

Broken Men in Paradise

The world's refugee crisis knows no more sinister exercise in cruelty than Australia's island prisons.

By Roger Cohen December 9, 2016

MANUS, Papua New Guinea — The plane banks over the dense tropical forest of Manus Island, little touched, it seems, by human hand. South Pacific waters lap onto deserted beaches. The jungle glistens, impenetrable. At the unfenced airport, built by occupying Japanese forces during [World War II](#), a sign “welcomes you to our very beautiful island paradise in the sun.”

It could be that, a 60-mile-long slice of heaven. But for more than 900 asylum seekers from across the world [banished](#) by [Australia](#) to this remote corner of the Papua New Guinea archipelago, Manus has been hell; a three and a half year exercise in mental and physical cruelty conducted in near secrecy beneath the green canopy of the tropics.

A road, newly paved by Australia as part payment to its former colony for hosting this punitive experiment in refugee management, leads to Lorengau, a capital of romantic name and unromantic misery. Here I find Benham Satah, a Kurd who fled persecution in the western Iranian city of Kermanshah. Detained on Australia's Christmas Island after crossing in a smuggler's boat from Indonesia and later forced onto a Manus-bound plane, he has languished here since Aug. 27, 2013.

Endless limbo undoes the mind. But going home could mean facing death: Refugees do not flee out of choice but because they have no choice. Satah's light brown eyes are glassy. His legs tremble. A young man with a college degree in English, he is now nameless, a mere registration number — FRT009 — to Australian officials.

“Sometimes I cut myself,” he says, “so that I can see my blood and remember, ‘Oh, yes! I am alive.’”

Reza Barati, his former roommate at what the men's ID badges call the Offshore Processing Center (Orwell would be proud), is dead. A fellow Iranian Kurd, he was killed, aged 23, on Feb. 17, 2014. Satah witnessed the tall, quiet volleyball player being beaten to death after a local mob scaled the wall of the facility. Protests by asylum seekers had led to rising tensions with the Australian authorities and their Manus enforcers.

The murder obsesses Satah but constitutes a mere fraction of the human cost of a policy that, since July 19, 2013, has sent more than 2,000 asylum seekers and refugees to Manus and the tiny Pacific island nation of Nauru, far from inquiring eyes. (Unable to obtain a press visa to visit Manus, I went nonetheless.)

The toll among Burmese, Sudanese, Somali, Lebanese, Pakistani, Iraqi, Afghan, Syrian, Iranian and other migrants is devastating: self-immolation, overdoses, death from septicemia as a result of medical negligence, sexual abuse and rampant despair. A recent United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [report](#) by three medical experts found that 88 percent of the 181 asylum seekers and refugees examined on Manus were suffering from depressive disorders, including, in some cases, psychosis.

The world's refugee crisis, with its 65 million people on the move, more than at any time since 1945, knows no more sustained, sinister or surreal exercise in cruelty than the South Pacific quasi-prisons Australia has established for its trickle of the migrant flood.

Australia, like Europe but on a much smaller scale, faces a genuine dilemma: What to do about desperate migrants trying by any means to gain asylum? Their journeys across the world have fueled rightist movements in many developed societies. Anxiety, whether related to jobs or terrorism, is high and, as Donald Trump demonstrated, scapegoating is effective. Approaches to the crisis have varied. Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, has taken in more than a million. But the Australian government argues that toughness is the only way to prevent the country from being overwhelmed.

It has "stopped the boats" and the Indonesian smugglers behind them: This is the essence of Australia's case. The government says it has prevented deaths like those in the Mediterranean, where more than 4,000 migrants have drowned this year. By turning back the "queue jumpers," a phrase that resonates in a nation devoted to a "fair go" for all, it has safeguarded Australia's right to select who gets to people a vast and empty country. The official vow that those marooned on Manus and Nauru will never live in Australia has assumed doctrinal vehemence.

In Peter Dutton, the immigration minister, the country has its own little Trump. Last May he portrayed the asylum seekers as illiterates bent on stealing Australian jobs, and he has suggested "mistakes" were made in letting in too many Lebanese Muslim immigrants. His soft bigotry resonates with enough voters to sway elections.

