

In Australia, concentration camps have been built to intern migrants from poor countries. The largest on-shore refugee detention centre in Australia was built in the desert at Woomera in October 1999. In the first year of its operation there were riots, fires, a mass escape, many suicide attempts, and allegations of sexual abuse. During February 2001, a mass hunger strike of over 300 people went on for up to 30 days; some participants sewed their lips shut.

All of the migrants held there are asylum seekers, most of whose claims have been rejected. Many have been held for over three years – even the blind and the pregnant are detained behind razor wire. The transnational corporation (Group 4) that runs the detention centre also runs private prisons in the US and detention centres in the UK, and earns US\$65 a day for each refugee detainee held in Australia.

Protests inside Australia's refugee camps have been ongoing for a decade, and it is only since they escalated in 2000 that people on the outside have protested against the existence of the camps. On 30 March 2002, 1,000 people broke into the Woomera asylum seekers' prison and more than 50 detainees escaped. This was part of the Woomera 2002 Festival Of Freedom – a tour of actions held around the desert town organized jointly by urban activists and local Kokatha and Arabunna peoples, who had received messages from the prisoners requesting help and support.

Though many escapees were recaptured, a few former prisoners remain free. Detainees inside Woomera refused to let guards conduct a headcount in order to ascertain who had escaped. Guards responded with tear gas and beatings. Woomera detention centre, the centre of so much controversy, has since been closed down, but Baxter – a detention centre with an even fiercer regime – has opened and resistance continues: in January 2003, simultaneous fires occurred in every refugee detention centre in Australia.

We Are Human Beings: the Woomera breakout

by Jess Whyte

From inside the Woomera refugee internment camp in the South Australian desert, people screamed out at us. “We are human,” they yelled over and over again, “we are not animals”. One man called out: “We are people. There are no animals here.” These were the calls of desperate people caught in a system so dehumanizing that when they were faced with other people – people who came in solidarity – their first instinct was to convince us they were human.

The call to action for this protest talked of our humanity being obliterated in Woomera. Here, in the desert, we felt the full extent of what that really meant. We realized that it applied not only to those inside the fence but to all of us who are ‘free’ on the outside. And so we fought for the freedom we had been told we already had. We fought alongside people and knew them as such, and we discovered, amidst the horror, a common humanity.

Arriving in Woomera, the first thing I was struck by was the incredible isolation. I imagined being a newly arrived migrant, driven through the desert to this place. I imagined feeling the dry heat for the first time, being whipped by the dust and then being left here, behind the fence. It would be easy to believe that no one knew this place existed. It would be so easy to feel utterly alone. “The future of people is anonymous,” an escapee told me later that night. “They

don't know how long [it will be until they are] released. Some have been here years. Their family can't contact them. They don't know if they are alive or have disappeared."

On Friday night 1,000 of us marched towards the camp to show those inside that they were not alone – that we knew, that we cared, and that we would fight alongside them. As we walked through the thistles towards the camp, orange flares were released, spewing clouds of orange smoke into the sunset. The flares were a signal of distress, a signal of the desperate emergency that lay before us. This time the call was answered – not by some distant boat on the horizon, like the unfortunate Tampa, whose captain had followed the law of the sea and his own conscience [by picking up a boat of stranded migrants], and found himself a pawn in a political game [when Australia refused to let him dock] – but by thousands of people fighting together on either side of the razor wire.

Outside the fence we rushed forward. We waited for the riot police. We waited for the tear gas and the water cannons many of us had seen used on those inside to be turned on us. The police didn't arrive.

Suddenly we were face to face with the razor wire. We had talked about ripping down the fences, tearing down the cages, destroying the barriers that divided us. Few of us had believed our own rhetoric. But now we were faced with a fence. In the distance, on the other side, people were locked up. This fence symbolized everything we had come here to oppose. For a moment we were daunted by it. We pulled at it in anger, watching it sway, but hardly believing it when it came down. The coils of razor wire that ran along its top, designed to rip and tear at the flesh of those who attempted to scale it, were soon powerless, pinned to the desert floor by sandbags, which seemed to have been provided for the purpose.

We learned later we could have walked around that fence. Perhaps if we had, everything would have been different. Seeing that razor wire come down changed everything. It changed us. Suddenly everything seemed possible. We helped each other over, mocking the once-foreboding coils now lying limp before us. And still the police didn't arrive. With the fence down, there seemed no other choice but to continue on. Even those who would not

shouting "The working class has no borders", close to 1,000 people occupy the Los Angeles International Airport in protest against a week of raids by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and against a state supreme court ruling which denies back-pay to undocumented workers fired for union organizing. The people are part of a coalition of immigrant rights groups, unions, and community and religious organizations. Southwest Airlines

participated closely with the INS in Operation Tarmac, launched in the wake of 11 September. The airline is profiling passengers with one-way tickets, cash purchases, and Latino-sounding surnames, and is allowing undercover agents to demand identification, often chasing fleeing workers into oncoming traffic.

>> **March 29** >> Over 1,000 people assist refugees to escape from Australia's Woomera Detention Centre.

