporting.
- Sailors were trained in "public order management" so they were prepared for non-compliant behaviour of asylum seekers.

A spokesman for the immigration minister, Peter Dutton, declined to comment on the documents on Friday, saying the reports had been publicly canvassed previously.

Australia had to apologise to Indonesia for the unintentional breaches of its waters, which sparked a diplomatic incident. Indonesian warships were moved towards the Australian border following the admission in January 2014.

An Australian navy captain was sacked, a second was sanctioned and five were counselled in the aftermath of the review.

It emerged during the review that a crew member had raised concerns they were heading into Indonesian waters but the officer in charge failed to escalate the information to his chain of command, and continued with the operation.

One of the vessels, the Ocean Protector, had digital maps on board which would have shown the baseline markings, but it was not known if they were switched on at the time. The Ocean Protector incurred nine kilometres into Indonesia's internal waters – much further than during the other incidents.

The review found no evidence the crew knew the correct location of the baseline, but found "substantial evidence" the calculations used were wrong, a customs spokesman told Guardian Australia at the time.

The review recommended that rules of engagement be reviewed and harmonised for the defence force and Operation Sovereign Borders, the new disclosures show.

The document also quotes parts of the UN Convention on the Law of Sea, which warns there is no "innocent passage" if a vessel is loading or unloading any person contrary to the customs, fiscal and immigration or sanitary laws and regulations of the coastal state.

The confirmation that Australia was conducting turnback operations is likely to further strain Indonesian relations. Following the most recent turnback – involving six Bangladeshi men and two Indonesian crew – the Indonesian government again criticised the policy.

A foreign ministry spokesman, Arrmanatha Nasir, said turnbacks were "dangerous action and not the permanent solution to overcome the problem of irregular migrants".

Dutton on Friday dismissed the warning and said the two countries had a good relationship and were working together closely.

"We've got a good relationship with Indonesia and work closely with them," "We know there are about 14,000 people who are in Indonesia ready to hop on boats now," he told media in Melbourne.

Dutton and foreign minister Julie Bishop are scheduled to travel to Indonesia for the Bali process ministerial meeting on combating people smuggling on 22 March.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/11/turnbacks-underway-when-indonesian-waters-breached-foi-documents-reveal>

10. MEDIA RELEASE: Hazara asylum seeker deported to danger

Sunday March 13, 2016
 Refugee Action Coalition
 Ian Rintoul
 mobile 0417 275 713

A 42 year-old Hazara asylum seeker is scheduled to be forcibly deported to Kabul on Monday 14 March after appeals to the Minister for Immigration were rejected.

The case once again highlights the deep flaws in the refugee determination process and the system of Ministerial discretion.

The Hazara man was first rejected at the Refugee Review Tribunal in March 2013. "There needs to be an appeal process that can deal with the fact that changed circumstances, in this case, three years can make a fundamental difference in any country's situation, let alone in a country like Afghanistan," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition. "Afghanistan wasn't safe in 2013. The situation so obviously more dangerous in 2016."

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs Afghanistan information in February 2016 warns of 'the extremely dangerous security situation and the very high threat of terrorist attack'; and that 'the frequency of attacks in Kabul, including in the most heavily fortified areas of the capital, has increased significantly in 2015-16 and further attacks are be expected'. "Attacks", it says, "can occur anywhere, anytime, particularly in Kabul, and the southern and eastern provinces."

The Hazara asylum seeker will be the first forcible removal to Afghanistan since two Hazaras were forcibly deported in late 2014.

One of them, Zainullah Naseri, was removed in August 2014 on the basis of a December 2012 Refugee Review Tribunal decision. Following his return he was seized by the Taliban when attempting to travel to his home village along a road about which the Tribunal had stated that 'the level of risk does not reach the threshold of a real chance'.

"The flaws that were obvious in the refugee determination process then have not been fixed. The dangers in Afghanistan are even greater now," said Rintoul, " We urge the Minister to use his wide discretionary powers to reconsider this case and halt this removal."

For more information contact Ian Rintoul 0417 275 713

11. MEDIA RELEASE: Out of control Nauru police strip & handcuff refugee worker

Sunday March 13, 2016
Refugee Action Coalition
Ian Rintoul
mobile 0417 275 713

An Iranian Arab refugee was held naked and handcuffed for a night and a day at the Nauru police station after he was arrested last Thursday night (10 March).

The refugee, who also works for Connect, an Australian service provider for refugees on the island, was arrested after police were called to an argument between the refugee and a local shopkeeper.

Even though the shopkeeper declined to make any formal complaint, the police arrested the refugee.

At the police station, the Nauru police would not allow the man to make a phone call to call the Connect emergency number for assistance. Instead, he was handcuffed and placed in a cell.

After numerous pleas to police to remove the handcuffs, 'to free my hands', the police stripped the man of all his clothes, leaving him completely naked and handcuffed in the cell. "This is like Guantanamo, the police said, "You might be a terrorist."

He was kept naked and cuffed until he was released on Friday after a Connect manager attended the police station. No charge has been laid against the man, although he has been told he may have to appear at a court at an unspecified future date.

The arrest and brutalisation of the refugee on Thursday night is the latest example of the discriminatory policing of refugees on Nauru.

The incident also raises more questions about the complicity of Connect, the Australian-contracted service provider, with the discriminatory policing of refugees on the island. There have been previous incidents in which Connect has called the Nauruan police in regard to disputes over housing; one involving an Iranian female refugee who was held for several days. In another, a 44 year-old Iranian refugee was separated from his 8 year-old daughter and held by the police for almost two weeks after Connect called the police.

The arrest of the Connect worker on Thursday 10 March, comes only days after Nauru police said there was nothing they could do about a machete attack on another Iranian refugee at Nibok, last Saturday night, 5 March.

Despite requests for greater security, neither Connect nor the police have provided a guard for the man and his wife even though the locals responsible for the machete attack, came the next night to attack their accommodation at Nibok, and threatened to kill them.

Connect have also declined requests by the threatened couple to be moved, even temporarily, to safe accommodation.

Despite initial denials of the machete attack, the Nauru police came to Nibok at 2.40pm on Friday 11 March to 'investigate the incident'. The police repeated their earlier statements that, 'We cannot do anything.'

"We lock ourselves in every night. We do not sleep at night for fear we will be attacked again," the Iranian refugee told the Refugee Action Coalition, "But there is no one who will help us."

Police and Connect are also turning a blind eye to a racket involving gangs of locals, often armed with machetes, stealing motorcycles from refugees in Fly Camp.

"Nauru is not safe for asylum seekers and refugees. The Nauru government is both unable and unwilling to provide the protection and secure future for the refugees they are holding for the Australian government," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition.

"That lack of safety is one more reason why the Turnbull government should not return the 267 asylum seekers who are presently in Australia, to Manus Island and Nauru. Allowing the 267 to stay, should be the first step to closing the camps."

For more information contact Ian Rintoul mob 0417 275 713

12. Nuns, church groups start training for Australian Border Force raids

Sydney Morning Herald
March 12, 2016 - 3:49PM
Nicole Hasham

It is hard to imagine the brawn of the Australian Border Force raiding the convent where Saint Mary MacKillop's body is entombed.

But that is the scenario North Sydney's Sisters of St Joseph will be preparing for on Sunday, as they ready to help harbour asylum seekers the Turnbull government tries to force back to Nauru or Manus Island.

The order of Catholic nuns is among about 115 church groups across Australia that have formally offered to provide sanctuary or other aid to the asylum seekers – risking criminal sanctions and raids by police or border officials.

Almost 1200 religious leaders, people from their congregations and members of the public have registered for Sunday's training sessions in capital cities, to learn how to respond if authorities seek to enter church halls, vestries and other church buildings where asylum seekers have sought refuge.

