



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

The Manus Island horror story stains us

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The closure of Australia's detention camp on the poor Papua New Guinea province of Manus Island happened on Halloween, of all days. The symbolism wasn't lost on those of us appalled by what's been an Australian-government-orchestrated horror story.

This fluid crisis could have been avoided well before the PNG Supreme Court ruled the camp was illegal. Hundreds of men, many found to be genuine refugees, are now truly forsaken. Only about 60 have agreed, under some pressure, to move to three incomplete so-called transit centres that will lead to destinations unknown. Many more, about 600, would rather stay in the shell of the detention centre with no electricity, water or food than to "transfer" or walk into the Manus Island community and face violence at the hands of locals or police.

Staying has its own risks. Looters are taking electric fans, plastic chairs, tables and rubbish bins while authorities look on. And the mental fragility of the remaining men is such that they could take out their frustrations on each other. Many are impaired, more so as their supply of tobacco, a incentive used by guards, has been cut off. They are jittery, at tipping point, on edge.

They are staying at the compound because it gives them some sense of control. Signs held up by them on Facebook read: "If the air was in Australia's hands it would cut us" and "Pray for us".

On the eve of the closure, the Canberra International Film Festival screened a film about the camp called *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. Codirected by a centre inmate, Behrouz Boochani, it was secretly shot using his mobile phone. Chauka is the name of a native bird, a honeyeater indigenous to Manus Island. It's also the name of the camp's solitary confinement and punishment wing. The fact that Australian officers call it Chauka disgusts the locals in the same way as would the misuse of the names of fauna on the Australian coat of arms.

Watching the film, I was struck by how surreal the detainees' predicament has become. Their relatives don't believe them when they call home. An incredulous wife thinks her husband is on a beach, sunbathing.

The film shows how successive Australian governments have not only neglected and abused detainees but also exploited the locals, who have in turn abused the detainees in their charge. The detention policy, dank with colonialism, set up a hierarchy, with the Australian guards and managers at the top under which sit the local workers given responsibility to control the detainees.

While the film tries to show respect for Manusians, providing glimpses of hospitality and humour, there's an ominous undertone. They have much in common with the asylum seekers but the policy pits each against the other, fermenting entitlement and resentment among the locals about the care and protection offered the detainees, when in fact it's the reverse, as confirmed when the

Federal Court forced the Commonwealth to pay \$70 million to the detainees to compensate for physical and psychological harm.

Most Manusians don't speak out against the mistreatment at the camp because it's their "bread and butter", in the words of one interviewed on camera. "It's in our culture to look after them. But we have become scared," he says.

After 23-year old Iranian Reza Barati was killed on Manus in 2014, the inmates who witnessed the violence were thrown in the Chauka in what they believe was a message to shut up about what they saw.

Australian politicians who have sent empathetic letters to concerned citizens over many years, but done nothing in the party room, are complicit. On Thursday, Labor leader Bill Shorten visited a Palestinian refugee camp on the West Bank. He had less to say about the camp closer to home. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has left it to a sneering Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, who says he's slammed if he keeps Manus open or closed. How about simply keeping to the spirit of the refugee convention that Australia signed?

Meanwhile, Australia now has a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council, and looks to the United States to take more than the 24 of our detainees it has taken so far.

The Trump administration has drastically cut staff on its refugee processing and resettlement program, so it will take even more time. A Canberra refugee advocate and Brigidine nun, Sister Jane Keogh, says Australia is clueless about what the US will do. Grimly, she says many abandoned on Manus won't last long enough to find out where else they might make their home.