

Australia Tortures Children in Camps

by Allen Douglas

The “Three Musketeers” of the ongoing war in Iraq are the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. Australia’s role is less conspicuous, but its navy and its highly-regarded Special Air Services (SAS) have played crucial roles in the conflict; and on April 1, Australia’s Maj. Gen. Jim Molan was named the Coalition’s commander of “counter-terror” operations. No one outside the Bush government, including Britain’s Tony Blair, has more enthusiastically supported the war than Australia’s Liberal Party Prime Minister John Howard. And, like Blair and the Cheneyacs in the United States, Howard and his Cabinet have repeatedly lied and attacked dissidents in Australia’s armed forces and intelligence services, in order to keep the war going. (See *EIR*, May 7, 2004.)

While tagging along in Iraq, Australia has “led the way” with its domestic “war on terror.” Neither the U.K., nor even the United States with its infamous “Patriot Act,” have come close to the sweeping Nazi-like laws which Howard’s government has rammed through, most recently with complicity of an opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP) led by Mont Pelerin Society stooge Mark Latham. In fact, so shameless is the Howard government, that in its latest atrocity, the Anti-Terrorism Bill 2004 now before the parliament, it intends to effectively legalize, under Australian law, the regimes at Guantanamo Bay and at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. That bill proposes that “an offence against a foreign country” be recognized under Australian domestic law. This would include, specifically, “an offence triable by a military commission of the United States of America established under a Military Order of 13 November 2001 made by the President of the United States and entitled ‘Detention, Treatment and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War Against Terrorism.’” That Military Order by President Bush established the lawless hell-hole of Guantanamo Bay, whose regime of degradation and torture was then exported to Abu Ghraib in Iraq.

Yet, that latest police-state measure still does not plumb the depths of evil represented by “beast-man” PM John Howard and his government. On May 13, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) released a report, “National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention,” which summarized the HREOC’s two-year investigation into the status of children interned in the country’s seven “Immigration Detention Centers” (IDCs). That report, together with submissions to the HREOC during the course of its inquiry, documents a systematic regime of torture

against the children of asylum seekers (and their parents). This practice has been going on for years; the Howard government is fully aware of it, and Howard himself has personally indicated, in response to the HREOC report, that he intends to continue it. A nurse who served in the notorious Woomera IDC in the middle of the South Australian desert, summed up the case in her submission: “The Australian government is thereby culpable of torture of children.”

The Detention Centers

The detention center policy was begun in 1992 under the ALP government of Prime Minister Paul Keating. Keating and his ALP predecessor PM Bob Hawke discarded the national banking, pro-sovereignty traditions held by the ALP since it was founded in the 1890s, and ushered in the globalization, privatization, and deregulation nightmare which the Howard government has only deepened since it came to power in 1996.

At their height in late 2001, the IDCs and the “offshore centers” at Manus Island in Papua New Guinea and Nauru in the Pacific, held some 2,800 immigrants in extremely harsh, overcrowded conditions. The centers—widely referred to in Australia as “concentration camps”—were run for years by the private firm, Australasian Corrections Management (ACM), a subsidiary of the notorious U.S. Wackenhut firm. (A new four-year contract has been let to a British firm.) Detainees, visitors, and human rights advocates have consistently described the camps as “worse than prisons,” with no medical care, widespread abuse by prison guards, middle-of-the night “counts,” and “isolation cells” like something out of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Pit and the Pendulum” story. The camps are ringed by barbed wire, some are in the middle of the desert, or in other far-flung locations; the government tightly controls access so that no news from inside them leaks out.

Many of the detainees are held for years, with no knowledge of when, if ever, they will be released. The Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) which oversees their cases is composed of political appointees with no background, legal training, or experience in such matters, and it invariably rules against the immigrants. In September 2001, Howard rammed through a series of “Border Protection” laws, which removed any right of appeal of the RRT to the Federal court, so that the kangaroo court RRT has the ultimate say over the refugees’ fates.