The sanctuary movement began last month after the High Court ruled Australia's offshore detention system was lawful. It paved the way for the Turnbull government to return 267 asylum seekers and refugees from Nauru who had been brought to Australia for medical treatment, or accompanied a family member.

Other asylum seekers facing return to offshore detention would also be offered refuge.

Sister Marion Gambin from the Sisters of St Joseph said Mary MacKillop – Australia's only saint and the order's founder – would have frowned on the government's treatment of asylum seekers.

"We need to stand with the people who are reaching out to us for help," Sister Marion said.

"That's what I've learnt from Mary MacKillop, that's who she was ... this is what she would be doing."

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton has previously claimed asylum seekers would not be dragged out of churches, but still insists they will return to Nauru when their medical treatment is finalised. The Department of Immigration and Border Protection on Friday refused to say how many were living in community detention – and hence could seek church sanctuary – or if any had already returned to Nauru.

It also refused to say if it would override church sanctuaries and remove asylum seekers.

Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce executive officer Misha Coleman, whose organisation initiated the sanctuary movement, said churches would respond peacefully to any effort to remove those in their care. The training is being held in conjunction with advocacy group GetUp.

She said churches were preparing to accommodate and sustain asylum seekers "for a long period of time, until the government reverses its decision to deport people".

"They will have to be housed and clothed and fed, and if they are children they will have to be educated," she said.

Ms Coleman said legal advisers had warned of jail terms or hefty fines for protecting so-called "unlawful" non-citizens or obstructing public officials.

Sister Marion said she was aware of the legal risks, but "I really believe this is what we need to do".

"I don't think we are really holding up our ideals of who we are as a country," she said.

"I'm hoping this offer of sanctuary will bring about a change of heart really, particularly of our government, so we can find a better way."

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/nuns-church-groups-start-training-for-australian-border-force-raids-20160311-gngjza.html>

13. Churches hold 'sanctuary training' for those wanting to shelter asylum seekers

Hundreds expected to attend sessions outlining options for civil disobedience in line with Old Testament concept of sanctuary

The Guardian
Helen Davidson
Saturday 12 March 2016 16.01 EST

Hundreds of people were expected to attend "sanctuary training" around the country on Sunday, learning how to resist any attempts by Australian government officials to forcibly remove asylum seekers.

The events follow a pledge by a growing number of churches to offer the Old Testament concept of sanctuary to a group of 267 asylum seekers in Australia. The group, which includes elderly women and 37 babies among more than 50 children, is facing removal back to offshore detention and processing centres on Nauru or Manus Island.

It's believed about 100 people are being held in community detention while the rest are in medical or detention facilities.

The sessions, which will include instructional role playing and advice on what to do if Australian Border Force officers attempt to remove people, are being held at churches in capital cities, by the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (ACRT), with support from GetUp.

"On Sunday we'll be giving people who expressed a wish the opportunity to learn how to peacefully resist any efforts to forcibly deport asylum seekers back to Nauru and Manus Island," Misha Coleman, chief executive of the ACRT told Guardian Australia.

"We hope the government will see mums and dads, not activists – not rent-a-crowds as they always call groups who protest – but just church-going Christians, normal people from the suburbs, who are prepared, probably for the first time in their lives to be civilly disobedient."

The Christian concept of sanctuary predates common law, and is untested in Australia. However in the 1990s Australian churches offered sanctuary to East Timorese who were facing deportation from Australia after fleeing violence by Indonesian occupying forces and supporters.

"It's a very ancient Christian tradition around providing protection from the terrors of the state, where the state has policies that are intolerable," Coleman said.

"I think especially with this cohort [of asylum seekers], even if you accept – which we don't – that the offshore detention centres act as some sort of deterrent to people seeking asylum, these people have already had their go on Nauru and Manus Island. They've already been incarcerated. They've already done their time if that's what the government thinks is required."

The sanctuary movement had about 115 volunteer churches from around the country, Coleman said, with others offering their support if they could not offer sanctuary.

"By not acting, we in the church community feel we are condoning those practices ... We feel if we don't speak out and don't match our actions with our words then we're essentially being complicit in this regime of terror."

Shen Narayanasamy, Human Rights Director at GetUp said the goal of Sunday's events was to stop vulnerable people being removed "back to abusive detention camps".

"Churches have offered sanctuary, and ordinary people will try to make sure that sanctuary is upheld. It's an incredible gesture," Narayanasamy said.

The ACRT's movement is part of a weeks-long campaign lobbying the minister for immigration, Peter Dutton, to allow the asylum seekers to stay in Australia. Several state and territory leaders have offered to take them in.

The medical fraternity has also called for the government to end the "state sanctioned child abuse" of keeping children in detention. Some doctors called for a boycott of the offshore processing system.

Last month staff at Brisbane Lady Cilento children's hospital were involved in a week-long standoff with the immigration department when they refused to discharge a baby, known as Asha, if she was going to be sent back to Nauru.

Asha was eventually discharged after the immigration minister agreed she and her family could stay in community detention, but he added they would still be sent to Nauru eventually.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/13/churches-hold-sanctuary-training-for-those-wanting-to-shelter-asylum-seekers>

14. 'The whole nation is on board': inside the sanctuary movement to protect asylum seekers

Hundreds gather at churches to learn how to engage in civil disobedience and protect asylum seekers from border force officials

The Guardian
Melissa Davey
Sunday 13 March 2016 01.14 EST

"How many people here have ever been to a blockade where you've tried to prevent someone from doing something," Misha Coleman from the Australinatan Churches Refugee Taskforce asks a crowd of about 100 people gathered outside the Wesley United church in Melbourne.

A good dozen hands go up. Someone yells out that they've been involved in protests to stop the live export of animals.

"Those people who do have some experience, we really do want to get you to help us here today," Coleman continues.

"We're not here today to be arrested. We're here today to demonstrate what respect looks like. This is about a respectful way to challenge the current policy framework."

The policy framework that those gathered have come to challenge is the federal government's hardline stance on asylum seekers, which has left 267 asylum seekers currently in Australia facing deportation to offshore processing centres on Nauru or Manus Island. They could be removed at any time and there are 37 babies among them.

The immigration minister, Peter Dutton, last week reiterated the government's position, despite numerous protests being held throughout the country in recent weeks calling on the government to let the asylum seekers stay.

As a result, hundreds of people gathered at churches around the country on Sunday, including at Wesley United church, to learn how to engage in civil disobedience and protect asylum seekers should border force officials try to forcibly detain them and send them to offshore detention centres.

Coleman tells the crowd that 120 churches are now part of a movement to offer the Old Testament concept of sanctuary to the asylum seekers should border force officials come for them, a statement which is met with applause. The idea is that human rights groups and advocates will try to get those asylum seekers to a church before the border force officials come and will then surround them by joining arms in a protective, peaceful human barrier to block them off from the police and border force staff trying to detain them.

Full story at <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/13/the-whole-nation-is-on-board-inside-the-sanctuary-movement-to-protect-asylum-seekers>

15. Ramazan Ali: Life in the Nauru detention centre

The Saturday Paper
Mar 12, 2016
Ramazan Ali

My misery started when I was transferred to Nauru in November 2012. I arrived on Christmas Island two weeks earlier, on a boat with a group of 83 asylum seekers. Our boat floundered for a day in tumultuous seas. The engine stopped working and the boat was taking on water. We lost hope for survival.

It was lunchtime when we were told we were being transferred. Some of us who had not finished eating had the food stuck in our throats. It was the beginning of a long mental torture.

Three days later, immigration came to our group and told us to collect our belongings. They forced us to sign a paper that said, "We are going to Nauru voluntarily." I asked, "What kind of voluntary is it?" The immigration officer said, "You have no option, you must sign."

