



WHAT REALLY HAPPENED ON MANUS ISLAND

This was a brutal attack, not a “riot”

On 17 February, local G4S personnel brutally attacked asylum seekers on Manus Island, armed with guns, machetes, pipes and sticks. A fence was pushed down from outside, enabling PNG Police and the PNG ‘mobile squad’ to enter the facility.

This resulted in the murder of Reza Barati, a 23-year-old Faili Kurd from Iran, and injuries to at least 62 other asylum seekers. One man was shot in the hip and others have lost eyes.

This account has been confirmed by several eyewitnesses including Azita Bokan, an Immigration Department interpreter who told the media, “There was blood everywhere. The number injured was horrific: people with massive head injuries, at least one with a slashed throat.”¹

This was an act of retribution against asylum seekers after they had been holding protests for a month, demanding that the processing of their claims begin. The day before there had been a major protest where 35 asylum seekers broke out of the detention centre. But on the night of the attacks there was only one small protest hours before the attack by 30-50 asylum seekers in a different compound from where the murder took place. Yet the media still wrongly refers to the event as a “riot”.

Who was to blame?

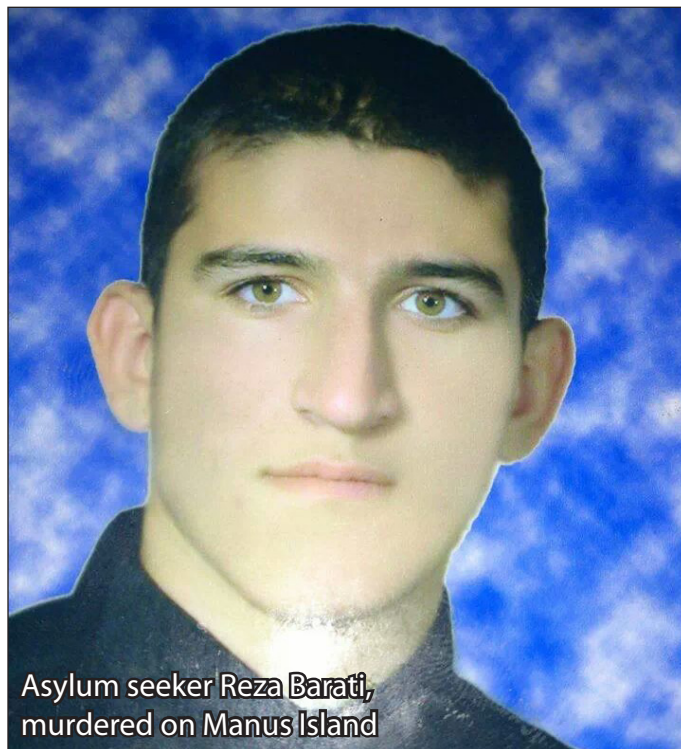
Although the attacks were carried out by PNG personnel, responsibility ultimately lies with the Australian government. The detention centre is funded and run by Australian authorities. This is blood on Immigration Minister Scott Morrison and Tony Abbott’s hands.

There is also blood on Labor’s hands. The Labor government re-opened Manus Island in November 2012 and Reza Barati was sent there by the Rudd government in August last year.

Are asylum seekers safe on Manus Island?

Scott Morrison initially claimed, “I can guarantee their [the asylum seekers’] safety when they remain in the centre”. However he was forced to backtrack as more eye-witnesses came forward—admitting people were attacked inside the centre. Clearly he cannot guarantee safety.

Locals continue to threaten violence against the asylum seekers. On 27 May a number of locals wielding machetes threatened asylum seekers who were taken outside the detention compound to a football oval. Some of the very staff who attacked them continue to be employed at the centre. Although the contract to run the centre has passed



Asylum seeker Reza Barati, murdered on Manus Island

to Transfield Services from G4S, it has confirmed it will continue to employ the same local security staff.

Why are asylum seekers held on Manus?

Manus Island first became the location for one of Australia’s offshore immigration detention centres in 2001, along with Nauru, as part of former PM John Howard’s “Pacific Solution”.

