

Manus Island Senate Enquiry

I Christopher Iacono am a former employee of the Salvation Army on both Nauru and Manus Island. I worked on Manus Island from the middle of September to the 31st of January just weeks before the incident that took place. On the night of the incident I was with a fellow past employee when asylum seekers phoned and we made contact with a current employee on island.

The threat to asylum seekers safety on Manus Island was always a discussion point when talking to the asylum seekers themselves. I arrived on Island the afternoon of an incident when two rival PNG forces had a dispute out the front of the processing centre. The day after when I entered the centre the asylum seekers stated that G4S security had evacuated and essentially left them to fend for themselves in the event the dispute rolled over into the centre. The asylum seekers were very worried from this point onwards of the chance if any attack did occur they would be left defenseless as the security that was there to 'protect them' would just evacuate.

The cross cultural awareness between both parties was never addressed. Many asylum seekers were told by G4S that PNG nationals were cannibals and that PNG on a national scale was rife with criminal activity. The asylum seekers always questioned their safety if they ever were released into the community abroad as they were culturally and physically different and suspected they would be targeted. The PNG nationals were upset and angered at the processing centres as they believed they weren't being given opportunities for work both in running the centre and for construction services. This was evident as protests held by PNG nationals had occurred inside the Lombrum navy base.

If the safety of asylum seekers was stressed the safety of staff was always on high alert. Staff couldn't walk home at night by themselves and any female member no matter how large the group needed to be accompanied by at least one male. These were the rules when walking home on the days that the security company deemed safe. There were countless nights that we were banned from walking to and from the bibby and navy accommodation. One night I remember clearly was when we had a meeting saying no one could walk home as the PNG navy boys were having a

celebration at the wet mess “ navy pub”. There was a high chance of violence. That night one PNG person was assaulted by a group of fellow PNG nationals. There were days when staff were banned from excursions to Lorengau town centre. If Manus Island was a safe place why were there so many instances where ex-pat staff were banned and disallowed from doing activities outside the accommodation and workplace areas?

With the conditions that asylum seekers were and are still being forced to live in there is no doubt they would develop very negative views of PNG. Food with insects baked and cooked was a daily occurrence. Recreational activities were vastly inadequate to beat the boredom associated with being locked up in fences 24/7. Clothing was very limited and many didn't have more than the clothes on their backs. Communication back home was limited to a 20 minute phone call once every three days for more than half the centre asylum seeker population. Pair this with the inescapable heat, humidity and wetness that prevailed all year long and the smell of feces that wafted through the entire camp incessantly I believe no-one would have a bright view of PNG.

The safety of asylum seekers was never guaranteed on Manus Island and I don't believe it ever will. On the night of the incident an asylum seeker rang a colleague of mine and the thing I remember most vividly was him screaming “They're killing us!”. They turned out to be PNG nationals and us the asylum seekers. An event that staff were expecting but hoping not to happen was happening. Before the incident there was talk among staff that the PNG military police were a mobile death squad. These were the people doing sentry duty out the front of the centre with their automatic rifles. An hour later we contacted a fellow employee on island who said many asylum seekers had been ferried to the bibby accommodation with serious injuries and it was being used as an emergency medical point. He was obviously in distress and stated that he had heard many gun shots up to 20. At the time we feared deaths as did he and the other staff members with him who had been evacuated to the bibby. One man did lose his life in an event that could have been prevented with a bit of caring and humanity shown by the government towards some of the worlds most vulnerable people.

In a TSA meeting the structure of the centre was outlined with DIPB/DIAC being on top followed by the TSA as head service provider and the other service providers on the same level underneath. No mention was made to any PNG organization.

For all refugee interviews Australian ex-pat workers were in charge of the proceedings. I didn't see any PNG national work within the legal or decision making processes.

All business cases for activities or to receive equipment and resources for the centre went through DIAC/DIPB offices to gain approval. G4S were charged with doing a safety and security audit on all new activities or resources entering or affecting the asylum seekers.

G4S were in charge of the gates inside the compounds and the main gate into the centre. Ex-pat guards were in charge of monitoring entries and exits a vast majority of the time.

Staff entering and exiting compounds were searched and metal detected to ensure nothing entered that was contraband. All movement was granted approval and monitored by G4S. All meal lines were run by G4S who could decide at a whim when to close the kitchens.

All service providers in the centre were contracted by the Australian government and were given directions from DIPB/DIAC personnel working on the island.

Inhuman and Degrading Treatment

Before arriving on Manus Island I had heard stories of the inadequacy of the food being served by fellow employees. It was common occurrence to find insects in the food. Flies were often baked into the bread staff and asylum seekers were served.

I witnessed asylum seekers being denied entry into the mess hall in Oscar compound numerous times even though other asylum seekers inside were still lining up to receive their meals.