Before they put us on the plane, they told everyone of us to take a shower. They did not let us wear our own clothes or shoes. Instead, they provided us with new shorts and T-shirts. Mine was a white colour. Wearing them, I felt like a corpse going to the grave after being washed and shrouded.

In the afternoon, a Serco officer huddled us inside a bus and drove towards the airport. Two Serco cars were at the back and two at the front. Some who resisted and yelled "I don't want to go to Nauru" were dragged by three or four big officers. Looking at them, I thought it was futile to resist. I went by my own feet, thinking they would take me anyway. On the plane, I felt really cold. I shivered in cold the whole flight – about 15 hours.

We were about 15 asylum seekers on the plane. Half of the plane was filled with Serco officers and a nurse. A heavy-set and tattooed Serco officer was sitting between me and another refugee. He did not allow me to look outside or allow us to talk to one another. They looked so big: double our size. When I was going to the toilet, a Serco officer followed me, putting his foot on the door so it was not completely closed. When I spoke, he would not answer me. He would not say where we were or what time it was. I just thought, "What have I done?" They treated us like big criminals. They looked at us with stern faces. I looked at my body and his; I just kept quiet.

When I got out of the plane, the hot weather slapped my face. I had this sinking feeling: "Oh, it's the end the world and maybe the end of my world, too."

They huddled us into a car and drove through jungle. Our car was escorted by two police cars – one at the back and one at the front. I felt like a prisoner being sent to a jail. We arrived at the camp – saw barbed wires and tents. We saw some Iranians and Sri Lankans who were transferred there before us. They said, "Welcome to the hell."

I had not slept for two nights before but could not sleep the first night in Nauru and not so well afterwards. I heard the buzzing mosquitoes all night. Something was moving over my body the whole night and they bit so mercilessly. In the morning, I found my body was swollen with mosquito bites. Others showed me the big wounds and marks left by mosquito bites.

Full story at <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2016/03/12/life-the-nauru-detention-centre/14577012002993>

16. MEDIA RELEASE: Nauru refugee wounded in vicious machete attack

Wednesday March 9, 2016
Refugee Action Coalition
Ian Rintoul
mobile 0417 275 713

A 34 year-old Iranian refugee on Nauru was savagely attacked by two Nauruans on Saturday night, 5 March, around 10pm.

Two Nauruans on a motor cycle approached the man who was walking alone near the Nibok settlement. The man was struck across the top of the head by a machete, while the attacking Nauruans said, "Fuck refugees."

The Iranian man was left with a deep head wound that required 8 stitches (photo attached).

The following night, Sunday, 6 March, locals returned to attack the accommodation at Nibok that the man shares with his wife.

The husband and wife barricaded themselves inside their accommodation and screamed for help, as the attackers yelled, "Fuck refugees. We will kill you." Other refugees in the area rallied to support the couple.

Nauruan police were called but they took one and a half hours to attend to the scene of the attack. Police told the refugees there was nothing they could do.

Now the couple are living in fear of a further attack. Neither the police nor immigration or Connect will provide a guard for their accommodation.

"We cannot sleep for fear we will be attacked again," the victim's wife told the Refugee Action Coalition.

"The unprovoked attack once again reveals both the real danger and the complete absence of official willingness to protect refugees on Nauru. The lack of security at Nibok and other camps on Nauru leaves refugees open to attack," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition.

The Nibok attack comes at the same time as reports of growing numbers of both thefts and incidents of Nauruans armed with knives threatening refugees at the Fly Camp that accommodates single men.

The dangers for refugees on Nauru forms the backdrop to the on-going "Let Them Stay" campaign calling on the Turnbull government to allow the 267 asylum seekers presently in Australia from Nauru and Manus Island, to remain in Australia.

"There is no prospect for enduring protection or care for asylum seekers and refugees on Nauru," said Rintoul, "The 267 must be allowed to stay and the camps must be closed."

For more information contact Ian Rintoul 0417 275 713

17. Nauru police reject claims of alleged 'machete' attack against refugee

The Age
March 9, 2016 - 5:25PM
Nicole Hasham

An Iranian refugee at Nauru claims he was slashed in the head with a large knife normally used to cut down coconuts, in an alleged attack that raises further doubt over the safety of refugees on the island.

Nauruan police say there is no physical evidence of an attack and the refugee refused to provide a statement to police. This is despite the emergence of photos purportedly showing the man's injuries, and an unverified police statement sighted by Fairfax Media.

The man, who lives in the Nauruan community, told Fairfax Media he did not wish to be identified for fear of worrying his family in Iran.

He alleged that he was leaving his home on Saturday evening when he was attacked by two Nauruan men riding a motorbike.

The refugee claimed the men approached him from behind, and one hit him with a large "knife to cut a coconut", similar to a machete.

He says one alleged perpetrator said "f--- refugees" and both men laughed before riding off.

The refugee said the alleged attack was unprovoked, and he believed it was carried out "for fun".

He claims to have lost about one litre of blood and attended hospital, where he received multiple stitches. Photos purportedly of the alleged victim show a long gash along the back of his head.

The refugee said he called police later that night and was told to attend the police station another day.

The man said the alleged attackers returned to his home the following night, and he escaped by locking himself inside. He claims to have later made a statement to police reporting both incidents. An unverified copy of this statement, dated March 7, has been sighted by Fairfax Media.

In a statement, a Nauru Police Force spokeswoman said it received a complaint by a man who said he was hit with a steel object, adding police "responded immediately".

The spokeswoman said the man "refused to allow police to conduct a medical examination, provided no other details and refused to provide a statement to police or co-operate with any investigation. There was no obvious physical evidence of any attack."

"Police conclude that this complaint was made for media exposure only and has no basis," she said.

The alleged victim rejected the claims, saying he showed police his injuries and provided them with photos.

A Department of Immigration and Border Protection spokesman said the allegation was "a matter for the Nauruan Police Force".

There have been growing fears about the safety of refugees living at Nauru who have been subject to a string of alleged attacks.

They include two gay refugees who say they are virtually prisoners in their home after repeated bashings due to their sexual orientation. Homosexuality is illegal in Nauru.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/nauru-police-reject-claims-of-alleged-machete-attack-against-refugee-20160309-gnefkl.html>

18. Nauru refugee left with horrific head wound in attack dismissed by police

Iranian man says two Nauruan men launched unprovoked attack with a machete, but police dismiss injury as being 'made for media exposure only'

The Guardian
Ben Doherty

Wednesday 9 March 2016 16.13 EST

A refugee on Nauru has told police he was attacked on Saturday night with a machete – leaving him with a head wound that required eight stitches – but police have dismissed his injury and complaint as being “made for media exposure only”.

In his statement, the 34-year-old Iranian – who does not want to be identified for fear of repercussions for family members still in Iran – reported he was attacked by two Nauruan men who approached him on a motorbike as he walked alone near the Nibok settlement at about 10pm on Saturday night.

He said the attack was unprovoked, with one of the men striking him across the top of his head with a “knife to cut a coconut”, understood to be a machete or similar. One of the assailants yelled “Fuck refugees”.

Pictures of the man’s head show a deep wound through the middle of his head, sewn together with stitches.

The following night, Sunday 6 March, local men surrounded the accommodation at Nibok where the man lives with his wife. “The group of Nauruans came asking for a fight and they carried sharp knives,” one witness told Guardian Australia.

The husband and wife barricaded themselves inside their accommodation. The attackers were unable to get inside, but threatened the pair, saying: “Fuck you, we will kill you.”

Police were called and attended – after a delay of more than one hour, according to another source on the island – but no arrests were made.

Nauruan police have denied the assault took place, saying in a statement that officers “received a complaint about an alleged attack and responded immediately”.

The police statement in full reads: “The complainant told police he was hit with a ‘steel object’ but refused to allow police to conduct a medical examination, provided no other details and refused to provide a statement to police or cooperate with any investigation. There was no obvious physical evidence of any attack. Police conclude that this complaint was made for media exposure only and has no basis.”