At the same time, Manus and Nauru are a growing embarrassment to Australia, a party to all major human rights treaties. "There is an increasing realization that this is unsustainable," Madeline Gleeson, an Australian human rights lawyer, told me.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull knows this and needs a way out. After Omid Masoumali, a young Iranian, burned himself to death on Nauru this year, a cartoon by Cathy Wilcox captured Australia's shame. Above a man in flames was the caption "Not drowning."

The result is a one-time [agreement with the United States](#), announced last month. America will, over an unspecified period, take in an unspecified number

of the refugees, with priority going to the women, children and families who are on Nauru. The single men on Manus would presumably bring up the rear, if accepted at all with Trump in office.

Turnbull has said he's confident Trump will not torpedo the deal. But when I asked Benham Satah if he thought he would soon be in the United States, he drew on a cigarette and gazed out to sea: "After three years suffering here I know only this: Unless you see it, don't believe it."

In the early morning at the Lorengau covered market, another Australian-funded project, women lay out produce and wares. Pickings are slim: pineapples, papaya and small bunches of peanuts. Giant turtles with prices scrawled on their bellies flap in expiration as the sun rises and flies hover.

Betel nut has pride of place on many tables. Chewing the nut is a Manus habit often manifested in scarlet lips and rotting teeth. Betel, a mild stimulant, prompts what June Polomon, who works in the market, called "our tendency to be nonstop chatterers, just like our noisy friarbirds."

Visiting Manus in 1928, Margaret Mead, the American anthropologist, described a scene little changed nine decades later: "He puts a betel nut in his mouth, leisurely rolls a pepper leaf into a long funnel, bites off the end, and dipping the spatula into the powdered lime, adds a bit of lime to the mixture he is already chewing vigorously."

As they chew, the people of Manus discuss property (familial attachment to land is fierce), daughters' dowries and the many hundreds of asylum seekers who — unexpected and unexplained — were deposited in 2013 at the island's Lombrum naval base, originally established by United States forces in 1944 under Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

"If Australia had cared, it would have told us something, talked to our village leaders, who are important," Polomon told me. "We've been used in a neocolonial way."

That is also the view of Charlie Benjamin, the Manus governor, whom I found in indignant mood. "It's just morally wrong to dump these people here and then say, 'Never Australia,' " he said. "Our understanding was we'd help a process and genuine refugees would move on, but no process exists." He described endless wrangling with the Australian authorities over roads he believes they should pay for — the western half of the island is still so inaccessible the governor said it took him six hours to drive the 50 miles to his village.

Under the money-for-migrants deal between Canberra and the Papua New Guinea government in Port Moresby, Australia promised its former colony hundreds of millions of dollars, but chiefly for projects outside Manus. The 60,000 inhabitants of Manus were never consulted. Nor, of course, were the asylum seekers and refugees. When they arrived, they had no idea where they

were. Seeing black Papuans, many thought they were in Africa. For almost three years they were held in the detention camp, humiliated and intermittently terrorized.

Last April, the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court ordered an end to “the unconstitutional and illegal detention of the asylum seekers or transferees at the relocation center on Manus”; it was an offense “against their rights and freedoms.” To which Dutton, the immigration minister, promptly [responded](#) that nobody in Manus “will settle in Australia.”

The only change resulting from the ruling is that refugees can now leave the camp during the day and take buses into Lorengau.

“We’re just in a bigger prison,” Abdirahman Ahmed, a Somali refugee, told me. The Shabab jihadi militia killed his father and brother in Mogadishu. “Sometimes I think maybe if I die it’s better. If you die there’s no question in front of you, no interpreter between you and God, no immigration, no Australia. We are not human, just a signpost: If you want to come to Australia you will end up in Manus with three years of trauma and torture.”

“The Australians argue about us and two elections were won fighting about our situation. ‘Don’t let in the boat people,’ they say, or ‘say yes to the boat people,’ but in the end, we’re just tools. No one really cares about us.” - Abdul Aziz Muhamat

They are the walking dead, suspended in a dreamland, staring out at shimmering islets. Abdul Aziz Muhamat’s lips are trembling. He is from Darfur and recalls how Sudanese government forces bound a villager’s limbs to four horses “and they tore him up.” The soldiers put children in a fuel-doused hut and torched it. “I can see it like yesterday,” he says.

