

## **IMPRISON AND DETAIN | 24 MAY 2001 CHARANDEV SINGH**

### **Chair**

*The final speaker for the evening is Charandev Singh, who's worked for nine years as an activist and advocate of people in custody and against the prison industrial complex and in the last three years with families of people who have died in custody. Also Charandev has asked me to say because of ongoing litigation against the Minister for immigration and ACM, what he says here are exclusively his own views and not those of any other organization with which he has worked.*

### **Charandev**

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the Eora people and pay my respects to the elders of that community and the elders of all communities here. I'd also like to pay my respects to all those people here, who have lived and survived through institutionalisation, through prison and detention, I pay my utmost respects to you here.

No person in this room is untouched or unconnected from the history of colonial violence, invasion and war in this country and many other countries. I can only completely endorse the need that Thang has talked about for all of us to make the structural and the personal connections between those processes and what is happening in this country at this time.

To learn the true history of this country, to learn about the history and the continuing struggle of resistance in this country and to resist the hierarchy of whiteness which is imposed upon people of colour, the hierarchy that's imposed on people of colour, to split us off from the processes of racialised punishment and those among us who are most targeted and imprisoned in this country, because we, our actions and our ability to work together is crucial to the ending of the process of racialised punishment in this country at this time and in the future.

This country doesn't have much space for any discussion of white supremacy.

I hope to make a small space for that discussion because I believe that it is the process of white supremacy, the ideology and the culture of white supremacy in this country, that is so crucial to the strength of what I call the imprisoning culture of this country.

Elizabeth Martinez, a Latino educator and activist, has defined white supremacy as 'an historically based institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations and people of colour by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege. The need to recognise racism as being systemic, is one reason the term white supremacy has been more useful than the term racism. They refer to the same problem but the purpose of racism is much clearer when you call it white supremacy.'

Some people think of racism as just a matter of prejudice, but supremacy defines a power relationship. A power relationship which is extremely manifested in the intense nature of racialised policing and racialised punishment, in the intense focused destruction that racialised punishment inflicts on indigenous communities and nations, on people of colour, on their aspirations, on their lives, on the future of their children, on their ability to be and maintain families to maintain resistance. The term white supremacy also gives white people and all other people a clear choice of supporting or opposing a system, rather than getting bogged down in claims to be an anti-racist or not in their personal behaviour.

I want to talk about the 22nd of December, last year (2000), in Melbourne. It's only five months ago. That day the sky wept and wept and wept and wept. It stormed all day. That day at 8 o'clock, a fifty three year old Tongan man named Viliami Tanginoa, who had been in this country for seventeen years, had laid down roots, family connections, was in the Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre. A fifty three year old Tongan man, a devoutly religious man, a very respectful man, was in a position where immigration officers attempted to remove him back to Tonga. He resisted, probably for the first time in his time in detention at Maribyrnong. He climbed up a basketball pole in the external recreation area of Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre. And what we know of, what I'm going to say, has been told to us directly by the many, many detainee eye witnesses that witnessed the last hours of his life and the violence of his death.

In the hours and days and weeks after Viliami's death, detainees felt a great need to get the story of Viliami's apparent desperate suicide into the public arena. They wrote many statements, contacted the media, and subjected themselves to intimidation and harassment. On January 1st, they fasted while there was a protest outside. They constructed monuments and engaged in numerous peaceful acts of remembrance.

The detainees have constructed a permanent monument to Viliami, with an inscription that reads: "Better to die proudly when there's no possibility to live proudly" ... "every refugee here will never forget and every refugee in the world knows how he felt before he jumped."

The death in custody of Viliami Tanginoa has again formed a bridge of grief between prisons and detention centres and marked another point of convergence between the violence of imprisonment in this country, and the growing convergence of that violence into detention centres.