The man who alleged the assault showed police the wound to his head.

“The unprovoked attack once again reveals both the real danger and the complete absence of official willingness to protect refugees on Nauru,” Ian Rintoul, spokesman for the Refugee Action Coalition, said on Wednesday.

“The lack of security at Nibok and other camps on Nauru leaves refugees open to attack.”

Rintoul said the victim’s wife had told him: “We cannot sleep for fear we will be attacked again.”

Also on Wednesday, the Nauruan education department released a video featuring education minister Charmaine Scotty denying claims that refugee and asylum seeker children were being abused and assaulted in local schools.

Earlier this year, videos were posted online of refugee and asylum seeker children on Nauru stating they had been hit by teachers and bullied by students.

Scotty said the allegations were “an affront to Nauru” and not true.

“It’s been overall a very harmonious experience for these kids.

“If these complaints are genuine, it would have happened also with the local kids, with the Nauruan children.”

Nauru’s education system essentially collapsed in the early 2000s – for five years schools barely functioned on the island, no exams were held and there was a mass exodus of teachers from the profession. The system is being slowly rebuilt, largely with Australian money.

The closure of the Australia-run school for asylum seeker and refugee children within the detention centre was fiercely resisted last year, with students saying they were fearful of being moved to the local school because they would be attacked. In their online video released in January, they reported being punched by students and their complaints dismissed by teachers because they were refugees.

The two incidents – and their responses from Nauruan authorities – are evidence of the continuing difficulties being experienced on Nauru in attempting to assimilate refugees from a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds into a monocultural, Christian, island society.

Nauru's on-island population is about 8,000. The nearly 500 people in the detention centre and more than 550 refugees resettled in the community have suddenly added more than 10% to the population. Nauru is, per capita, the third-largest refugee-hosting country in the world, courtesy of Australia's offshoring policy.

Despite constant denials by the Nauruan government of tension between refugees and locals, there is significant hostility towards the new residents on the tiny island.

Single women in particular are singled out for verbal abuse and physical attack.

The Australian government is continuing to search for a "third country" in which it can resettle those it has sent to Nauru. The Nauruan government has resolutely maintained it will not accept any refugees for permanent resettlement.

The Australian government's only third-country resettlement option so far – Cambodia – has been a calamitous failure, with only two refugees resettled in the south-east Asian nation, at a cost to Australia of \$55m.

Three other refugees transferred to Cambodia have opted to risk returning home, to Myanmar and Iran, despite the Australian and Nauruan governments finding they faced "a well-founded fear of persecution" in their homelands.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/10/nauru-refugee-left-with-horrific-head-wound-after-attack-dismissed-by-police>

19. Nauru Government denies refugee children are abused in schools

ABC Radio CAF - PM

By Simon Lauder

Posted Wed 9 Mar 2016, 4:12pm

The Nauru Government has denied claims that refugee children are being abused in the country's schools.

Earlier this year videos emerged of children, purportedly refugees on Nauru, claiming they had been hit by teachers and bullied by students.

The videos were released in January by advocacy group Offshore Processing Centre Voice (OPC Voice) who claimed the children were filmed inside the Nauru refugee camp.

Today the Government of Nauru released its own video in which Education Minister Charmaine Scotty is filmed talking about the integration of refugee children into Nauruan schools.

"It's been overall a very harmonious experience for these kids," Ms Scotty says.

She goes on to argue that if the claims were true, there would also be complaints from Nauruan families, not just refugees.

"This idea that the teachers are abusing children is wrong, because funnily enough, the things that I read in the overseas media, it's the refugee children who are complaining about the teachers on Nauru.

"But the Nauruan children are not complaining. If this is the truth, the Nauruan are always the first ... the parents, they know their rights — they come and complain.

"They go to the police, they come to the Education Department. They bring in the complaints. If these complaints are genuine, it would have happened also with the local kids, with the Nauruan children."

Ms Scotty also cites the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"It's an affront to us, to the people of Nauru and to the Education Department. Because Nauru, as most of the members of the United Nations, we ratified CRC — Convention on the Rights of the Child — and we adhere to that convention, to our mandate as being a signatory to that convention.

"All of us our teachers and have been trained in regards to recognising what child abuse is."

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-09/nauru-govt-denies-abuse-of-refugee-school-children/7234772>

20. Nauru visa changes slammed as 'crazy, embarrassing' by former president

ABC News Online

Posted Mon 7 Mar 2016, 2:52pm

A former president of Nauru says his country's recent changes to visitor visas for Australia and New Zealand are "crazy".

Under the new immigration rules, Australians and New Zealanders wanting to visit the Pacific nation will need a sponsorship letter from a Nauruan citizen.

If visitors breach the visa restrictions, the sponsor faces a fine of up to \$5,000 as well as a maximum sentence of one year in jail.

Nauru's former president Sprent Dabwido told Pacific Beat most Nauruans would be "intimidated" by the measure.

"It's crazy, why these two nations?" he said.

"What has Australia and New Zealand done to deserve this kind of restriction on their citizens if they want to come to Nauru?"

"Probably it's a warning to those not to even think about sponsoring people from Australia and New Zealand.

"It's another wall being built on top of the walls they've already built."

Visitor visas from Australia and New Zealand were cancelled last month following the sudden rule change.

Nauru's Government, which has criticised Australian media for coverage of immigration issues, said the move was in response to an ABC journalist attempting to enter the country as a visitor, a claim the ABC denies.

Several Australian and international media organisations have unsuccessfully sought approval to visit Nauru to report on the country's agreement with Australia to take asylum seekers who arrive by boat.

The cost of journalist visas in Nauru was raised to \$8,000 two years ago.

Mr Dabwido said the latest measures were "embarrassing and wrong".

"They've done it to target advocates and probably the media of Australia and New Zealand, that's probably the hidden agenda behind what they are doing," he said.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-07/ex-president-of-nauru-slams-visa-changes/7227166>

21. Abyan reports being 'scared' after Chris Kenny's Nauru visit, immigration emails reveal

Exclusive: Welfare of alleged rape victim discussed after she was approached by journalists from the Australian, emails obtained under FOI laws show

The Guardian

Amanda Meade

Wednesday 9 March 2016 00.06 EST

The Somali refugee and alleged rape victim known as Abyan reported feeling "harassed" and "scared" after Chris Kenny, an associate editor at the Australian, and a photographer approached her accommodation on Nauru, immigration officials said in correspondence obtained by Guardian Australia.

Emails obtained through freedom of information requests show top immigration officials from the two countries discussing the welfare of Abyan, who was reportedly upset after the journalists "caused some issues" with her after she returned from Australia.

"She advised [service provider] Connect she is unable to stay at her house as the journalists were 'camped outside'," one official says. Written approval was given for Abyan to be moved elsewhere, following the approach from the journalists.

An officer from the Nauruan government responds that he or she was unaware of the incident and was "sorry to hear that". The Nauru official adds that the article in the Australian has just been seen. "We have advised [redacted] on the implications of publishing photos of asylum seekers."

The correspondence also shows senior officials in the Australian immigration department – including at least two first assistant secretaries and a deputy commissioner – were aware of Kenny’s presence on the island and that he was pursuing Abyan.

The journalists were Kenny – the first journalist in 18 months to be granted a visa to visit Nauru – and photographer Kelly Barnes. When asked by Guardian Australia in October 2015 how he obtained a visa to report from Nauru, Kenny said: “If my public support for strong border protection measures helped sway Nauru’s decision, so be it.”

Abyan – who says she was raped by an unknown assailant in July 2015 – had just returned to Nauru from Australia, where she had been seeking an abortion.