With an uncle’s help Aziz — the name he now uses — fled: Khartoum airport, Yemenia Airways Flight 632 (“I still remember the number”) to Sana, on to Dubai, and from there to Jakarta. He is met by a Sudanese man who whisks him south to Bogor, where he hides in a house with Iranians, Pakistanis, Burmese and others. It is mid-August 2013.

They move on by truck at night, then paddle in canoes to an island, and board a rickety boat crammed with 50 people. “I asked where we were going,” Aziz tells me, “and this guy said Australia.” But after 12 hours at sea, with the boat foundering, they turn back. Five people drown.

When Aziz tries again in October, his boat is intercepted by the Australian Navy and he is thrown into a detention center on Christmas Island with more than 40 others. Finally an Australian immigration officer tells them they will be flown to Manus, “a very dangerous place full of contagious diseases — if you touch a local, sanitize yourself.”

“I have a question,” Aziz says.

“That’s it. I cannot answer questions,” says the immigration officer.

“If you know these things exist on Manus Island, why do you want to send us there?”

Aziz says he’s in a cage. The whole island is a cage. Then he says he’s in a hole. He has no feelings, no desire. There’s no point asking why. It’s been too long. At first conditions in the detention center are primitive, hundreds of men crammed into makeshift compounds or tents, scant food, bullying expat staff contracted by Australia, constant threats from a special Papuan police riot squad flown in at Australian expense — and no information, no “process.” Nothing.

Frustration boils up in early 2014. For weeks, there are peaceful protests every evening, chants of “Freedom.” But they have no effect, and the asylum seekers are told that “processing” could take a decade: Kafka in the tropics. Anger turns to rage. Two Iranians try to escape and are beaten up. Local thugs with machetes and bush knives, drunk on moonshine, goaded and abetted by some international security staff, pile into the camp. Shots are fired. Reza Barati is killed. Aziz, his toe broken, finds himself in the clinic among “170 guys lying on concrete, some conscious, some unconscious, bodies full of blood. I thought I was back in Darfur.”

Dump men in the middle of nowhere, confine them, abuse them, suspend them in limbo, and this is what you get.

The riot changes nothing.

A year later, in January 2015, hundreds of men begin a hunger strike. Several sew their mouths shut. The strike persists for two weeks. The authorities break it by throwing Aziz, Benham Satah and others into solitary confinement in windowless containers known as the “chauka” (named after a bird unique to Manus).

The hunger strike changes nothing.

Australia has relied on the remoteness and secrecy of its program: out of sight, out of mind. [Keep the press out](#). Impose draconian nondisclosure clauses in contracts for everyone who works there. Even pass a federal law that can send whistle-blowers to prison. On the whole, it has worked.

Still, the ugliness is beginning to seep out. In 41 months these stranded men have had only two pieces of good news: the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court ruling and now the Australian deal with the United States.

“The deal represents a long overdue concession from the government that it cannot leave people on Manus and Nauru forever,” Daniel Webb, a lawyer at the

Melbourne Human Rights Law Center, told me. “That concession is way overdue, but it does not end their suffering.”

“I have personally seen prisons, and seen detention centers around the world, but I had never seen a place like Manus Island. In most prisons they give you a time limit, and they respect at least some of your rights. Here they treat you as though you’re worse than a criminal or an animal. Each hour I feel like the people come and say ‘You will never, ever go to Australia.’ It’s become their slogan to torture people.”

- Amin Abofetileh, who fled religious persecution in Iran.

Aziz, a smart young man who now has dreams of becoming a human rights lawyer, said the policy is “not about stopping boats. I think it’s about using innocent people as political tools to win elections.”

Moving the asylum seekers elsewhere to be processed was not in itself unlawful, so long as the process was fair and efficient and met basic human rights standards. There should have been explanatory sessions with the local authorities, clarity over who was running facilities, zero detention and an Australian-led regional effort to secure a decent life for the refugees. None of this occurred.

