

The Death of Reza Barati and the Violence of Australian Border Policing

Michael Grewcock

Introduction

On the night of 17-18 February 2014, 23-year-old Reza Barati died following a violent assault inside the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Barati, an Iranian Kurd asylum seeker detained on Manus Island by the Australian government, was one of at least 69 victims of attacks on detainees by PNG police, local residents and some detention centre staff. The medical officer who first treated Barati noted that his 'head was shattered by a crack on the left side of his skull ... He also had facial abrasions and knocks indicating he has received a more general beating' (quoted, Cornall 2014: 65). Injuries recorded by medical staff to other detainees included: 'lacerations and abrasions, fractures, soft tissue injuries, contusions, sprains, dental trauma, ligament injuries, gunshot wounds to one person, head injury, an eye enucleation and haematomas'.¹

The attacks occurred in the midst of protests by detainees about the circumstances and nature of their detention. However, it is clear that there were rising tensions both inside and outside the centre for several weeks before the attacks and that the Australian government and the private contractors responsible for running the centre were aware of the potential safety risks to detainees. Moreover, initial statements by Australia's Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, Scott Morrison, that the violence occurred mainly outside the centre following a break-out, were plainly wrong (Hall 2014).

This chapter considers the extent to which Reza Barati's death symbolises the inherent dangers of immigration detention and raises broader questions about the neglected topic of state violence and the criminogenic nature of Australian border policing policies. Drawing on recent literature on border policing and state crime (Grewcock 2009; Pickering 2005; Weber & Pickering 2011), the chapter argues that Barati's death occurred as a result of the institutional violence inflicted by successive governments since the introduction

¹ Evidence of Mark Cormack, Deputy Secretary, Department of Immigration and Border Protection, to Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee Inquiry, 10 June 2014.

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