

# Visit to Manus

**A global spotlight on the humanitarian crisis**



In November 2017 three members of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre visited the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre in Papua New Guinea. The visit was prompted by the events of 31 October when the Turnbull Government ordered all staff and personnel to abandon 606 men in the detention centre, leaving them without any food, water, power or medicine, including those critically ill.

#### **Acknowledgements**

To Kon Karapanagiotidis, CEO and Founder; Jana Favero, Director of Advocacy and Campaigns, Natasha Blucher, Detention Rights Manager and special thanks to volunteer videographer, Martin Wurt.

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# The visit to Manus

For the past sixteen years, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) has assisted hundreds of people seeking asylum in detention centres in Australia, including Christmas Island, and offshore on Manus Island and Nauru.

## Purpose of the visit

On 31 October the Australian Government abandoned 606 men in the Manus Island detention camp, cutting off all medicine, power, food and water. This prompted the ASRC's first visit to an offshore detention centre, to witness the humanitarian crisis unfolding and shine a global spotlight on what is happening to refugees and people seeking asylum transferred by Australia to Papua New Guinea (PNG).

After assessing the risks involved with such a visit and consultation with sector partners and local agencies in PNG, the ASRC landed on the decision to proceed with the visit to Manus Island.

ASRC CEO, Kon Karapanagiotidis, Director of Advocacy and Campaigns, Jana Favero, Detention Advocacy Manager, Natasha Blucher and volunteer videographer, Martin Wurt (WorkingPhotos) made the visit from 11 to 17 November 2017.

What they found was a medical emergency festering inside a humanitarian crisis.

The trip can be summarised by Aziz, a refugee who guided the ASRC through the Manus Regional Processing Centre (RPC):

"We saw the hearts and the true face of Australians and because of you guys, your visit the other night gave some hope to the people who have lost hope completely." - Abdul Aziz Muhammad

## What the visit enabled the ASRC to achieve

1. The ASRC bore witness to the current situation facing the men on Manus. We gathered information and evidence to inform our advocacy. This enabled us to act as an independent voice to counter and expose the current vilifying narrative on refugees and people seeking asylum by documenting the terrible conditions of the RPC and the inadequate, unfinished facilities at the three transit sites.
2. We were able to tell the human story of the men on Manus. We documented their experiences through 40 recorded interviews (eighteen in Port Moresby, four on Manus Island and eighteen in Manus RPC) to better understand their cases and critical needs
3. The ASRC worked with local agencies to provide urgent material aid, food and water to the men.
4. Coordinated health professionals including psychiatrists and counsellors in Australia to connect with sick men to offer medical advice over the phone.
5. Enhanced the effectiveness of the ASRC's Detention Rights Advocacy Program by gaining a comprehensive understanding of the geographical, social and operational contexts of Manus Island and Port Moresby.
6. Gained face to face meetings and connections with new and existing clients of the Detention Rights Advocacy Program.



7. Established and worked with local partners and helped lobby international humanitarian organisations to intervene and get involved in the situation on Manus
8. Delivered findings to key individuals and organisations such as Professor Patrick McGorry, the Australian Medical Association (AMA) and Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF), who are all now lobbying for urgent medical access to the men, to provide medical treatment, and independent oversight.
9. Shared case studies and findings with international humanitarian organisations to support interventions on Manus.
10. Responded swiftly to the forced removal of the men from the detention camp to unfinished transit centres after we returned to Australia. The insight and connections from visiting Manus enabled us to provide timely support and advocacy for the men. This included up to date developments to media and humanitarian groups, immediate medical advice and access to assistance to those whose possessions were destroyed in the forced removal.



## What we found

After years of advocating for an end to detention and offshore processing, the ASRC were in PNG for the first time to visit the RPC and see for themselves what was happening there. We were shocked and sickened.

### Key findings:

1. The situation on Manus Island is an urgent humanitarian and medical crisis.
2. The team witnessed deteriorating physical conditions of 421 men at the RPC. Of these, 150 were suffering serious illnesses after more than two weeks without access to clean water, food, medicine, first aid and power.
3. Men were suffering from seizures, kidney stones, undiagnosed episodes of unconsciousness, infected cuts, ear and eye infections, skin abscesses, skin rashes, chronic diarrhoea and serious mental health issues. These men still require immediate access to physical and mental health professionals on Manus Island and in Port Moresby.
4. The three transit facilities are not ready for the men to move into – they are still under construction and do not have adequate food, water or security.