>> **April 1** >> After a 30 year campaign involving direct action, popular education, and constant legal challenges, forest activists in Aotearoa/New Zealand achieve massive victory when the government bans all logging of publicly owned temperate rain forests. National parks are extended, and two new conservation parks are created, resulting in the West Coast region having over 85 per cent of its land protected as public preserve. Padlocks are removed, fences



Preparing to tear down the fence surrounding the detention centre. Woomera, Australia

have joined the civil disobedience action scheduled for the following day were here now. They too had seen the fence come down. They too had been changed, and they moved with us to the next fence.

If the last fence was symbolic, this one was chillingly real. Behind its bars were people like us, people who were crying or screaming for freedom. Many of them were injured. Topless men stood before us, their chests slashed and bloody. People raised mangled hands, ripped by the razor wire. They too had already pulled down a fence. Now they screamed out at us, desperate to convince us they were human. While Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, talks of the “illegals” or the “queue-jumpers”, we talk of the “refugees”, the “asylum seekers”, the “detainees”. Too rarely do we go beyond our mythical categories and think about the people. But now we were faced with these people, and we realized how severely the fences they stood behind imprisoned us all.

A small boy stood at the bars, pulling at them while tears poured down his face. Around him people held hands through the fence. Above them, people from the inside and outside met and wrestled with the razor wire that stretched

around the perimeter. This was the razor wire news crews had filmed a man throwing himself onto in desperation months earlier. At one point a man climbed to the top of the first fence and stood contemplating the wire below. For a horrific moment we expected to see a replay of the scene we had all seen played out on our television screens. People on both sides screamed out to him, “NO!” He looked out at the people in front of him, people in tears, people who seemed to care if he lived or died, and slowly he climbed back down.

Around him other refugees used towels and gloves to protect themselves as they tore at the fence. They didn’t want to harm themselves and now there was another option. That option was to fight, to escape, to tear down the fences as we on the outside had talked about. When the steel bars finally buckled it wasn’t those on the outside who tore them down. It was the people inside who had been constrained by them for so long. And suddenly they were jumping out. The first to escape scrambled out to be hugged by people outside. Moments later, as the police finally moved in, more flew threw the air and stage dived into our arms. A man ran through the crowd grabbing people and

come down, and public access is restored to the spectacular region. Using words unfamiliar to most capitalist policy-makers, the forestry minister tells Parliament, “These lowland forests are considered by many New Zealanders to be a unique and significant part of our natural heritage, too valuable for logging of any sort to continue.”

>> **April 3-5** >> Continent-wide demonstrations in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle take place across

Latin America. More than 1,000 Brazilians, including members of the MST, march to the US consulate in São Paulo. In Brasília, *Via Campesina* members hold an overnight vigil and encampment in front of the Israeli embassy, while 500 people in Rio de Janeiro protest at the Israeli consulate. 1,000 people, most of them of Palestinian descent, march in Santana do Livramento, and across the border in Rivera, Uruguay; in Chile 1,000 people gather in

Santiago to condemn the Israeli assault. In Quito, Ecuador, a protest takes place at the Israeli embassy and in Lima, Peru, about 100 Palestinians demonstrate outside the Israeli embassy. In Nicaragua, 2,000 people march to the UN office in Managua to present written demands calling for the withdrawal of the Israeli army; participants included many Nicaraguans of Palestinian and Arab origin and members of the leftist Sandinista National Liberation

telling them: "I am refugee. I've been inside two years." I held his hand and began to walk, to walk away from the fence, away from where the police had moved in, blocking the escape of those who had been too slow to get out.

As we walked we tore off his prison clothes and pulled a "Free the Refugees" t-shirt over his head. He looked like any of us. Except that unlike us he was a hunted man, an escapee. As we crossed back through the dust towards our campsite, he asked me again and again, "Now what is your plan? How do we get away?" I wished I had a better answer than, "We'll do everything we can." We kept walking faster now as just in front of us, six police dragged a man back to the other side of the razor wire. We tried to look the other way as we kept walking.

That night we spent many hours with this man. We asked him to choose a name in case the police raided our campsite. He said he'd use an Australian name and chose Chang. We offered him cigarettes, which he took, and we sat in a tent smoking rollies and talking. He was intelligent and articulate and incredibly calm. We offered him food, but he refused. He was on hunger strike. "We had a demonstration in the afternoon saying 'welcome' to protesters," he told us. Australasian Correctional Management (ACM – a subsidiary of Wackenhut Corrections, now owned by global private prison operators Group 4) guards had disrupted the protest and told the detainees that three protesters (who had been injured in a car accident) had been killed. They told the protesting refugees it was their fault. "Today all on hunger strike in solidarity with demonstrators in car accident,"

"When there is damage to a detention centre, the TV cameras are invited in to show the ruined buildings to the world, but no journalist has ever been allowed inside to document the destruction of our souls."

– appeal from the asylum seekers of Australia, January 2003

Chang told me. "No one inside is eating. In morning we raised black flag in sorrow."

