

# LIMBO IS NAURU'S REAL TORTURE FOR ASYLUM-SEEKERS

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We understand that the motivations of the refugee lobby have their genesis in generosity and compassion. But for some the cause morphs into partisan activism, political abuse and personal smears.

Crusading for what they see as a righteous moral cause, the refugee lobby seems to ignore the normal rules of engagement. There is no compunction in terms of spreading lies about perceived ideological enemies, shaming their nation and compatriots or, indeed, the entire population of Nauru.

The toxicity of this debate has played out again this week after The Guardian Australia revealed thousands of incident reports from Nauru. The leak provided disturbing details about the sorts of complaints and episodes we have been aware of previously, from protests to medical emergencies and from terrible cases of self-harm to claims of assault and rape.

Much of this was reported breathlessly and at face value as proof that Australia is “torturing” children in what is “systematic abuse” of refugees. A week earlier we saw similar coverage of claims from two human rights activists who slipped into Nauru for a clandestine assessment. Amnesty International said Australia was guilty of “appalling abuse” and “neglect of refugees” on Nauru.

I interviewed one of the report’s authors, Amnesty’s Anna Neistat, from Paris and it was clear she had little or no direct evidence. She spoke of “daily” attacks, “people being hacked with machetes, hit with metal bars, thrown off motorcycles, women who have been raped” and the “regular occurrence” of self-harm for which people “don’t get sufficient” support. She said virtually all of this violence was being inflicted by Nauruans.

So why would Nauruans want to hurt the refugees? “You know there is a very simple answer to that,” she said. “They do it because they can do it.”

For this to be plausible we need to accept a bleak view of 10,000 Nauruans, not to mention their government and police force who are accused of acquiescence, if not complicity, even though they are assisted and trained by Australian Federal Police.

None of us can disprove claims. Nor would we expect Nauru to be crime free. We know some violence has occurred and we expect thorough investigations and justice.

But we shouldn’t accept implausible claims at face value when there is an obvious incentive for exaggeration or concoction, and especially when it is so damning of the people of Nauru and the hundreds of Australians working with them.

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It is these sorts of reports that prompted my visit to Nauru last October when I inspected the processing centres, spoke with dozens of asylum-seekers and refugees, and met service providers, locals, police and leading members of the Nauruan government. As my reports relayed, the sense of isolation, torment and uncertainty for the asylum-seekers and refugees was overwhelming.

Many were frantic with complaints and agitating to be allowed into Australia, others were resigned to never reaching our shores but still desperately impatient to start a new life somewhere — anywhere but Nauru.

But where Neistat tells us women are afraid to leave their accommodation for fear of rape or attacks, I saw refugee women walking alone and in small groups around the island and catching buses to English lessons and the like. Where the activists talk about rampant abuse, I saw energetic and friendly children whose mothers insisted they were safe. “It is a different kind of abuse,” said one mother. “It is the uncertainty.”

Much reporting has focused on children, and activists contend we should at least bring them to Australia. Yet the children are with their parents and, providing they attend school, have the least to lose while on Nauru. As I reported when I met Jafar, a Syrian refugee with five sons, ranging down from 25-year-old Mohammed to zesty nine-year-old Salem, “to scour the boys’ faces, youngest to eldest, is to see disappointment and worry increase with the years”. There are 1159 refugees and asylum-seekers on Nauru. Most live in the community and 412 live in processing camps where they are free to come and go as they please. Medical care is provided by 75 healthcare professionals at the centre’s clinic and Nauru’s hospital, refurbished at a cost of \$29 million.

There have been horrific cases of self-harm, including two people who self-immolated this year; one died. Depression must be a critical problem.

There have been allegations of rape and abuse — at least one was investigated by Nauru police and found to be baseless. Other alleged attacks have not been reported to police.

Whether you oppose the offshore processing policy or support it, this limbo must end. And the sooner the better.

Critics who say the policy is too harsh have every right to oppose it, of course.

But it is another matter to accuse Australia of condoning or conducting abuse. “The Australian government’s persistent failure to address abuses committed under its authority on Nauru strongly suggests that they are adopted or condoned as a matter of policy,” says Amnesty.

Establishing the facts is crucial. People stranded on the island have a clear interest in undermining the policy, seeking international attention or securing transfer to Australia on medical or other grounds.

More transparency is needed — although rather than discuss my reporting or that of Channel Nine’s Caroline Marcus, who also gained access earlier this year, the activists accuse us of lying and deliberately covering up abuse. The debate diverts from rational discourse to become a moral demolition derby.

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For the activists' claims to be true, Marcus and I would need to be the most loathsome manipulators for some undisclosed cause, most Nauruans would need to be violent criminals overseen by complicit police and politicians, hundreds of Australian public servants, police and social service workers would need to be either evil or cowed into malevolent silence and our politicians would need to be monsters.

Melbourne lawyer and refugee activist Julian Burnside has tweeted that Immigration Minister Peter Dutton "wants a few more refugees to die" on Nauru or Manus Island as a deterrent. Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young says the government "uses" child abuse to stop the boats.

Hanson-young says we should "Close the camps" and "#BringThemHere" but must know that the last time we halted boat arrivals then weakened the regime, the people-smugglers rekindled their trade leading to 1200 deaths and more than 50,000 people going into detention. Australian Human Rights Commission President Gillian Triggs publicly supports this disastrous prescription.

Despite the fact our orderly refugee intake remains one of the highest in the world and is growing, the activists will do anything to unpick the border policies. It is a reckless sanctimony that eschews logical arguments.

Yet this issue demands more attention for the pressing reason that more than 2000 refugees and asylum-seekers remain in an Australian-imposed diapause on Manus Island and Nauru. With the boats stopped and the major parties in relative consensus, now is the time to focus on the only constructive solution — resettling the refugees without compromising our borders.

If the compassionista campaigning succeeds we risk repeating history. It is unthinkable this country would countenance a third rerun of this obscene policy failure.

Yet it is perilously possible because political pressure at home or difficulties in the host nations could force a retreat. So, aside from the main imperative of finding a humanitarian outcome for people in our care, there is a compelling political need to empty the camps and preserve the integrity of the policy.