

NEWS

Asylum seekers riot in detention centre

ASYLUM seekers were involved in a riot at the Christmas Island detention centre, off the coast of Australia.

Thirty-seven people were injured in the chaos as around 150 people clashed and attacked each other with tree branches and pool handles.

It took the authorities more than half an hour to regain control over the situation.

The centre houses more than 1,000 asylum seekers, mainly Afghan and Sri Lankan, who had to be separated after the brawl.

Most of the 'Sri Lankan' detainees are Tamils fleeing persecution by the Sri Lankan government, reports said.

After the incident 3 people had to be flown out of the centre to Perth, to be treated for broken bones.

Some of the injuries included a broken jaw and a broken ankle.

Australian Immigration Minister Chris Evans cited frustration amongst the Tamil detainees as a possible cause for the scuffle.

"There hasn't been too many problems but there has been some increased tension I think around the Sri Lankans, in particular being a bit concerned as we have had some people removed back to Sri Lanka... generally there has been a bit of anxiety among Sri Lankan detainees."

At Christmas Island, Afghans form an overwhelming majority of the asylum-seekers who have been granted visas this year.

In the year to October 12, 544 Afghans were granted protection visas while 21 Sri Lankans were granted visas, which may have further exasperated tensions between the two groups.

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, said Tamil asylum-seeker claims were going nowhere.

"The problem is the Australian government is using the Sri Lankan embassy for security checks and identity checks," Ms Pamela Curr of the ASRC said.

"The Sri Lankan embassy is spitting bile about the Tamils. This is the way they can get at them: they go in slow, they don't release the information."

The detention centre is run by a private firm, Serco, who have recently been criticised over their handling of the centre. There is said to be overcrowding and restrictions on recreational activities.

Australian opposition immigration spokeswoman Sharman Stone also expressed her concerns

and called for an urgent inquiry into the centre's management.

"There's massive overcrowding now on Christmas Island, but you have to wonder what sort of management or discipline is in place in the centre if you have 150 people brawling," she said.

"I am seriously concerned about whether the department is now so overwhelmed by the numbers there."

Ian Rintoul, from the Refugee Action Coalition, spoke to many of the refugees housed at the detention centre and felt the sheer number of people being held there the most prominent cause of the brawl.

"I have spoken to one Afghan and one Tamil detainee inside the detention centre," he said.

"The incident seems like it was confined to just one compound, but they were aware of the situation and had spoken to people and the Afghan guy had observed some of it certainly," he added.

"What they say is that there was no particular cause. That is a result, people are angry, people are frustrated," Rintoul said.

"The overcrowded conditions inside simply boiled over inside the Green 1 compound and the Afghan detainee told me he was surprised it hasn't happened before and he is very certain that it will happen again."

"There is restricted news access, restrictions on some of the access to kitchen facilities and making tea and coffee during the day, trying to save," he said.

This came with reports that inmates are restricted to two teabags a day and no had access to the internet.

"It is those kinds of tensions or there are ethnic tensions simply to divert attention away from the deteriorating conditions inside Christmas Island and all the problems that are associated with mandatory detention."

"The Rudd Government has seen fit to continue those Howard government policies and it is now reaping the whirlwind."

"All the consequences, all the difficulties that were faced by the Howard government, will be visited on the Rudd Government because they have perpetuated the appalling conditions in mandatory detention," Rintoul warned.

The previous Australian government had been criticised for its harsh treatment of asylum seekers arriving on the country's shores.



The asylum seekers in Indonesia are among many Tamils trying to flee Sri Lanka as their treatment by government and paramilitary forces makes the risk of death at sea better than life in the country

Risking all to flee Sri Lanka

AS a growing number of Tamils take to rickety boats and risk death to flee Sri Lanka, international observers have raised concerns about the lack of international concern shown for these people and the factors that drive them out of the country.

The international community should be more involved in finding a safe home for Sri Lanka's Tamils says Irene Khan, the secretary-general of Amnesty International, the London-based human rights group.

"These people are in search of protection, the international community is doing very little," she told Al Jazeera.

"There isn't any resettlement of refugees taking place, refugee protection is very weak and, therefore, people are taking the situation into their own hands to desperately find a place where they can have safety."

"It is not people smuggling. I would call it a flow of asylum-seekers."

According to Khan, asylum seeking is a growing trend.

"The numbers of people seeking asylum are going up precisely at a time when borders are closing, which creates a very serious humanitarian situation," she said.

"For example, these people on rickety boats are putting their lives at risk to find safety. If they are not rescued at sea many of the boats will flood, if they are rescued at sea, they are then stranded as a lot of bargaining goes on as to where people can be disembarked."

Khan said the Australian authorities should speed up the

processing of refugees for resettlement in the country and increase the number.

"There is a lot of fear and negative propaganda about refugees and asylum-seekers - that these are people looking for a better life, when really, in effect, they are fleeing to save their lives," she said.

"There has to be a change in public opinion. Political leaders, and governments in particular, need to take charge to change the way in which refugees and asylum seekers are viewed - these are desperate people in need of protection and it should be provided to them."

Chris Lom, a regional spokesman for the International Organisation for Migration, repeated these views.

"Sri Lanka has been going through a very bad period over the last 30 years of conflict that has impacted the economy quite seriously," he told Al Jazeera.

"Consequently, not only have there been a diaspora of Sri Lankans travelling to other countries around the world, but there's also been a fundamental lack of jobs and lack of economic growth that, we hope, will come to an end with the end of the civil war earlier this year."

In contrast to Khan, who says this is not a case of people being smuggled but a case of flow of refugees, Lom believes "this is a mixed flow of genuine refugees and economic migrants who are coming for a variety of reasons, but primarily economic reasons such as finding better jobs; supporting their families; getting bet-

ter education for their children - which are all things they expect to find in Australia.

"But what they don't necessarily take into account when coming to that decision is that the streets of industrialised countries are not necessarily paved with gold and that they are probably taking serious risks by putting their lives in the hands of people smugglers."

At least 9,612 Sri Lankans applied for asylum in developed countries last year.

However, they are part of a far wider problem. The UN says more than 839,000 people worldwide went through legal channels to gain refugee status in 2008.

By contrast, an estimated four million migrants resorted to smugglers and traffickers, according to AI.

In Asia-Pacific, Australia is a prime destination for asylum-seekers - at least 13,000 refugees from across the world re-settled in the country last year.

That is an increase from just over 10,000 in 2007 - owing to conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka.

More than 4500 asylum-seekers arrived by air and were granted temporary status, which allowed them to live in the community while their applications were processed - compared to 161 people who reached Australia by boat.

Immigration figures suggest "boat people" are the ones with more genuine claims to refugee status. But in the period their claims are under consideration, they are kept in detention.