Large 20 litre water bottles were used to distribute water to all 500 asylum seekers in Oscar compound. This water often ran out every couple of hours as there were only two bottles usually at any one time. I witnessed the large bottles being filled by smaller 600ml bottles on occasion but was also told that the bottles were being filled by tap water. I attempted to drink this water once but couldn't as it had a yellow hue and tasted and smelt very unpleasant.

The asylum seekers were afforded zero privacy as they were crammed into rooms the largest containing at least 100 men and all rooms in Oscar compound with 50 men. Sheets were often strung up to offer limited privacy but these were cut down on regular occasion to make sure they could be monitored.

The toilets and showers were highly unhygienic and in poor condition. Most showers and toilets had moss and fungi growing on the walls and floors. Many of the showers in Oscar had, had their doors damaged and not working limiting privacy greatly. The toilets were filthy with toilet paper constantly on the floor. The floors in all the facilities were constantly wet and there was a strong smell of sewage around the centre at all times.

Waiting times for IHMS appointments were extremely long. I was told by management to alert asylum seekers that waiting times were a minimum of three days at one point. Asylum seekers were told to fill in medical request forms and wait for an appointment. Most often no appointment ever arrived and the asylum seeker had to enter numerous requests.

Many asylum seekers had skin conditions caused by the constant wetness, humidity and aforementioned unhygienic cleaning facilities. While I was on Manus I witnessed cases of scabies, typhoid, regular gastroenteritis, rashes and skin infections.

Many times soap ran out in the centre. A G4S guard told me that “we ran out of soap two days ago and are waiting for the barge to come in”. There were no washing facilities located near mess halls for asylum seekers to wash hands before eating ever.

At numerous times over my 5 months on Manus island anti-malarial drugs had been exhausted and could not be handed out. Asylum seekers were very concerned about mosquito born diseases and any side effects of the anti-malarial medication. Asylum seekers and staff also questioned the safety of breathing in the mosquito fogging fumes that were used every 2-3 days across all compounds all without receiving adequate answers.

Clothing was extremely limited on Manus. Many asylum seekers were only given one set of clothing and whatever they had brought along of their own. It was a daily occurrence to hear of stolen or lost clothing as there was not appropriate washing facilities and clothing was left to dry on fences. The response from management was to not issue any more clothing and they had to make do with what they had.

P1 block in Foxtrot was a known hotspot for sexual activities. I had heard this from numerous guards and on two occasions a G4S guard had told me that they thought they had seen something happening in there but didn't go in as it was after dark and unsafe.

Freedom of movement is very limited to the confines of each compound.

Each asylum seeker is confined inside a fenced perimeter at least 8 feet tall chained and padlocked at all entry/exit areas. Most of the fence line was wrapped in a thick green shade cloth to limit communication outside of the compound

The asylum seekers are forbidden to walk from one area to another and have to be driven no matter the distance.

There was a strict rule to not allow asylum seekers to communicate with others in a different compound. I was told this was to stop them from organizing protests or other action in unison.

The padlock keys were left with G4S guards usually a PNG local. Many times the key holder was nowhere near the gate, asleep or distracted to open it quickly. On one occasion in Delta compound an asylum seeker had slashed his wrists and it took an exceptionally long time to get into the compound, as the guard was 10 metres away talking to another PNG G4S guard behind the guard box. On the way over the guard managed to drop the keys as well.

I witnessed a guard grab a small Lebanese man out of frustration on the arm and slam him into the side of a toilet container in Oscar compound. The asylum seeker hadn't heard a request to move a metre to the right area for the telephone line. The asylum seeker asked him to let go several times without result before I intervened myself. An hour later I saw the same guard along with three others, two I'm sure weren't in the area at the time collaboratively talking and filling out incident reports together. I didn't fill an incident report in myself at the time as I thought the matter resolved.

On many occasions when asylum seekers were complaining about food, medical services, cleanliness the G4S guard had stated, "If you don't like it go back to your own country" and then dismissed the complaint.

Any formal complaints entered by asylum seekers against guards for abuse, racism or plain negligence received an answer an extended time later stating that the issue had been followed up and there was either a lack of evidence or the guard couldn't be identified. This was a common theme on the four complaints I was shown by asylum seekers and others I was told about.

The Incident

On the 17th of February I was with another TSA member Nicole Judge who received a call from Manus Island at around 11pm. It was a distress call asking for help, the asylum seeker was saying "were being killed".

Nicole Judge and I were able to contact another TSA member currently on Island via facebook and get a phone number to contact him. He confirmed something was

happening at the centre and wounded were being brought to the bibby (staff accommodation) for medical treatment were he had been evacuated to hours before. In a later call he confirmed multiple shots had been fired and dozens of asylum seekers were being treated on the wharf.