Instead, Australia, briefly under a Labor Party government and then under the conservatives, has effectively argued that the end (discouraging human smuggling) justifies the means (cruelty). As Hugh Mackay, a social researcher, observed, this is “the very same principle used to justify torture.” And even so, boats are still being turned around by a huge naval deployment.

A strange hysteria about the “boat people” seems to have blinded Australia to what is being perpetrated in its name. The country was founded on a similar principle to “offshore processing”: Britain’s dispatch in the late 18th century of convicts to a faraway land in Oceania, where they, too, would be invisible.

Its subsequent history has included the slaughter and incarceration of the native Aboriginal people; the White Australia policy, under which a vast land mass was seen as threatened by black people and other nonwhites emanating from places like Papua New Guinea; the “stolen generation” policy, under which tens of thousands of Aboriginal children were taken from their families and placed in white homes; and now this disgraceful consignment of asylum seekers, many of them dark-skinned and Muslim, to faraway islands where they are left to fester with the “natives.”

“Australians have a tendency to feel vulnerable,” Amelia Lester, the editor of the magazine Good Weekend, told me. “We’re so far from anywhere, it breeds a kind of paranoia.”

“In the beginning, I thought I was lucky to survive, to leave it all behind. I don’t feel that way anymore.” - Hassaballa Hassaballa, a welder from Northern Darfur, Sudan, who has been held for more than three years.

Just 24 million people live in Australia, a country twice the size of India, where 1.25 billion live. Might there be room to squeeze in 2,000 more? Australia has not known a recession in a quarter-century. Perhaps it is hard to imagine what humiliation and despair are. But it is time to imagine; they are right here, across the water.

“Whatever the policy challenge, deliberate cruelty to thousands of innocent people is never the solution,” Webb told me.

One measure of the government’s obsession is that it has introduced legislation to impose a lifetime ban from Australia for anyone held at one of the camps. So in theory, a man from Manus could go to the United States under the recently announced deal, become a Harvard professor, and never be able to visit Sydney.

Another is that it insists that the roughly 370 people moved from Manus or Nauru to Australia as “transitory persons” because they were injured in riots, or sexually assaulted, or were dying, or pregnant, or had broken down (like the wife of the Iranian who self-immolated) cannot stay in Australia. If they want to be considered for the American deal, they would have to return to one of the islands to be “processed.” The “transitory persons” include about 40 children. This is madness.

Lynne Elworthy, a mental health nurse, is one Australian who knows the agony of Manus and Nauru. She’s worked on both islands, and spoke to me in brave defiance of the nondisclosure rules meant to gag her. “Some cope better, focus on gym and seem to do O.K.,” she said. “But many men in Manus are withdrawn, skinny, depressed and worn out, hopeless, with plummeting lows. It’s quite obvious to see this. They exist in a lifeless pit.”

She continued: “Apart from the way the whites treated the Aborigines when they first arrived — that was worse — this will come in second by the time Manus and Nauru are considered for their absolute cruelty. I imagine one day a royal commission will look into the illegal imprisonment, the damage caused, the agony and the injury.”

“I am a free man, I am with the birds and the ocean. I am outside of the system. I am free.” - Behrouz Boochani, who in April climbed a tree in the detention center to avoid being forcibly removed by authorities attempting to permanently resettle him in Papua New Guinea.

On my last day in Manus I managed to get through the navy checkpoint at the entrance to the camp. Rain was falling heavily. I drove past General MacArthur’s old house, and an American-built church, and down to the high metal fences and

barbed wire. Dozens of Australian border guards were exercising in a field. Jeeps and white S.U.V.s splashed by. I saw the barracks — Oscar and Delta and Mike and Foxtrot — and by now it was easy to imagine the suffering endured within.

Behrouz Boochani, another Iranian refugee, had broken down in front of me a couple of days earlier, crying uncontrollably. “I can’t sleep,” he said. “I want justice,” he said. “I have one million pages of incriminating documents,” he said. Emaciated, with pale green eyes, a ponytail and beard, he was a broken but still determined man: “We are here because of all Australia, all the people who are silent, who have done nothing.”