Labor reopened Manus Island in 2012. Last year, just before the election, Kevin Rudd announced the “PNG deal”, in an effort to prevent asylum seekers from reaching Australia by resettling them in PNG. Despite the fact that many of them have been on Manus Island since last August, their claims are yet to be processed. Liz Thompson, a former migration agent involved in refugee-assessment interviews on Manus, described the process on SBS’s *Dateline* in February as a “farce”.

“There is no visa for them to get. There’s no legislation governing their resettlement...Manus Island is an experiment in the ultimate logic of deterrence, designed to frustrate the hell out of people and terrify them so that they go home”, she said.²

What are conditions on Manus Island like?

Amnesty International described the situation on Manus Island as “tantamount to torture”, after visiting the centre in November last year.

There are now 1329 asylum seekers on Manus, housed either in tents, shipping containers or an old WWII bunker crammed with bunk-beds. There is severe overcrowding (up to 50 beds per dormitory room) and a lack of privacy which can exacerbate symptoms of anxiety or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Detainees must spend 1-5 hours a day queuing for meals, access to amenities and medical help, in a place where there is “almost no shade to protect people from the sun, heat, or rain”.

Due to insufficient infrastructure, services and limited staff, asylum seekers have been denied adequate water and soap supplies or even urgent medical attention. Asylum seekers suffer “snakes inside their accommodation, malaria, lack of malaria tablets, no mosquito nets, [and] inedible food that often has cockroaches in it”, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.⁴

Each year, around one in six people on Manus contract malaria. Former Manus Island doctor John Vallentine told the ABC's *Four Corners* last year that the centre was “just a disaster, medically”, saying it was just “too remote” to provide proper services there.

Will there be a proper inquiry?

It appears there will be no genuinely independent inquiry able to gain proper access to the detention centre sufficient to properly investigate.

The staff on Manus Island were allowed to scrub clean the scene of Reza's death inside the centre before there could be any collection of evidence.

Immigration Minister Scott Morrison has now released the report completed by the Immigration Department. It confirms that PNG police and local detention centre staff, in particular a local employee of the Salvation Army, were responsible for the murder of Reza Barati.

But it ignores that it is the very decision to place asylum seekers in the entirely unsuitable location of Manus Island that caused the tragedy, simply insisting on better security. With the report hardly an independent one, where the Immigration Department simply investigated its own actions, this is little surprise.

It has taken six months for the PNG police to lay charges against two people over Reza's death. But there were clearly others involved too.

PNG police have dismissed outright the evidence in the report that they themselves were involved in the attack on asylum seekers, and dismissed the evidence pointing to the individuals who killed Reza Barati in a statement by Deputy Police Commissioner Simon Kauba as “inconclusive”.

The best hope for a proper inquiry, investigations by the PNG National Court, have been stymied with the support of the Australian government. A separate Senate inquiry was also held which heard further evidence that there was plenty of prior warning of the attack, with testimony from former Manus Island detention centre workers including Steve Kilburn and Nicole Judge.

How much does Manus Island cost?

All up the Coalition has budgeted \$2.87 billion over the next year to run the offshore centres on Manus and Nauru. Transfield Services alone recently signed a contract worth \$1.22 billion to run both the camps for the next 20 months.

Toll Holdings has been paid \$3.5 million just to provide a tented kitchen since the Manus Island centre re-opened.⁶ The Commission of Audit found it now costs over \$400,000 a year to hold one asylum seeker in offshore detention. The Refugee Council has calculated that processing an asylum claim offshore costs about five times what it does in Australia.

What should the government do?

Manus Island, like Nauru, is designed as a punishment so terrible that asylum seekers will give up and agree to be sent back to danger at home. Any processing of claims will take years, and there is no real prospect of resettlement.

PNG is a poor country that is unable to accommodate refugees permanently. It has no arrangements in place to resettle the asylum seekers, nor is it ever likely to. On top of everything else, it is now clear that asylum seekers' lives are in danger if they stay there. Charlie Benjamin, one of two members of Parliament on Manus Island, believes the PNG Solution is becoming “unpopular” among island residents because “it's not right for us to force them [asylum seekers] to be here when they don't want to be here. It is going against our own conscience.”⁷

Manus Island must be closed now and the asylum seekers brought to Australia to live in the community while their claims are processed.

References

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