

# THE NAURU FILES ARE RAW EVIDENCE OF TORTURE. CAN WE LOOK AWAY?

David Marr - Wednesday 10 August 2016 - <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/aug/10/the-nauru-files-are-raw-evidence-of-torture-can-we-look-away>

Nauru is Australia's work. We own this despair. These thousands of reports from within the refugee prison that have come to Guardian Australia reek of misery. There is no narrative here. It's the same, numbingly the same, day after day.

Tolling through the Nauru files are the words "I want to die". Nauru is on perpetual deathwatch. In the face of daily threats of suicide and self-harm, the guards struggle as amateur psychologists and social workers become connoisseurs of despair.

Suicide occupies so much of the prisoners' imagination. They threaten death as escape or simply in the hope of being treated decently. In the crushing tedium of the camp, swallowing a handful of screws or slashing their wrists offers prisoners a break in routine. Death is something to do.

"I will walk into the ocean with my daughter," warns a desperate mother. A social worker assesses the risk of death as major. But Wilson Security knows better. A scribble by the prison administration downgrades the risk to minor.

Day after day the forms record the cries of people Australia has deliberately brought to the brink:

"I just don't care."

"I do not want to be alive any more."

"I will kill myself."

"I will not stay here. I will be dead."

"I will do what I want to do."

"Enough is enough."

"I don't care any more."

"One more week until I die."

"I cannot control my thoughts."

"My head is full of crazy."

"I need poison so I can kill myself."

"I want to die. I want to die."

The prisoners threaten death by hanging, jumping, swallowing razor blades, slitting wrists, cutting throats, overdosing, refusing medication and walking into the sea. At any time a cohort of prisoners toys with death by refusing to eat.

There are no surprises for our officials here. Australia has been a long time in this business. We know what endless, hopeless detention does: it sends people mad. We put a lot of resources into the task of trying to keep them alive. It's costed into the Pacific solution.

Parking refugees on distant islands worked last time to keep their predicament hidden. But secrets are so much harder to keep these days than they were in John Howard's time. An incident report from January last year records a prisoner threatening to "report to Save the Children, to immigration, Guardian, ABC".

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Canberra's passion for secrecy has always been contradictory. Surely the more the world knows of the fate of refugees in these island camps, the more the deterrent power of holding them there?

But secrecy has its purpose. It helps hold the political consensus together. The truth is terrible. The regime of official secrecy allows us – even when so much is known – not to face the facts. It's a service for the squeamish.

Two years ago Peter Young, the detention system's former chief psychiatrist, told Guardian Australia that in his professional view the department of immigration was deliberately inflicting suffering on prisoners. The purpose was to force them to return home.

His verdict was measured and devastating: "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."

Since then there has been revelation after revelation of degrading conditions, bashings, rapes and sexual assaults on Manus and Nauru. Yet the politics of detention have not shifted. A man burns himself alive; a woman survives horrifically scarred; and the political settings haven't budged.

Guardian Australia is now publishing the largest cache of material ever to be leaked from within the detention network. These are the Panama papers of Australia's refugee gulag.

Here is the raw evidence of torture deliberately inflicted. Lives come apart in stupefying boredom. Prisoners keen for the children, sisters and parents Australia has taken from them. One of the great themes of these reports is the grief of separation.

Bored kids push the rules. Parents vent. Security guards pull brawling children apart on the football pitch, in the rec room, the gym, the school bus and the patch of crushed coral that serves as a volleyball court. Fights stopped one day break out the next. No one is surprised.

But the reports are also full of apologies, courtly apologies by children and their parents for tempers lost, for threats made, for allowing their despair to show. "I am sorry," one woman says. "I am a hundred times sorry."

Their children are growing up in a contradictory little world of total surveillance and endless vulnerability. They are touched, ogled and threatened. Courtesy of Australia they are enjoying a dystopian coming of age in broken families trapped in a makeshift prison on a sweltering island.

Release into the tiny community of Nauru has its own terrors. An incident report in early 2015 records a Nauruan guard telling an asylum seeker child: "Once you get a positive RSD [refugee status determination] I will kill you in Nauru."

Australians are not brutal people. This is not like us. One of the great questions that hovers over this system is how we can allow it to go on – how we can know so much about our prisons on Manus and Nauru yet manage not to face the facts of the Pacific solution.

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Put simply: we think the horrors are worth it. First because both sides of politics tell us that only by detaining refugees out there will the boats stop coming here. And second, we're assured there is somewhere in the world ready to take our prisoners off our hands.

Those are both lies.

The boats are stopped because they are turned back. They are still setting out from Sri Lanka, Vietnam, India and Indonesia, hoping to ferry asylum seekers to Australia. In June, both the prime minister and the minister for immigration, Peter Dutton, boasted they'd turned back their 28th boat.

If the smugglers' customers knew about the prisons on Manus and Nauru – widely and expensively advertised by Australia – they were not deterred from risking an expensive voyage by fear of ending up there.

Australian Border Force and the navy stopped them reaching Australia. Turnbacks have their own horrors and present diplomatic dangers for this country, but there is no doubt they work – just as they did last time under John Howard.

The second lie is worse: that some country will take the prisoners on Manus and Nauru off our hands. The hunt for the "regional solution" for resettlement is up there with search for Lasseter's lost reef.

Papua New Guinea and Nauru offer, at best, a temporary and dangerous existence outside the wire. The Cambodian solution was a stupendously expensive flop. New Zealand's offer was snubbed: too close to Australia for Canberra's liking.

Last time it was called "burden sharing" and ended – as it will again – with hundreds of refugee prisoners brought ashore to Australia because they have nowhere else in the world to go.

The maths was brutal for Canberra's grandstanding politicians: some hundreds of prisoners gave up and returned to Iraq and Afghanistan; a cohort was forced to return, some to their deaths; a handful were reunited with their families in Canada and Scandinavia; New Zealand took more than 500 (verboten this time); and all the rest reached their original destination: Australia.

We lived with that because we had to. The last men and women to leave Manus and Nauru were damaged souls. We did that to them. They are now getting on with their lives in Brisbane and Ballarat and the outskirts of Adelaide.

Now would be the time – in the aftermath of an election campaign in which the boats barely featured – for Canberra to start bringing its prisoners quietly ashore. The problem is, the promises made to keep every last one of them out of this country are so much more extreme than last time.

What's new is the river of information flowing here about life in the island prisons. At some point – closer now that Guardian Australia has this cache of incident reports – Australians will know too much to be able to keep shying away from the facts.

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The truth is in the detail. We are trying to break these people. They are resisting. The reports reveal little yearning for the countries we are trying to force them back to. Homesickness is not a theme.

Even after being trapped on Nauru for years, they see themselves on a forward journey. There is nothing to suggest history won't repeat itself here. They will land. The only question is: how much will we make them suffer before we accept the inevitable?

Despite all that's been done to them and all that their treatment at our hands tells us about Australia, they still want to live here. It's a humbling verdict.