5. The long term accommodation of refugees and people seeking asylum is not tenable for this population or the local community, due to the lack of physical access to sufficient food, healthcare and services to support the men.
6. The policy of offshore processing and detention has had a direct and catastrophic impact on the physical, mental and emotional health of refugees and people seeking asylum.

## The visit to Manus

7. There are a high number of people seeking asylum and refugees with chronic and acute medical issues, who are being warehoused and left stranded by the Australian government in Port Moresby waiting for access to appropriate treatment.



### Port Moresby

The visit began with several days in Port Moresby spent interviewing some of the 120 men and women who have been transferred from Manus and Nauru to PNG for medical treatment.

It became clear from the interviews that the medical situation in both Manus and Nauru detention centres is critical.

The team witnessed young men and women suffering from medical conditions directly related to their time in detention. Many suffered from mental and emotional trauma.

A young Rohingya man, who, despite being found to be a refugee, was requesting to return home despite the very real threat of persecution. He said offshore processing is killing him and he'd prefer to die at home.

One of the worst medical cases we saw was a young man with a cardiac issue that remains untreated due to the lack of appropriate specialist equipment in Port Moresby. Concurrently, he has an unusual bone disorder that he does not understand, whereby bone growths are appearing on his legs and are reappearing again after surgery. He has been informed that if the issue is not resolved it could lead to cancer; however he has no information if and when he will receive any diagnosis and treatment. To compound his conditions, he was originally told by a heart specialist that he could not have the surgery to remove his bone growth due to his heart, however the surgery happened anyway. He was confused, very ill and waiting in limbo. We met a large number of people who had been in Port Moresby for a significant period, but were yet to receive appropriate medical treatment due to unavailability in PNG.

The complex health and mental health conditions inherent in refugee populations due to their experiences in countries of origin are compounded by long term detention in hostile environments, and cannot be managed within PNG.

It became evident that Port Moresby is being used by Australian Border Force to warehouse and isolate incredibly sick people in order to avoid bringing them to Australia for the care they need.

## Manus Island

In the five hours we visited the Manus detention centre, we saw the best and worst in humanity.

In October the men who were on medication were extraordinarily handed a month's worth of medication to self-administer. For almost five years before this, men were given one tablet at a time.

By the time the ASRC visited the RPC that medication had run out, leaving men stranded without assistance - many with chronic illnesses.

Despite being physically, mentally and emotionally worn down from five years of detention, the men were standing together and actively caring for each other. The men were determined, strong, resourceful, kind and resilient.

Refugees and people seeking asylum who did not have enough to eat each day insisted on making us tea and offering what little they had. They asked how we were feeling and wanted to know if we were okay. They apologised for not being able to clean the toilets as running water had been cut off.

In stark contrast to this is the wickedness and abject cruelty of Australia's offshore processing and indefinite mandatory detention policy.

One man sat slumped in a chair with his foot in a bucket of water, swollen from a minor cut, which could easily become septic. This was a real fear given the death in 2014 of Hamed Kehazaei who died of sepsis after a minor infection in his leg consumed his body.

Another man suffered from seizures and had finished his medication. He lay staring vacantly into space.

In the hours we were in the RPC, men telling and showing us their medical conditions swamped us. They took us to those who couldn't move or walk and we were able to record their symptoms in order to provide medical assistance over the phone from Australia, and to advocate for their access to proper healthcare.

## Reflections

[Abdul Aziz Muhammad, a refugee detained on Manus Island for five years showed the ASRC team around Manus RPC. He shares here his reflection on our visit and what it meant for him and his fellow refugees:](#)

"I'd like to say thank you very much to the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre team and my special thanks to Kon and Jana and Tash. Your visit means a lot to us. I am not sure I know how to describe it; I can't find the proper word in English to describe your visit to us. In the last four and half years none of us in the detention centre dreamt that one day the ASRC would walk right inside the detention centre.

But as they say, there is nothing impossible under the sun. We saw the hearts and the true face of Australians and because of you guys, your visit the other night gave some hope to the people who have lost hope completely.

We were powerless and hopeless, but when we saw you we get a little bit of hope because we know how much it means that the ASRC walked in the middle of the detention centre that the Government was trying to ban the media for the last years and the only thing that we can say to you is thank you very much.