Under these conditions, numerous detainees have committed suicide or attempted it. Incidents of “self-harm” are constant, with inmates throwing themselves on razor wire, slashing themselves, drinking detergent, or sewing their lips together in protest at the inhuman conditions in which they are held. Numerous children have emulated their parents in these practices. Psychologists and psychiatrists have testified repeatedly to the devastating degree of mental problems experienced by all the detainees, as many as 75% of whom were



“Mr. Ruddock and Mr. Howard are guilty of crimes against humanity,” concluded Queen’s Counsel Julian Burnside. Children have been held indefinitely and abused in camps; refugee boats have been deliberately sunk at sea, including the “SIEVX,” whose 436 passengers had been forced onto it by police agents. The SIEVX, though smaller than this boat, bore twice as many people to their deaths.

already victims of torture and trauma in the countries from which they fled, mainly Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. Many of them are members of persecuted minorities who faced death or further imprisonment, had they stayed. While the camps on the mainland are horrible enough, the Australian government in 2001 initiated its “Pacific solution,” by dumping hundreds of refugees on Manus Island or Nauru, where they live in utter squalor, with only brackish water to drink. On the few occasions when they were allowed outside the camps, they were sometimes beaten by poverty-stricken natives, who are enraged at anything having to do with the Australian government.

While the government has attempted to imply that its inhuman immigration policy is to “stop terrorists,” the policy of large-scale internment began before 9/11—and in spite of the fact that, of the 17,000 immigrants who arrived before 2001, only seven were found to have been criminals, and not genuine refugees. As many have pointed out, a terrorist is hardly likely to choose an unseaworthy, overcrowded boat as his passage to Australia. Additionally, under international law, all of these so-called “illegal immigrants” have the right to seek asylum wherever they can find it; in any case, the numbers involved are tiny, Australia ranking only 41st in the world as a refugee destination.

The HREOC Findings

The HREOC’s inquiry was established in November 2001, to examine whether the treatment of children met Australia’s obligations under international law, particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child. After two years of hearings and investigations, the Commission found that the detention centers violate that Convention in numerous ways; in particular, that “Children in immigration detention for long periods of time are at high risk of serious mental harm. The Commonwealth’s [Australia’s] failure to implement the re-

peated recommendations by mental health professionals that certain children be removed from the detention environment with their parents, amounted to cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of those children in detention.”

The Commission therefore recommended that children “should be released with their parents as soon as possible, but no later than four weeks” from the report’s release, and that “Australia’s immigration detention laws should be amended, as a matter of urgency, to comply with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.” Human Rights Commissioner Dr. Sev Ozdowski charged, “This is not ancient history. We are still abusing a significant number of children in detention now.” Ozdowski appealed to the general public, “All Australians should look at these findings, read the examples and think of their children or the children of their friends and ask

themselves—how would I feel if my children were raised behind bars and their human rights abused? Almost 93% of these families have been accepted as ‘genuine refugees,’ so why do we lock them up for years behind barbed wire? The treatment of some of these children has left them severely traumatised and with long-term mental health problems. Children with emotional and physical scars will be a legacy of our mandatory detention policy.”

Almost immediately after the report was released, Howard and his Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone, stated that they had no intention of following the recommendations, because to do so would “send the wrong signal” about Australia’s immigration policy.

‘Crimes Against Humanity’

As is usual with a government body, the HREOC’s language was measured; important though it was, it understated the severity of the abuse, as well as the culpability of Howard and his government. Two other figures with knowledge of the camps were more blunt: registered nurse Barbara Rogalla, who had worked for three months inside the Woomera camp, and a well-known Melbourne lawyer, Queen’s Counsel Julian Burnside, who has defended some of the refugees.

In her submission to the HREOC, Rogalla noted that she had written to the Human Rights Commissioner back in 2000, and that “Following my letter to HREOC, riots, hunger strikes and use of the water cannon have become more frequent at IDCs. I recently visited Woomera, only to find that the camp now looks even more formidable, frightening, and offensive. The outer perimeter now extends to the Roxby Downs road, with an additional two rows of razor wire fences between which lies a haunting no-man’s land. The layout of staged high razor wires with open spaces between more than ever resembles concentration camp horror, straight out of Nazi Germany.”

Rogalla recounted some of the horrors of the detention camps, including acknowledged child sexual abuse covered up by the ACM contractor and the government. Challenged on the abuse, then-Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock claimed that these allegations “were being pushed by advocacy groups opposed to the mandatory detention of asylum seekers with children,” and therefore should be disregarded. After citing chapter and verse of the Australian government’s willful neglect of children under both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention Against Torture, Rogalla charged, “The Australian government is thereby culpable of torture of children.”