Among the refugees is Naysir Ahmed, a Rohingya who fled persecution in Myanmar on July 2, 2013. Now 63, he made his way to Indonesia with his wife and six children. But when they boarded the bus to go to the boat, he was unable to squeeze in alongside. His family reached Australia before the imposition of the Manus and Nauru policy, and now live in Sydney. He did not. Every effort to be reunited with his family since he arrived in Manus on Nov. 15, 2013, has failed.

“I was shouting and screaming, ‘My family is gone, someone help me!’ But no-one came. That is my only regret. When I close my eyes, I can see that bus leaving.” - Naysir Ahmed

Ahmed’s nose and ribs were broken in the 2014 riot. A daughter got married in Sydney two years ago; he told her to stay well and not think too much. He blames himself for missing the bus.

“I think all the time about what happened,” he told me. “When I close my eyes, I can see that bus leaving.” He said he was “shouting and screaming, ‘My family is gone, someone help me!’ ”

What is incumbent on Australia now is clear enough. Prevail on Trump to take as many of the refugees as possible. Reunite Naysir Ahmed with his family. Recognize that the country has incurred a moral debt to the myriad people it has mistreated on the islands and allow those who do not go to the United States to build a decent life in Australia. Make the “transitory persons” already in Australia permanent residents. Close this foul chapter that stains Australia and echoes the darkest moments in its history.

Aziz had been reading Mandela’s biography. One of these men, allowed a chance, might yet make Australia proud.

[Australia’s Offshore Cruelty](#)

Scrap a policy that condemns refugees to a desperate and hopeless limbo.

By 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.

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.

[Australia's Brave Whistleblower Nurse](#)

Lynne Elworthy has been dismissed after speaking up, in defiance of gag orders, to denounce the cruelty of Australia's refugee policy.

By Roger Cohen December 20, 2016

From the start of its "offshore processing" program that has seen more than 2,000 asylum seekers and refugees dumped on two remote Pacific islands, Australia has relied on draconian nondisclosure contracts to keep the extent of its brutality secret. But this month Lynne Elworthy, an Australian mental health nurse employed on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, defied the gag clauses and a federal law against whistle-blowers to tell me the policy was an exercise in "[absolute cruelty](#)."

Elworthy, who lives in the south Australian town of Gawler, near Adelaide, has observed for more than three years the impact of endless limbo on men in

Manus. She has watched them grow inert. She has seen the “plummeting lows” induced by Australia’s punitive measures, as I did during five days on Manus last month. She has witnessed refugees losing their lives through mayhem and medical negligence in what she calls the “lifeless pit” of confinement. In the end she felt compelled to speak out because “there is no room in my head or my heart for anyone except those guys on Manus.”

Now, Elworthy, who was supposed to return to Manus this week on her regular rotation, has been told she will not be going back. She has, it seems, been fired for her honesty.

In an email provided to me, International SOS, her employer, informed Elworthy that there were no flights available until Dec. 27 and that “the position you were filling has not been renewed past 31st December.” It continued, “We have to cancel all the remaining rotations for you as we simply don’t have the headcount approval.”

Elworthy told me: “I knew the risk I was taking and I accept the consequences. But it’s quite disgusting the way this has been done.”

International SOS owns International Health and Medical Services (I.H.M.S.), a company that has been paid hundreds of millions of dollars by the Australian government to run clinics in the detention facilities on Manus, the tiny Pacific island of Nauru and elsewhere.

I.H.M.S. responded to my query about Elworthy’s dismissal by saying her contract “was concluded in light of changes to operational requirements.” It said in an email that she had occupied “a surge position” — although she has worked there for several years — in “a constantly changing environment.” The email made no mention of her interview with The New York Times.

Since July 2013, Australia has dispatched “boat people” trying to reach its shores to Manus and Nauru, far from inquiring eyes. There they have festered, grown ill, staged hunger strikes, attempted suicide; a handful have died. The conservative Australian government headed by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull argues that its policy has “stopped the boats” and that Australia would otherwise be inundated.

But its approach — in effect cruelty as deterrence — is a growing source of international embarrassment; and the government last month announced a vague one-time accord under which the United States would take some of the Manus and Nauru refugees. When, how many and from which island was left murky, but the men on Manus, who now number about 900, will almost certainly be last in line.