Kenny had flown into Nauru to report on conditions, and arrived as news about Abyan was breaking so he decided to try and get an interview with Abyan, he later wrote.

In another email an official confirms Abyan will be placed in a secure place “for a period of time due to two journalists approaching her about 10.30am this morning at her residence”.

“I have been advised that she is currently with IHMS staff at the RON hospital clinic and has indicated to them that she is feeling harassed and is too scared to return to the residence due to the journalists presence. I have verbally advised IHMS staff of your approval and she will be transported here shortly,” the official says.

A first assistant secretary at the department of immigration and border protection, Cheryl-Anne Moy, advised Australian officials on Nauru in October that there were two Australian journalists on the island and requested that no staff from Border Force be interviewed.

“I am not sure if you are aware some journalists caused some issues today with the refugee who returned to Nauru on Friday,” Moy wrote to the department’s top officials including the commander of regional processing, Kingsley Woodford-Smith, a first assistant secretary of detention services, Neil Skill, and deputy commissioner Cindy Briscoe.

“She [Abyan] advised [welfare agency] Connect she is unable to stay at her house as the journalists were ‘camped outside’. She is currently in RPCI [Regional Processing Centre 1].”

The emails were obtained under Freedom of Information laws and the names of Australian and Nauru government officials on Nauru and personal details about Abyan have been redacted.

Kenny did acknowledge at the time that Abyan was not happy with his visit. “Five hours after the Australian’s interview Nauruan authorities reported that Abyan complained about being visited by the media and had sought medical attention at the local hospital,” he wrote in his piece on 20 October.

The next paragraph reads: “Abyan’s case comes after another rape allegation made by a Somali refugee on Nauru, reported by the ABC’s 7.30. Police have investigated that complaint and determined that it was fabricated.”

Kenny wrote that he found Abyan by asking other refugees. He knocked on her door and her initial response was to refer him to her lawyer, George Newhouse, he reported.

Abyan then apparently relented and invited him into her home and gave him a chair to sit on and that she “again spoke briefly outside her door and agreed to have her photo taken without her face being shown”.

Refugee activist Pamela Curr, who was speaking to Abyan on the phone when Kenny was at the house, told supporters in an email that Abyan was very distressed and she had asked Kenny to leave.

Kenny said Curr was spreading “malicious lies” about him. He called her and sent her two legal letters demanding she retract. She later apologised and withdrew some of her comments.

Kenny, who has denied harassing Abyan, wrote of the incident that it would have been “unthinkable that any responsible journalist fortunate enough to be there would not try to find her and seek her version of events”. “It was a difficult and fraught assignment but I was pleased to speak with Abyan and relay to the public her version of events and her wishes.”

In a statement to Guardian Australia Kenny said Abyan’s visit to the Nauru hospital was originally reported by him in the Australian.

“As has been clearly established she was interviewed of her own free will and was treated with respect,” Kenny said. “At no stage was she harassed and nor was anyone ‘camped’ outside her accommodation.

“Refugee advocates have spread lies about these events and have withdrawn them.”

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/09/abyan-reports-being-scared-after-chris-kennys-nauru-visit-immigration-emails-reveal>

22. Pamela Curr: Whether On Nauru Or Australia, The Detention Industry Harms Women

From major traumas to small, everyday intrusions, detention grinds women down. The struggle for our rights is not over until all women are treated with dignity and respect, writes Pamela Curr.

New Matilda
By Pamela Curr
March 8, 2016

Another International Women's Day arrives, bringing with it a moment to reflect on the road to equity and fairness for women. We older women particularly remember a time when our lives were dependant on the goodwill of men. Such times are well past for most women in Australia today but not for all.

The cruelty of the lives of women in Australian on- and offshore detention camps is heartbreaking. This terrible secret is largely unknown because media are denied access, staff are threatened with jail if they speak out, and the women themselves are fearful of even worse treatment or of removal if they complain. For those transferred back to the mainland, their great fear is of being returned to Nauru to endure life in mouldy hot tents with little to no water, stinking toilets and vermin. Life in Melbourne, Brisbane and Darwin detention centres seems paradise by comparison until the family separation and mental torture wears them down.

Even in Australian detention centres the small, routine harshness grinds women down. Imagine having to endure a body search by a female guard using both hands to squeeze your arms and legs, patting your breasts and bottom and poking fingers under the bra and into the groin before you go out, and then once again on return. This is the situation for women when they leave the camps to go to a medical or counselling appointment.

This search is filmed by a male guard at close range. The woman is then escorted to an awaiting van by two guards holding her upper arms. This is the new Border Force Enhanced Escort Position or EEP. The search makes no sense other than to cause maximum distress and loss of dignity.

After months of seeking an explanation for this abusive and intrusive process, it has been confirmed that this is not over-reach on the part of the contractors, but rather part of Border Force policy.

Each night at around 11pm and then again at 5am, guards bang on their doors calling out "how many". The women tell us that many guards do not wait for an answer but barge straight in with torches to shine in their face, waking their children. During the day a guard may come at any time. Women tell me that they are afraid to be caught on the toilet or in the shower. Doors can be locked, but guards have the keys.

Women who are deemed to be High Risk because they are crying or upset, or who are thought to be suicidal, are put on the Psychological Support Program (PSP). A guard can follow them around or sit inside their room, a short distance from the bed. In the past they sat outside the room in the doorway and female guards were placed on watch for women. Now, a woman can wake in the night to find the door closed and a male guard at her side. We've argued with Border Force that only women should perform this role but have been rebuffed.

Women say they are going mad in this high surveillance environment with nothing meaningful to do. One woman had a sewing machine given to her by SERCO. She made clothes and bags out of recycled jeans and always had a box full of mending for others in the camp. Even SERCO guards gave her uniforms for repair. Two other women asked visitors for machines to make things for their children and to keep busy. The machines were offered and placed in property, but never passed through to the women.

This International Women's Day we remember that our struggle is not over until all women are treated with respect and dignity. As we have apologised and lamented over cruel policies towards Indigenous women and single mothers, we will one day be called upon to apologise for this cruelty to women seeking safety. Enough of this cruel government policy now.

<https://newmatilda.com/2016/03/08/whether-on-nauru-or-the-mainland-the-detention-industry-harms-women/>

23. Two offshore asylum seekers placed under suicide or self-harm watch every three days

Exclusive: Confidential health briefing obtained under freedom of information laws shows dramatic deterioration in mental health of people held on Nauru and Manus

The Guardian
Ben Doherty
Tuesday 8 March 2016 14.07 EST

Asylum seekers in offshore detention are being placed under surveillance for suicide and self-harm at a rate of two every three days, and growing more seriously mentally ill the longer they are detained, a new health briefing to the federal government shows.

Obtained under a freedom of information request by Guardian Australia, the latest report shows a dramatic deterioration in the mental health of asylum seekers held in offshore detention.

It warns that rates of mental illness are almost certainly higher than reported because people in offshore detention have given up going to see doctors, “feeling ... hopelessness and apathy ... relating to time in detention, lack of progress ... and the perceived dangers of resettlement”.

Every three months, International Health and Medical Services (IHMS), the government’s immigration health services provider, prepares the report for the government on “health trends” in immigration detention.

A new statistic, added by IHMS for the past six months, shows the number of times asylum seekers are placed on “supportive monitoring and engagement” (SME), a process of monitoring by staff after an attempt or threat to self-harm or take their own life.

At its highest level, SME is an around-the-clock suicide watch, involving one-on-one monitoring of a person at close physical proximity 24 hours a day, even as they shower, sleep or go to the toilet. Asylum seekers report this regime is highly invasive and distressing.

In the six months between July and December of 2015, SME was initiated 124 times over 184 days in offshore detention, a rate of more than two every three days. Up to 66 individual people were placed on SME, meaning most made several separate attempts to self-harm or take their own life. Nearly 40 people were placed on the highest category suicide watch, known as “high/imminent”.