In a speech at Parliament House in 2003, lawyer Julian Burnside charged that: “Human beings—men, woman and children innocent of any crime—are locked up for months, and in many cases, years. They are held in conditions of shocking harshness. . . . The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has described Australia’s detention centers as ‘worse than prisons’ and observed ‘alarming levels of self-harm.’ ”

Burnside then recounted how the Australian Criminal Code had recently been amended to recognize genocide and other crimes against humanity. Citing specific chapter and verse of these Australian laws, which clearly encompassed what was happening in the IDCs, Burnside—hardly a radical—concluded, “A careful analysis of the criminal code therefore suggests that Mr. Ruddock and Mr. Howard are guilty of crimes against humanity by virtue of their imprisonment of asylum seekers.”

In a debate on detention policy on Feb. 16, 2004 at the Melbourne Rotary Club with the present Immigration Minister, Amanda Vanstone, Burnside blasted the two beast-men personally responsible for the camps, Howard and Ruddock: “Our Prime Minister calls himself a Christian, is in fact immoral, hypocritical, un-Christian and—as a proponent of mandatory detention—a criminal. He must take personal responsibility for the ‘Pacific Solution,’ which is the most disgraceful enterprise ever undertaken by an Australian government. Mr. Ruddock clings to his membership of Amnesty International, in the face of sustained criticism from that organization; he chants the Liberal [Party] mantra of family values whilst locking families of innocent people behind a 9,000 volt ‘courtesy fence’ at Baxter. He pretends to be a Christian, while the leaders of all Christian churches in Australia condemn him for his policies. He is responsible for instructing counsel to argue that we do not have solitary confinement in detention centers—but if we do, the Courts must not interfere; that we must send terrified people back to torture or death; that we can lock them up for the rest of their lives if need be. For their hypocrisy, as much as for their cruelty, the Howard government deserve our contempt.”

Ruddock was subsequently appointed Attorney General by Howard, where he has overseen the most intense barrage of police state laws since Hitler’s Germany.

Murdering Asylum Seekers?

In addition to its torture of desperate immigrants who finally reach its shores, there is a mounting body of evidence that the Australian government is directly or indirectly responsible for the premeditated sinking of one or more refugee boats, with hundreds of deaths.

In the closing months of 2001, the Howard government was in an extremely close re-election contest against Labor, which Labor was expected to win. Howard’s trump card was his “tough-on-immigrants” policy. In furtherance of it, he set up the People-Smuggling Disruption Program (PSDP) under the oversight of Ruddock’s Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), and carried out by the Australian Federal Police (AFP). Under this program, the AFP liaised with, financed, and trained elements of the Indonesian police to stop refugee vessels heading toward Australia, including by sabotaging the boats *so they would sink at sea*. At a meeting with AFP officers in Indonesia in June 2001, Ruddock himself asked if it were possible to sabotage the boats.

Some of the “people smugglers” were police agents of Indonesia, or Australia, or both. There is abundant evidence that one such protected operative was Abu Quassey, who organized the voyage of what became known as the Suspected Illegal Entrance Vehicle X (or SIEVX), which sank on Oct. 19, 2001, drowning 353 men, women, and children. Indonesian police had forced 421 refugees onto the SIEVX, many of them at gunpoint. The boat was 19 meters long by a mere 4 meters wide, and could hold a maximum of 100 people; when loaded with over four times that many for its deadly voyage, it looked like a cattle car. It was so overloaded, that it clearly had no chance to make it from Indonesia to Australia.

To an investigator, everything about the disastrous voyage raised alarm bells: the involvement of the Indonesian police; the obviously unseaworthy condition of the boat; the Howard government’s almost-fanatical insistence—later disproven—that the boat sank in Indonesian waters; the mysterious failure of the huge Australian air-and-maritime anti-smuggling presence either to intercept the craft at sea, or at least rescue the survivors. Australia’s former Ambassador to Indonesia, Tony Kevin, aggressively questioned the strange circumstances of the sinking; his persistence unleashed investigative reporting from Australia, and finally an Australian Senate inquiry. Reviewing all the evidence that had emerged since the fateful night of Oct. 19, 2002, Kevin said in Perth on Feb. 8, 2003, “I believe that the premeditated sinking of SIEVX was a final deterrent solution, generated under this [PSDP] program.”

If true, it would not be surprising. PM John Howard is a second-generation synarchist. His father was a member of the fascist New Guard of Sydney in the 1930s, which planned a coup to stop ALP Federal and state governments from creating jobs and relief measures for the poor, instead of paying debts to British bankers.