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Australia's Offshore Cruelty

Roger Cohen MAY 23, 2016

SYDNEY, Australia — The Australian treatment of refugees trying to reach this vast, thinly populated country by boat follows textbook rules for the administering of cruelty. It begins with the anodyne name for the procedures — “offshore processing” — as if these desperate human beings were just an accumulation of data.

It continues with the secrecy shrouding what goes on “offshore” in the tiny Pacific island nation of Nauru and on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, where a total of more than 1,350 people languish with no notion of how their limbo will end, where they will go or how to get answers to their predicament. Under the Australian Border Force Act of last year, disclosure by any current or former worker of “protected information” is punishable by up to two years in prison.

It goes further with the progressive dehumanization of people — dubbed “illegals” without cause — who are caught in this Australian web under a policy now dating back almost four years. They are rarely visible. They are often nameless, merely given identification numbers. Women and children are vulnerable in squalid conditions where idleness and violence go hand in hand.

The refugees are consistently demeaned, as when the conservative immigration minister, Peter Dutton, said this month that they could not read and would somehow contrive at once to steal Australian jobs and “languish in unemployment queues” — a statement that prompted Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to call Dutton “outstanding,” no less.

Turnbull, who came to office with a reputation for being from the more progressive wing of the conservative Liberal Party but has proved beholden to the hard-line right, faces an election in early July. Clearly both he and Dutton reckon casting the marooned of Nauru and Manus Island as threats to Australia will play well with voters.

Beyond electoral calculations, people are dying. Last month, a young Iranian refugee, Omid Masoumali, self-immolated on Nauru and died in a Brisbane hospital. Soon after, a 21-year-old Somali refugee, identified only as Hodan, set herself on fire and was taken in critical condition to Brisbane. Their acts were reflections of the desperation and exhaustion inflicted by Australia under a policy that was supposed to be temporary, has not been thought through, and places people in conditions of hopelessness.

Perhaps “offshore processing” was supposed to afford the government plausible deniability. Australia would pay billions of dollars to poor Nauru and poor Papua New Guinea to take a big problem off its hands. But in reality there can be no plausible deniability. On the contrary, by any ethical standard, the policy engages Australian responsibility for cruelty.

Dutton even suggested that human rights advocates bore responsibility for the self-immolations by giving asylum seekers “false hope.” He said the government was “not going to stand for” people trying to twist its arm. Well, a dead person cannot do that, of course.

“We don’t see the boats, we rarely see a human face and there is a black hole of accountability,” said Madeline Gleeson, a human rights lawyer and the author of the recently published book “Offshore.” She told me, “The international community does not understand how outrageous this policy is, how far from basic human standards and how shot through with violence and sexual abuse.”

The government argues it is keeping the country safe from terrorism, preventing a proliferation of Australia-bound boats that could result in deaths on a scale seen in the Mediterranean, and ensuring its immigration policy remains orderly. In the current fiscal year, the country has offered to take in 13,750 people under its Humanitarian Program, and committed, exceptionally, to a further 12,000 from the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts (a handful of them have been processed). But it has vowed that nobody in Nauru or on Manus Island will gain admission to Australia.

Australia's "offshore processing" is falling apart and must end. The Supreme Court of Papua New Guinea ruled in April that the Australian-funded detention center on Manus Island was illegal. In Australia, only retroactive legislation enacted after a lawsuit was filed provided legal support for a policy that was in effect pursued illegally since 2012.

This country's history includes the long and unhappy chapter of its White Australia policy under which a vast land mass was portrayed as under threat of invasion by uncivilized "natives" from across Asia. Politicians like Dutton are playing scurrilously on similar fears.

A nation of immigrants, short of agricultural labor, Australia has benefited when it has overcome its fears, as with the admission of Vietnamese "boat people" in the 1970s. As Steven Glass, an international lawyer, observed in introducing Eva Orner's new movie, "Chasing Asylum," "What, exactly, are we scared of?" Even women raped and impregnated on Nauru have been treated as if they are security threats.

Bring those stranded in Nauru and on Manus Island, many of whose refugee claims have already been deemed legitimate, to Australia. Treat them with humanity as their demands for permanent settlement are assessed. Scrap a policy that shames a nation with its pointless cruelty.

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