My message to the Australian people is what the ASRC team showed in the media - this is the facts, this is the reality, this is what the Australian Government has been hiding from you.

## The visit to Manus

They are using your names and reputation of your country, they are destroying it. And my message to you guys is to stand up, please wake up. Now is the time. No one knows what is happening in offshore, but what you are seeing through the ASRC and other media is the fact. This is what is happening on Manus Island.

The ASRC and other refugee organisations are fighting hard to get freedom for everyone who has been detained - they need you to stand with them. The Australian people have the ability to change this policy. Please just let us go to a country that wants to take us.

What is happening on Manus Island is a humanitarian crisis that needs a solution.

Each and every man has to get out of this Island safely. We are human beings with a family who we haven't seen for the past 5 years. We call our mums our parents each day and they ask us what is happening. We have no answers. Please just give us a chance."

[Jana Favero shares her experience of the visit:](#)

"The trip to PNG and Manus was profound for me. As a mother of two small kids, I was feeling a bit risk averse and wasn't sure if I would try to get into the detention centre, especially when I knew it would be by boat at night. But after meeting the men transferred from Manus to Port Moresby for medical treatment, and some of the men in Lorengau who asked us to go, I knew I had to.

It was so important to the men for people to witness and meet the faces and voices our policies are trying to silence. It's something I will never forget. I will also never forget the impressive strength and resolve of the men despite everything they have been through. To me, they are human rights heroes."

[Natasha Blucher's commitment to the cause is summarised here:](#)

"In understanding the horrific maze that is the system of offshore processing, there is no substitute for seeing it with your own eyes. To meet the men that I have spoken with over the phone countless times, to see the accommodation in Port Moresby where people are located when we advocate for their medical care, to see the camp in which countless horrors have occurred was invaluable. I'm committed to translating this new knowledge into searing advocacy for these men."

[Kon Karapanagiotidis is humbled and honoured to have met such brave men:](#)

"What stayed with me the most from my time on Manus beyond the degrading and inhumane conditions we had left these men in for the sole purpose of breaking them and punishing them for not drowning at sea, was the resilience, solidarity, bravery and humanity of the men I met. Men I had no right to expect anything from given how my country has treated them, responded to me only with grace, generosity and kindness. Our country would be lucky to call these men our own."

Pictured: Natasha Blucher, Jana Favero, Martin Wurt, Kon Karapanagiotidis



## Next steps

The refugees and people seeking asylum remain in a precarious humanitarian crisis after being forcibly removed from the camp.

The visit has confirmed that the only responsible action is to immediately evacuate them from Manus Island to safety. This has also been echoed by various international organisations.

Through the Detention Advocacy Program, the ASRC will continue to support the men on Manus and connect them to relevant counsellors, psychiatrists and lawyers.

The ASRC will continue to advocate for the immediate evacuation of all the men from Manus Island through lobbying, public campaigning, sector collaboration and media commentary.

The ASRC's trip to Manus resulted in widespread media attention, including:

- News coverage on The Project: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aaLS39L6Vg&feature=youtu.be>
- New York Times feature article: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/22/world/australia/papua-new-guinea-manus-island-detainees.html>
- Reuters article: <https://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCAKBN1DK066-OCATP>
- The Age article: <http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/shocking-footage-reveals-refugees-living-in-squalor-at-former-manus-island-detention-centre-20171120-gzp1xh.html?deviceType=text>
- Huffinton Post article: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2017/11/20/diarrhoea-filth-and-sickness-ravage-manus-island-refugee-camp\\_a\\_23283558/](http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2017/11/20/diarrhoea-filth-and-sickness-ravage-manus-island-refugee-camp_a_23283558/)

The visit to Manus enabled the ASRC to witness first-hand the catastrophic impact of offshore processing. Our recommendations for community based processing are no longer based on reports or second-hand accounts as we were able to verify and advocate from direct experience. The visit to Manus has strengthened the organisation's ability to effectively advocate for community based processing in Australia.

## Recommendations

All men are evacuated immediately to Australia in the best interests of their health, safety and protection.

People seeking asylum who arrive in Australia, regardless of their mode or date of arrival, should have their refugee claims processed while living in the community in Australia.

## More info

For more information please contact, Jana Favero, ASRC Director of Advocacy and Campaigns on [jana.f@asrc.org.au](mailto:jana.f@asrc.org.au) or 03 9326 6066



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