It seems clear to me that the appointment of a multinational global prison company has accelerated that convergence. ACM has only had a three year contractual partnership with DIMA. But in this relatively short time DIMA has now become Wackenhut Corrections Corporation's third largest customer in the world. Only second behind the State of Texas and the State of Florida. DIMA now provides Wackenhut Corrections Corporation, the parent company, with eleven percent of its global revenues. Apart from this massive commercial incentive which now exists for ACM, this entrenched interest now

appears to converge with the Minister's desire to be the entrepreneur of mandatory detention, not just in this country, but all over the world, to sell the idea of mandatory detention all over the world.

There's clearly a convergence between his ideological interests and the commercial and other interests of Wackenhut Corrections Corporation.

We've also seen an increased militarisation in detention centres. This can be seen in the normalisation of weapons of repression being used in detention centres, like the use of chemical weapons like teargas, allegations of prolonged solitary confinement, the transfer of immigration detainees to prisons who are then held there for months and years without charge, without ever going before a court, and as Thang has said the holding of immigration detainees who have completed their sentence primarily from Vietnam and Cambodia and who are spending years of immigration detention time in maximum security prisons. All these things and the introduction of prison techniques of repression like strip searching, and the erasure of sexual violence in detention centres like that which occurs in prisons, mark an increasing militarisation or 'imprisonisation' of detention centres.

With seemingly limitless capital available to them they're in an expanded position to build and operate detention centres far beyond the capacity that the Commonwealth government ever had.

That marks a significant shift in the ability of the globalizing punishment industry to capture and imprison increasingly criminalized populations of colour and indigenous people. That is the difference. The other difference that privatisation has bought and we in Victoria have experienced this behaviour many, many times, is private prison companies, intimidating activists, intimidating academics, with threats of defamation, because when we speak out against these policies and when we speak out against abuses that occur in these systems and they see it as a threat to their commercial reputations.

Now, violence and abuses and attempted genocides in prisons and places of confinement in this country, have a history of two hundred years, never once, despite all the repressive forces that the state has been able to level, has there been any talk of the state threatening to sue us and to silence us. Now that threat, which is very a real presence tonight, is an attempt to add to the multiple strategies of silencing that Paula Abood earlier alluded to. The temporary protection visa system impose on people being finally released from detention centres, that this man (Maqshood Alshams co-speaker) is subject to on a second to second basis is also another example of the multiple silencing strategies that are at work around the violent relay of racilsied punishment in this country.

What clearly, I think needs to happen, is to conciously and critically draw these connections together.

If the government and commercial interests in the global punishment industry are attempting to slice us off, to ideologically and physically separate us off

from our communities of colour and our indigenous families who are imprisoned increasingly, then we need to go and make those connections with individuals both in the community and in prisons, and not become subject to the violence and isolation and invisibility that the hierarchy of whiteness that operates in this country attempts to impose on us.

As Thang Ngo said, that we will not flick past the daily assaults of racism and white supremacy on to someone else because the nature of white supremacy in this country is circular. Although the techniques and the stereotypes may be differently applied to indigenous people and other people of colour in this country, they all borrow from the same ideological imperatives of white supremacy and they all target us in very different ways but for the same political and ideological objectives.

What I also need to say is that there is a history of five hundred years of resistance to slavery, white supremacy and invasion. There is a history of resistance for over two hundred years to the three primary weapons of white supremacy in this country, these primary weapons include the violence and terror of invasion and occupation, the white man's law, and the English language.

There's over two hundred years of resistance in this country and to build and pursue an agenda of resistance that MUST take numerous forms, that will reciprocate the thousands of acts of resistance and survival in places of detention and imprisonment that are carried out every day.

To do that we need to learn and embrace and pursue the struggles that have been waged in this country, by people like Dr. Ruby Langford, Mum Shirl and, to embrace the legacies, the teachings and the revolutionary transformative processes laid down by people like Malcolm X and our mothers and our sisters.

All this work, all this work is essential and is absolutely necessary at this time.

It's a matter of reciprocal obligations for those resisting inside prisons, resisting inside detention centres, resisting inside families, resisting inside intensely policed communities, it is a matter for us to take up our responsibilities for our sisters, our families, our brothers inside to and to join that resistance through all means possible.

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