But the figure of self-harm attempts is likely to be even higher. Nauru’s transition to an “open centre” meant SME could not, legally, be applied for a period, meaning those who had committed self-harm or attempted to take their own life could not be fully monitored.

The latest figures are released as the medical fraternity in Australia continues to resist government impositions of mandatory offshore detention.

Last month doctors at Brisbane’s Lady Cilento hospital refused to discharge the Australian-born asylum seeker “baby Asha” until they were assured she would not be returned to Nauru, an environment they regarded as “unsafe”. The head of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Brian Owler, said offshore processing was “state-sanctioned child abuse” that was “pulling apart the moral fabric of the country”.

An asylum seeker on Nauru, whom Guardian Australia has chosen not to name, has attempted to take her own life numerous occasions over the past several months, and is now on 24-hour close watch.

She says she is given a cocktail of sedative drugs every day to stop her harming herself again. If she refuses to take the tablets given to her she is injected.

“I have problems mentally,” she told Guardian Australia. “I have tried for suicide many times, so I am on high watch. Someone is watching me all the time, everywhere, all the day and night. They give me lots of tablets, but they make me dizzy and feel sleepy. I say, ‘I don’t want to take,’ and they tell me, ‘If you don’t take, we will give injection.’”

“I am very scary about what will happen to me. I have been here 26 months, but this place is terrible for me. I don’t have a future, I can’t think about the future.”

Over several reports, IHMS has consistently told the government that rates of anxiety, distress, and depression all increase the longer people are held in detention. Across the Australian immigration detention regime, onshore and offshore, the average time in detention is now 457 days, the highest it has ever been.

Based on the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, known as the K10 scale, IHMS data shows 22.4% of asylum seekers rated as “severely” mentally distressed, and 19.4% moderately mentally distressed.

The rate of severe mental distress is more than six times that in the Australian community, which is 3.5% severe (8.5% moderate). But IHMS has warned the offshore detention rate is likely higher because severely distressed people are likely to refuse to take part in the K10 survey.

In its latest report, IHMS noted a correlation between length of stay in detention and mental health issues, and said the data clearly showed a “persisting trend for movement towards the severe end on the distress scale over time”.

IHMS also said accurately gauging mental health of asylum seekers was becoming increasingly difficult because of “detention fatigue”. All but one of offshore detainees have been in detention for more than 18 months, and fewer and fewer people are

seeing doctors in both Nauru and Manus Island because they feel hopeless about their situation and, in some cases, are frightened about being resettled.

“On Nauru, a 32% reduction in consultations appears to be related to a reduction in transferee numbers, the establishment of a 24-hour, 7-day-per-week ‘open centre’ combined with an increase in feelings of hopelessness and apathy in some transferee cohorts,” IHMS wrote.

“On Manus Island, a 4% reduction in consultations reflects relative disengagement with health services associated with an increase in feelings of hopelessness and apathy ... staff are also noting an increased level of hopelessness in this cohort relating to time in detention, lack of progress with and the perceived dangers of resettlement.”

The secretary of the immigration department, Michael Pezzullo, said on Tuesday that people in offshore immigration detention had access to mental health care that “broadly commensurates with Australian community standards”.

Many asylum seekers placed in detention had existing mental health issues from trauma suffered in their home country or on their journey to Australia, Pezzullo said.

“For this reason the department and its service providers support individuals with a range of specialist care options including mental health assessments and individualised care plans,” he said. “The department provides access to mental health nurses, counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists to individuals transferred to Australia for medical care.

“The Nauru and Manus regional processing centres both have mental health care staff onsite, including mental health nurses, counsellors, torture and trauma counsellors, psychologists and a psychiatrist. There are also additional mental health care staff based at the Nauru Settlement clinic.”

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/09/two-offshore-asylum-seekers-placed-under-suicide-or-self-harm-watch-every-three-days>

24. DIBP uses 'allegedly' to describe experiences of Nazi Germany

The Age
March 9, 2016 - 10:23AM
Kate Aubusson

With one misplaced "allegedly" Australia's Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) appears to have stumbled into trouble.

In a statement on Tuesday titled "Immigration detention and children: separating fact from fiction" the DIBP's secretary Michael Pezzullo attempted to dispel "highly offensive" comparisons between the detention centres and historical atrocities in Nazi Germany.

But the unfortunate placement of one word derailed the message.

"Recent comparisons of immigration detention centres to 'gulags'," the statement read. "[S]uggestions that detention involves a 'public numbing and indifference' similar to that allegedly experienced in Nazi Germany; and persistent suggestions that detention facilities are places of 'torture' are highly offensive, unwarranted and plainly wrong – and yet they continue to be made in some quarters."

The 'allegedly' excerpt was pounced on by Twitter users, who pointed out the error.

"Free advice to Border Force: it's NOT best practise [sic] to put 'allegedly' next to 'Nazi Germany'," wrote @JoshButler.

"Bad Sentence Structure? or did Australia's Border Force just use the word 'allegedly' about the Holocaust," tweeted @workmanalice.

"Border Force wish to announce that the sun will come up tomorrow," wrote @MrDenmore.

"Border Force allegedly a competent organisation," wrote @ClancyBenson.

A spokesperson from the DIBP issued a response on Tuesday evening, saying: "Any insinuation the Department denies the atrocities committed in Nazi Germany are both ridiculous and baseless.

"This has been wilfully taken out of context and reflects deliberate attempts to distort this opinion editorial to create controversy.

"The term 'allegedly' was used to counter claims of 'public numbing and indifference' towards state abuses in Nazi Germany and the link to immigration detention in Australia. We reject the comparison to immigration detention as offensive and

question this being made as a blanket statement - an allegation hence 'allegedly' - to describe the attitude of the German population at large during that terrible time."

In the original statement, published on the department's website on Tuesday, Mr Pezzullo said "while policy can be debated, there should be no place for falsehood, rumour and unfounded speculation".

"People smugglers are constantly poised to jump on any relevant mistruth in order to convince prospective asylum seekers to pay them to get to Australia.

"That is also why official statements on this issue have to be precise and unambiguous as to the essential objective of government policy."

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/border-force-uses-allegedly-to-describe-experiences-of-nazi-germany-as-it-attempts-to-debunk-myths-about-its-detention-centres-20160308-gndz4a>

25. Border Force very sad about mean media comparing detention to Nazi concentration camps

Crikey

Mar 09, 2016 9:45AM

JOSH TAYLOR, Crikey journalist

They wear dark militaristic uniforms, are forced to pledge an oath upon signing up, wanted to conduct random street checks on visas, and spend millions of dollars on medals. But please don't compare them to you-know-who, secretary of the highly secretive government Department of Immigration and Border Protection has said, in a bizarre (and a tad sensitive) defence of border protection policy, detention centres and Border Force.

For the second time in under a month, Michael Pezzullo lashed out at coverage of Border Force issues, sending out a downright weird press release on Tuesday defending the government's highly controversial policy of detaining asylum seekers -- in particular, children -- who arrive by boat offshore on Manus or Nauru.

Pezzullo, using a line similar to the Nuremberg defence, stated that the department was simply following the law of Australia and government policy in detaining children.

He said that the department and its "uniformed operational arm", Border Force, operated within the law and was not an "immoral 'rogue agency'".

Pezzullo did not specifically reference what prompted the release, however it appears it to be in response to an article published in the Australasian Psychiatry Journal in January by UNSW senior lecturer Michael Dudley.

In his article examining the role of healthcare professionals in immigration detention, Dudley said that the detention policies "show reckless indifference and calculated cruelty". He said they "promote public numbing and indifference" and compared the policies to Nazi Germany, and detention to Soviet gulags.

