

The Deepening Crisis on Manus Island, Australia's Refugee Detention Centre

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What a weekend it has been. The Manus Island detention centre in Papua New Guinea may well have closed, but the protests, and those resident at the camp, continue to defy and prevaricate. At a protest in Melbourne on Saturday, Australian Greens MP Adam Bandt decided to get down and indignant with his calls to the Australian government.

"These people," claimed Bandt, referencing those refusing to leave the Lombrum naval base, "have committed no crime other than to do what every single one of us would do if we thought our lives, or our family's lives, were at risk."

The immigration minister, Peter Dutton, stonily silent, was singled out for special mention. "To look at the face of Peter Dutton is to stare into the eyes of someone who is prepared to kill people for political gain, and it's time he was held to account for his crime against humanity."[\[1\]](#)

Dutton, for his part, insists that the new facilities are better, a sort of accommodation promotion. On Channel 9's Today Show on November 2, the minister explained that the new residences constituted a "much better facility that where people are at the moment and I'd just say to the advocates here who are telling people not to move, to resist moving centres; that they're not doing those people any favours."[\[2\]](#)

The new facilities, comprising three sites for accommodation, have been given a curiously travel touch up in some reports. Peter Hartcher of The Age, for instance, describes the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre as having "room for 400 people" with healthcare and "security for the protection of the residents."[\[3\]](#)

West Lorengau Haus has room for a further 300 refugees. "For confirmed refugees, the PNG government pays an allowance for food and other necessities but they need to cook their own food." The third facility, Hillside Haus, covers those whose claims for refugee status have failed, one which will receive catered meals.

The sting in Hartcher's commentary lies in pouring cold water, and more, on the claims that there is a crisis, or at least one that has not been manufactured by Australian or PNG authorities. The former detention facility at Lombrum navy base, for instance, had been open for some 18 months, "with asylum seekers able to come and go as they pleased". They merely had to return to the centre at night.

These descriptions fortify the line of the irresponsible refugee, dandified, coddled, indignant and even fraudulent. This, despite the legal ruling by the PNG Supreme Court that such a facility was illegal, not to mention the numerous accounts of violence that have been documented by Human Rights Watch.

On the ground, not much coddling is taking place and few are buying the paradise packaged rhetoric that hope is around the corner. One such unflappable sceptic is Behrouz Boochani, who has been incessant on his Twitter account, streaming updates with pious, pilgrim-like dedication. Of latest concern in the next chapter of whether a move to the designated sites at Lorengau will take place centred on the heart condition of one of the refugees.

“The refugee with heart problems just arrived in Lorengau, about 40 kilometres from here [the camp]. Such a terrible night, will write about it later.”^[4] Then followed a tweet that the situation was “critical in Manus” and that a doctor was tending to the patient after four and a half hours. “Such a long time for emergency cases.”

Boochani, as is his wont, then shot a moral warning, a call to Australian authorities on complicity. “Anything bad [sic] happen for the refugee with heart pain Australia is responsible. You can not continue to kill people because of medical neglect.”^[5]

The infliction of death is a matter of relative assessment. The Australian government, backed by the Labor opposition, holds that a policy detaining people in tropical centres in the Pacific away from the mainland saves foolish lives and retards the “people smuggling industry”.

This fine cut fiction is based largely on a brutish assumption that the problem vanishes, when it, in fact, merely moves elsewhere. Where there are means to flee, and individuals happy to capitalise on assisting, there will be trade, however bestial and risky it may be. (What would Dutton make of the people smugglers of the post-Second World War period?)

The global problem on accepting and processing refugee claims, and the issue of settlement and integration, remain ones where wealthy states, on the whole, remain stern and austere in the face of desperation. Poorer states, challenged by a lack of infrastructure, are left to foot the bill, the modern serfs of the international humanitarian system. The Australian solution, singular and very colonial in inspiration, is to pay middlemen states and outsource legal obligations.

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Notes

[1]

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-04/adam-bandt-calls-immigration-minister-peter-dutton-a-terrorist/9118662>

[2] <http://www.minister.border.gov.au/peterdutton/Pages/Interview-with-Deborah-Knight,-Today.aspx>

[3]

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/what-do-refugee-advocates-hope-to-achieve-on-manus-20171103-gzeeiu.html>

[4] <https://twitter.com/BehrouzBoochani/status/926816959575945217>

[5] <https://twitter.com/BehrouzBoochani/status/926818919431544832>

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