Elworthy began hearing rumors last Friday from the Manus Offshore Processing Center — so called although there has been no “process” since the Australian

policy was instituted three-and-a-half years ago — that she would be barred from returning because she had spoken to The New York Times.

With the Sydney offices of International SOS, a leading medical assistance company, about to close for the weekend, and her departure to Manus by way of Cairns scheduled for Sunday, Elworthy wrote twice to request clarification. Finally, Veronica O’Riordan, a senior recruitment partner at International SOS, delivered the news that Elworthy would not be returning.

The treatment of Elworthy, who was once banished from Manus for several months because she had given chocolates to the detainees, is consistent with Australia’s punitive obsession in regard to the human debacles on Manus and Nauru.

Since the United States agreement, the government has even introduced legislation that would impose a lifetime ban from Australia on refugees held in one of the camps. So if a refugee in Manus were by some miracle (an even greater miracle now that Donald Trump has been elected) to become an American citizen he would be unable to visit Melbourne.

“It is time to close this chapter,” Elworthy told me. “My greatest fear is that these men will end up being far worse off than they even suspect. The U.S. deal sounds like pie in the sky to me.”

Later she sent me an email: “I am not interested in justice for me or anything like this. I have worked for I.H.M.S. for a long time; nothing surprises me any more.” The important thing, she added, was “to bring the focus back on the Manus men.”

In conditions of oppression and menace, most people are compliant, calculating or cowed. But some, like Elworthy, will not be swayed from the truth. As Hannah Arendt wrote, “Under conditions of terror, most people will comply but some people will not. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.”

The Manus and Nauru island prisons, orchestrated by Australia, are unfit for human habitation and unworthy of a liberal democracy that is a signatory of all major international human rights agreements. The Iraqis, Iranians, Burmese, Somalis, Sudanese and others who have fled for their lives, only to find themselves in a lifeless hell for 42 months, should be brought to Australia now, if they are not to go to the United States.

Lynne Elworthy should receive one of Australia’s highest civilian honors. She has stood up for the values of her country against a policy that has dragged those values into a tropical swamp. She has raised her voice when so many have been silent.

In 2014, Reza Barati, an Iranian Kurd, was killed in the Manus detention center. Later that year, another Iranian, Hamid Kehzaei, died from septicemia in Papua

New Guinea after medical negligence at the Manus facility left a cut untreated. In 2016, Omid Masoumali, a third Iranian, killed himself through self-immolation. These deaths were all avoidable. They are Australia's responsibility.

In Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, I met Janet Galbraith, a writer and trauma worker who has tried to help the refugees in Manus. She was with an Iranian who had been hospitalized in the capital after several suicide attempts on Manus. He had scars all over his body and told me, "The guards beat me because I tried to kill myself." Persecuted in Iran, he said, "They torture me here, too."

Galbraith told me: "As an Australian I am horrified that these people are being used, their bodies and their psyches, for something unacceptable. They are being tortured in such a sophisticated, nuanced way. I see this policy as part of a continuum: It is how white Australia has dealt with anyone who challenges that whiteness from the time the aboriginal people were incarcerated. These refugees are being held at a point between life and death."

Her words echoed Elworthy's, who is convinced a Royal Commission will one day examine the cruelty inflicted in Australia's name on Manus and Nauru.

"I tried my best," Elworthy told me. "There was not much we could do except say, 'Keep yourself strong.' Every night about 180 people would come for medication, mainly sleeping tablets. We were in a container with four windows, like bank tellers, dispensing the pills. Those guys are just over it."

She told me of a Lebanese refugee who became a friend and would say to her over coffee: "We're all damaged goods now. Face the facts, woman. Who will pick us up? Nobody is going to want us."

This column has been updated to reflect news developments.

Australia's Death by Numbers

Another refugee banished by Australia to Manus Island has died, the latest victim of a form of dehumanization that threatens the world.

By Roger Cohen December 30, 2016

The dead refugee had a name. But even in death Australia did not want to humanize him. For years now he had been no more than a registration number — BRFO63 — under the country's cruel refugee deterrence system known as "offshore processing."