He said that keeping children and adults in detention contravened Australia's endorsement of international conventions on refugees, civil and political rights, torture, children and disability, but he noted that no dissent or impartial evidence had swayed successive governments to consider alternatives.

He said the ethical aims of healthcare and detention were incompatible. Healthcare workers in detention centres are forced to sign secret agreements, which sabotage their independence and compromise their ability to provide advocacy and confidentiality for their patients.

The part that seems to have most hurt Pezzullo's feelings is a comparison to how health professionals in World War II helped the Nazis. Dudley wrote:

"Nazi-helping professionals were usually normal people, not psychopaths or villains. Peer and situational pressures, careerism and ideological commitments motivated them. Euphemism, bureaucratic routines and missionary zeal facilitated psychic numbing and denial."

Pezzullo said it was highly offensive to claim detention centres were like gulags and that detention "involves a 'public numbing and indifference' similar to that allegedly experienced in Nazi Germany".

When there was confusion to what experiences in Nazi Germany Pezzullo believed to be "alleged", the department put out a second press release clarifying that "the term 'allegedly' was used to counter claims of 'public numbing and indifference' towards state abuses in Nazi Germany and the link to immigration detention in Australia":

"Any insinuation the Department denies the atrocities committed in Nazi Germany are both ridiculous and baseless. This has been wilfully taken out of context and reflects deliberate attempts to distort this opinion editorial to create controversy."

Pezzullo stated that the resources devoted to providing medical and support services "undercuts emotive and inflammatory claims to the contrary".

He said there was "enhanced oversight" for the care given to asylum seekers in detention, with the department's chief medical officer, Dr John Brayley, giving advice to Pezzullo.

In a Senate estimates hearing in February, Brayley said it was "deleterious" for children to be held in detention, and those suffering from PTSD should not be held in detention.

Pezzullo said the department's goal was "the same as its critics" -- i.e. to get children out of detention -- and he noted there were now just 58 children in detention, down from close to 2000 in 2013. The 80 children in Australia for medical treatment, who are due to be returned to Nauru following a High Court decision, will be returned to an "open centre" on Nauru. There is security at an open centre, but the government of Nauru says asylum seekers are free to come and go as they please.

Asylum seeker advocates are quick to point out, however, that the island of Nauru is 21 square kilometres -- smaller than Melbourne Airport.

Pezzullo was not the only one to take issue with Dudley's Nazi comparisons. Last month Executive Council of Australian Jewry president Robert Goot said that it was a "disappointing" comparison to make.

"Whatever validity there is to criticisms of Australia's detention centres, it is undermined by making such comparisons."

Mike Godwin, the man who popularised "Godwin's Law" -- which describes the likelihood of online debate invoking hyperbolic comparisons to Nazis or Hitler -- has previously said it was not trivialising to compare Australia's asylum seeker policy to Nazi Germany.

<http://www.crikey.com.au/2016/03/09/border-force-very-sad-about-mean-media-comparing-detention-to-nazi-concentration-camps/>

26. 'Separating fact from fiction': where the immigration department fell short

Department head Michael Pezzullo often takes issue with those who disagree with immigration policy, but nothing in his lengthy statement 'separating fact from fiction' issued on Tuesday constitutes 'fiction' as opposed to an analysis differing from his own

The Guardian
Helen Davidson
Wednesday 9 March 2016 01.49 EST

The head of Australia's Department of Immigration and Border Protection, Michael Pezzullo, on Tuesday released a lengthy statement "separating fact from fiction" about the offshore detention and processing network he oversees.

His reason for doing so was the reputation of his department and its officers.

Pezzullo often takes issue with what is said by those who disagree with immigration policy, as well as with the language used by those who report on it. Nothing in his statement, however, constitutes "fiction" as opposed to an opinion or analysis differing from his own.

Because the department refuses to engage with the media -- and through them the public -- information comes from unofficial sources, which are no less trustworthy and oftentimes are more trustworthy than government statements.

The public's wish for transparency and Pezzullo's wish for 100% accuracy could both be fulfilled if media were allowed into detention and processing centres to report. Pezzullo may prefer the media to simply stop writing about the topic at all, but that's simply not going to happen.

Much of the reaction to his letter has been on an inadvisable placement of the word "allegedly" in a sentence referring to public indifference in Nazi Germany, but a number of other points made by Pezzullo also warrant addressing.

1. Consistent with the law of the land, and under direction of the government of the day, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection operates a policy of keeping children in detention only as a last resort, and releasing those children that might be in detention as soon as reasonably practicable," Pezzullo claimed.

In fact Australia detains children as a first resort. We are the only country in the world to do so. When/if a child is among a group of people seeking asylum by boat they, along with their family and fellow passengers, are put in an Australian-run immigration detention centre or sent to detention offshore.

Families may gain community detention and be released, but the first action taken is to place them in detention, and it has been for both this government and the preceding Labor administration which oversaw a peak of more than 1,600 children detained.

Despite Australian law stipulating detention as a last resort for children, the AHRC's Forgotten Children report found that "by requiring the mandatory detention of all non-citizen children in Australia without a valid visa, the law, as it currently stands, results in 'exactly the opposite' of what is required".

Critics of the system and health professionals have long said detention of children should not be a "resort" at all

2. He also claimed "persistent suggestions that detention facilities are places of 'torture' are highly offensive, unwarranted and plainly wrong – and yet they continue to be made in some quarters".

The claim that detention and the conditions within amounts to torture is one posited by a number of medical professionals, including the former director of mental health services at International Health and Medical Services, Dr Peter Young.

"If we take the definition of torture to be the deliberate harming of people in order to coerce them into a desired outcome, I think it does fulfil that definition," he told the Guardian in 2014.

Young's views are shared by Professor David Isaacs, a consultant paediatrician who worked on Nauru – also for IHMS, the company contracted to run health services for the immigration department – in December 2014.

A year ago the United Nations special rapporteur on torture found Australia is systematically violating the international Convention Against Torture by holding children in immigration detention.

3. In the same vein, any contention that prolonged immigration detention represents 'reckless indifference and calculated cruelty' in order to deter future boat arrivals, do not pass even the most basic fact check," Pezzullo said. "The number of children in detention would not be falling if that were the case."

However the former immigration minister Scott Morrison told a Senate inquiry in 2014 that while detaining children was not a specific deterrence, it was a "consequence" of a suite of border protection policies which do provide a deterrence.

Charges of indifference and cruelty within immigration detention, as a deterrent or otherwise, are myriad. Several inquiries, investigations, and media reports have detailed incidents - alleged and confirmed - which include asylum seekers beaten to death, placed in solitary confinement, cable-tied to furniture, coerced into sexual activity, sexually assaulted, ridiculed, or put in humiliating circumstances.

In response to one of the reports on rampant sexual abuse, then prime minister Tony Abbott said: "things happen".

A 2014 study published in the Medical Journal of Australia found 80% of doctors surveyed believed detention of children to be abusive.

4. According to Pezzullo: "Significant progress has been made over the past year to move children and their families from detention into the community. As I write, there are now 58 children who arrived by boat in held detention, down from a peak of almost 2,000 back in 2013."

This is entirely accurate. There are children still currently held in detention.

5. He also claimed that: "Recognition of an individual's mental health needs is particularly pertinent because many individuals in detention arrive with pre-existing mental health issues and may have experienced traumatic events in their country of origin or on their attempted journey to Australia."

Yes, it is likely a large number of people seeking asylum have pre-existing mental health and trauma issues. But detention is making it worse, according to numerous doctors including the current chief medical officer and surgeon general for the Australian Border Force, Dr John Brayley.

People in detention suffer mental illnesses at nearly four times the rate of the general Australian population, and their mental health deteriorates sharply the longer they are held in detention. Children under 18 had, by far, the highest rates of mental illness presentations among detainees.