This story was the flip side of the arguments we had heard on the outside before the protest. Some lawyers representing Woomera detainees had expressed concern over our protests, arguing that if refugees were attacked by ACM, or self-harmed, we would be responsible. This argument was taken up by the media and the government who attempted to paint protesters as irresponsible and unconcerned for the welfare of refugees, and foster a split between radical and conservative wings of the movement. At the time, many people involved in the Woomera 2002 network in Melbourne had argued against painting people inside Woomera as lacking in agency. We had pointed out that this movement we were part of was started by people within the camps – the first Woomera breakout was the event that had spurred on protests outside the camps. We

had pointed to the fact that inside Woomera people were organized, that many were serious activists before they arrived here and that they, like us, were capable of making decisions about how and when they were to protest, and of evaluating the possible ramifications.

Now before us sat two of these men; men who had escaped from Afghanistan. “The Taliban used to take our people, the Hazaras, for the front lines, then professional soldiers go after,” Chang told us. “We were compelled to escape.” They were men who had reached Australia against incredible odds and who now were fighting for their freedom. They asked us for one thing: solidarity.

That solidarity came in many forms, and crucially it served to give hope to people who were beginning to believe there was none. “They say no hope, disappointment,” Chang said of the people inside the camp. “But when they hear all people of Australia coming they found a glimmer of hope.” Throughout the night, he repeated these words again and again. “Before we had no hope. You have given us hope.”

Chang will need that hope. Like many others who escaped, he was later recaptured. Chang will not get refugee

status. He is what Philip Ruddock referred to during the protest as a “rejectee”. The persecution he outlined to us is not enough for him to qualify for refugee status. It seems the continuing ‘war on terror’ has made Afghanistan safe for people like Chang in the eyes of our Government. Afghanistan has been bombed to pieces, our Government claims it has been bombed to peace. “This [refugee application] process is so complex, even you native Australians would not be successful,” Chang told us that night. For people like him, success is even more elusive. “Tajik and Pashtun interpreters inside ACM hate us Hazaras,” he explains. “We say something, they say something different.” There are always technicalities to lock people out, to slam up more barriers to real freedom.

For the people who marched towards the fences that Friday night, chanting “No borders. No nations. No deportations,” the technicalities are irrelevant. We did not come to ask for minor amendments to the refugee convention, for faster processing, or more ‘humane’ incarceration. We came to fight for the free movement of people, for a real globalization, based not on the freedom of

Front, among others.

>> **April 6** >> More than 100 members of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, in South Africa, a group which reconnects power lines when service to poor communities gets cut, gather outside the home of Johannesburg’s mayor’s home, and attempt to deliver a memorandum, when they are fired upon with live ammunition. Chanting slogans, flinging garbage around

the garden, and otherwise trashing the house ensues in the outraged aftermath before 87 are arrested

>> **April 9** >> After six years of bitter struggle, the Cascadia Forest Alliance celebrates the cancellation of Eagle Creek timber sales in the Mt. Hood National Forest, Oregon, US. While not technically old growth, many stands of trees are 150 years old and naturally regenerated after wildfires in the late 1880s. The forest has been defended by road

blockades, sit-ins, and three years of continuous occupation of threatened trees. Tragically, 22-year-old Beth ‘Horehound’ O’Brian falls 150 feet to her death in the days following the announcement of the cancellation and the receipt of documentation, as activists continue their constant vigil, having learned from experience that the word of the Forest Service is virtually worthless.

>> **April 10** >> Farmers in Nairobi, Kenya take to the

capital to exploit the world's people with ease, but on global solidarity and justice. We came to assert that the people locked in cages were just like us, and had as much right to be here as we did. On Friday night Chang told me, "We come to be refuged by the people of Australia, not by Philip Ruddock or John Howard." At Woomera, 1,000 of us attempted to provide that refuge; to break down the barriers that existed between us, be they in the form of fences, lies, or institutionalized racism.

After Woomera there are people who remain uncaptured. Others continue to be locked up indefinitely. Those of us who are told we're 'free' Australians learned a lot about freedom, and gained a new determination to fight for it, both for ourselves, and for all of our friends whose cages are more tangible than ours. This time we will not fight on their behalf, but for our own liberation. We left Woomera with the realization that the people inside the camps struggle as much for our freedom as we struggle for theirs. Seeing these people – people who had sat with us, talking, smoking, and even laughing – being dragged back into the camps was heartbreaking. Seeing them with their fists still raised in the air was exhilarating. On Friday night Chang told me quietly, "We are happy that we got out. Even if we are arrested, we are happy we saw outside the fence." So now we continue to struggle, to destroy the fences so that people like Chang can join us in a fenceless, borderless world.

"We came here looking for freedom, safety, and justice. Instead we found nothing but traps, built of steel bars, bad laws, and dishonest politics. Inside these cages, children have grown into adults. Young men's hair has turned white. Babies have been born, taken their first steps, spoken their first words. Most of us, separated from our families, have become like ghosts to our mothers, our wives, our children."

– appeal from the asylum seekers of Australia, sent to refugee advocate Betty Dixon, January 2003