The brief announcement on Dec. 24 from the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection said: "A 27-year-old Sudanese refugee has sadly died today from injuries suffered after a fall and seizure at the Manus Regional Processing Center."

This was all that Australia could muster for Faisal Ishak Ahmed, who fled the Darfur region of Sudan in 2013. His was a death foretold, like that of the other deceased asylum seekers and refugees [banished by Australia to the small island nation of Nauru and to Manus](#), a remote corner of the Papua New Guinea archipelago.

Since July 2013, Australia has herded more than 2,000 desperate people into these island prisons. There has been no “process” in centers housed in poor countries paid by Australia to do its dirty work. Human beings have been left to fester, crack up and die, as I observed on Manus during a five-day visit last month. Draconian nondisclosure contracts have gagged staff, although the whole system is beginning to crumble under the weight of its iniquity.

The conservative Australian government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull argues that its policy has “stopped the boats” at a time when more refugees are on the move across the world than at any time since 1945. The argument’s flaw is its inhumanity. Despite being a signatory of all major international human rights treaties, Australia has instituted an indefensible policy of cruelty as deterrence.

Desperate for a resolution, the country last month announced an agreement with the United States to take some of those confined on Nauru and Manus. The accord’s prospects under a Donald Trump presidency seem poor. In any event, it came too late for Faisal Ishak Ahmed.

“It’s really tragic that somebody else had to die,” said Peter Young, the former medical director of mental health for International Health and Medical Services (I.H.M.S.), the company Australia employs to run clinics in the facilities. “There had been representations made and nothing was being done to help him and to get him proper assistance and care, but that is exactly how the system is designed to be. In fact it’s inevitable that it happened and will happen again.”

Young, who quit in mid-2014, added that I.H.M.S., operating on behalf of the Australian border force, inevitably became part of a culture “conditioned to see these people as less.”

I.H.M.S., owned by International SOS, issued a statement denying that Ahmed had been “denied access to medical care.”

I called a fellow Sudanese refugee, Abdul Aziz Muhamat, also from Darfur, whom I met on Manus. He knew Ahmed well and gave me this account.

“For the past two months Ahmed had been unwell. He was losing weight, had problems with his lungs. He’d walk 100 meters and stop three times. He’d go to I.H.M.S. every day and they’d say he was not sick. Then on Dec. 15, he came to me very upset. A nurse had been shouting at him, saying he was just pretending.

“We filled out a complaint form. We sent a letter Dec. 21 to I.H.M.S. saying Ahmed’s condition was worsening by the day. They removed him from Oscar

compound. He was coughing a lot. On Dec. 22, while in a bathroom, he fainted and hit his head. A nurse told me he would not make it when they finally airlifted him out Dec. 23.”

The next day, Faisal Ishak Ahmed was pronounced dead in Brisbane. Earlier this year Omid Masoumali, an Iranian held on Nauru, burned himself to death. Other deaths include Reza Barati, an Iranian Kurd, killed in the Manus detention center in 2014. Australia has blood on its hands. This is where numbering human beings ends.

But, Australia insists, it has “stopped the boats” and the nameless “boat people” in them.

I recently finished Viet Thanh Nguyen’s fine novel “The Sympathizer.” In its last pages, as his hero flees from Vietnam, Nguyen writes: “Now that we are to be counted among these boat people, their name disturbs us. It smacks of anthropological condescension, evoking some forgotten branch of the human family, some lost tribe of amphibians emerging from ocean mist, crowned with seaweed. But we are not primitives, and we are not to be pitied.”

On the eve of a new year pregnant with danger, and at the end of a year of fracture and rage, perhaps there is nothing more important to remember than the humanity in every individual — however poor, however desperate — and how easy it is to succumb to the perilous hysteria that reduces people to numbers as a prelude to their banishment or elimination.

In the 1970s, after bitter debate, Australia let in many Vietnamese “boat people” who have prospered. Offshore processing must stop. Australia owes those it has reduced to namelessness on Manus and Nauru sanctuary and dignity, now.

Americas’s Retreat and the Agony of Aleppo