6. And finally: "I must also address ongoing and consistent claims that those expressing opinions on immigration detention are 'risking jail by speaking out'. While often repeated, this claim is also wrong and unsupported by any facts. The secrecy and disclosure provisions in Part 6 of the Australian Border Force (ABF) Act are not unique."

The department has said this before, and was accused of misunderstanding the implications of its own legislation.

The secrecy and disclosure provisions in the Border Force Act impose a two year jail sentence on a current or former "entrusted person" – an officer, employee or contractor for, or secondee to, the department, who makes a record of or discloses "protected information."

There are exceptions, none of which include disclosure to the media, and the government has claimed there are protections under whistleblower legislation, although there are major caveats to this according to human rights lawyer George Newhouse.

As Pezzullo writes, it does not prevent medical professionals administering health care, or reporting something internally.

What it does block is public advocacy, something which a large number of current and former entrusted persons have at some point felt was the only recourse left to them to effect change in the system.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/09/separating-fact-from-fiction-where-the-immigration-department-fell-short>

27. Nazi comment brings apology calls

The West Australian

By Lisa Martin

March 9, 2016, 6:45 pm

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton and Labor's immigration spokesman Richard Marles have called on each other to apologise over a reference to Nazi Germany from the immigration department.

Department boss Michael Pezzullo dismissed as highly offensive, unwarranted and wrong claims from critics that likened detention centres to gulags and suggestions of public indifference similar to that "allegedly experienced in Nazi Germany".

The use of the word "allegedly" raised eyebrows across social media.

The department later said it had been "wilfully taken out of context".

"Any insinuation the department denies the atrocities committed in Nazi Germany are both ridiculous and baseless," it said in a statement.

Mr Marles said the department had turned a simple mistake into a "great error of judgment".

Its "laboured attempt" to explain the language had compounded the original mistake.

"The minister Peter Dutton has to come out today and clearly withdraw these words and apologise," Mr Marles told reporters.

"The reputation of the department is at stake, indeed the reputation of Australia is at stake."

But Mr Dutton accused Mr Marles of seeking to twist Mr Pezzullo's remarks.

"Any suggestion that Mr Pezzullo deliberately sought to deny or qualify the crimes of the Nazi era is patently ludicrous," Mr Dutton said in a statement.

He said Mr Marles should apologise to Mr Pezzullo and staff of the department and Australian Border Force for impugning their integrity.

<https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/a/31053072/row-over-alleged-holocaust-comments/>

28. Iranian asylum seekers could be sent home under deal with Tehran

Plan would allow Australia to forcibly return Iranians if Tehran guarantees they would not be persecuted or punished

The Guardian

Ben Doherty

Tuesday 8 March 2016 20.03 EST

Thousands of Iranian asylum seekers caught in limbo in Australia could be returned home under a deal set to be discussed when Iran's foreign affairs minister visits Australia next week.

Dr Mohammad Javad Zarif will visit as part of a broader push from Tehran to improve its economic and diplomatic relations with the west after last year's nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions in January.

An asylum deal is seen as a key agenda item for his visit, particularly from the Australian government's perspective.

There are about 9,000 Iranian asylum seekers in Australia's immigration system. About 400 are on Nauru and Manus Island, but most are in Australia, in detention or living in the community on bridging visas.

Iranians who do not meet the Refugees Convention threshold for protection cannot be forcibly returned to Iran because Tehran refuses to accept anyone being repatriated against their will.

As a result, hundreds of Iranians are stuck in limbo in Australia, unable to be deported and without any apparent prospect of being granted the right to stay.

The new deal would enable Australia to forcibly return asylum seekers, in exchange for guarantees from Tehran they would not face persecution or punishment.

Australia also wants to weaken its complementary protection regime, making it easier to send people back to places where they could potentially face significant harm.

Historically, most Iranians seeking asylum in Australia are ultimately granted the right to stay because of a "well-founded fear" of persecution in their homeland.

The government has discontinued its Asylum Trends report, but the most recent figures published by the immigration department shows 91% of Iranians are ultimately found to require protection by Australia.

Ethnic and religious minorities, homosexuals, journalists and opponents of the government face particular persecution in Iran.

Since signing a framework agreement to limit its nuclear program with a host of global powers in April last year – the so-called P5+1 talks – Iran has sought to strengthen its economic and diplomatic ties with the west.

And its emergence into more open relations is seen as timely globally. Iran is increasingly seen by western powers as a key player in helping broker a political solution to the long-running conflict in Syria, the major driver of the European refugee influx.

The bulk of Australia's economic and financial sanctions against Iran were lifted in January but it maintains restrictions on transferring nuclear proliferation-sensitive goods and weapons.

Zarif is understood to also be meeting the immigration minister, Peter Dutton, the trade minister, Steve Ciobo, the trade envoy, Andrew Robb, and, diary permitting, the prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull.

An asylum deal between Australia and Iran was first publicly floated when the foreign affairs minister, Julie Bishop, visited Tehran 12 months ago.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/09/iranian-asylum-seekers-could-be-sent-home-under-deal-with-tehran>

29. Iran rejects suggestions thousands of failed asylum seekers could be returned

The Age
March 10, 2016 - 6:18PM
David Wroe and Michael Koziol

Iran's Ambassador has poured cold water on hopes of any imminent deal to forcibly send up to 9000 failed Iranian asylum seekers home.

Ahead of a visit by the nation's foreign minister next week, Ambassador Abdolhossein Vahaji told Fairfax Media that Iran had no intention of accepting back its citizens returned forcibly after their asylum applications had been rejected.

His comments follow a report in The West Australian newspaper this week that said talks on the long-running point of contention between the two countries were well-advanced and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop was hopeful of a deal next week.

Asked whether there was any chance of a deal on returning people involuntarily, Mr Vahaji said: "No agreement. No improvement in that regard."

He branded as "propaganda" suggestions that people should be sent back, saying it was their right to stay.

"It's their decision, it's not my decision," he said. "If they want to stay under any circumstances, why should I bother them? Let them stay anywhere they want."

He said Iran was hosting 3 million Afghan refugees and Australia should accept like other countries that it simply has to take more asylum-seekers.

"Your country [is] in a position that you have to accept asylum seekers," he said.

Ms Bishop's spokeswoman said on Wednesday after The West Australian report that dealing with the "legacy caseload" of people who arrived by boat was a priority for the government. But she played down the prospect of any quick deal, saying only that "officials-levels talks are ongoing".

Ms Bishop has keenly sought improved relations with the Middle Eastern powerhouse as it opens up to the world in the wake of the nuclear deal that has spelled the end of many economic sanctions.

But Tehran's refusal to accept the forced return of about 9000 Iranians who are living in limbo, mostly in the community, after their asylum claims were rejected has been a thorny point of frustration for years. Iran will only take back people who go voluntarily and if they can prove they are Iranian.

Mr Vahaji used unusually blunt diplomatic language to attack Australia's immigration policies just days ahead of the visit by Javad Zarif, the first visit by an Iranian foreign minister in 15 years.

He suggested that Australia should scrap programs such as the \$55 million Cambodia deal, which has resettled just five refugees, and redirect the money to paying asylum seekers to return home.

"Why don't you spend the money for them to go back ... One of the encouragements for those who are willing to go back is to tell them for instance this much money we can give to you ... I'm sure many of them of them are going to accept that."

Mr Zarif's visit is a reciprocal trip following Ms Bishop's visit to Iraq last year, in which she signed a deal to share intelligence with Tehran on common security threats such as the so-called Islamic State group.

Mr Vahaji said Iran was hopeful of progressing talks on direct flights between Australia and Iran to boost tourism, as part of broader discussions on trade, economics and sharing technology in energy and agriculture.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/iran-rejects-suggestions-thousands-of-failed-asylum-seekers-could-be-returned-20160310-gnfv8a.html>