



12 March 2014 – As states around the world introduce [stricter border controls](#) and expand the use of immigration detention, they increasingly turn to a handful of multi-national companies to manage a range of functions that used to be considered the sole [responsibility of governments](#).



Critics argue that the use of these companies to run detention centres, guard borders and escort deportees has made it extremely difficult to hold someone to account when things go badly wrong, as they did on the night of 17 February at the [Manus Island centre](#). The riot, which occurred at Australia's offshore processing centre for asylum seekers on Manus Island, in Papua New Guinea (PNG), last month, which left one detainee dead and more than 70 others injured, has put the spotlight on the outsourcing of numerous aspects of migration control to private security companies.

Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, research director at the [Danish Institute for Human Rights](#) who has written extensively about what he calls “the migration industry” points out that if the violations at Manus Island had taken place under the watch of Australian immigration workers, “there would be a much easier case of legal responsibility”.

The privatization of migration control has made it more difficult to investigate and prosecute cases of abuse, even when they occur in front of dozens of witnesses. This was the case with Jimmy Mubenga, an Angolan asylum seeker who was so heavily restrained by the private security guards escorting him during a deportation flight out of Heathrow in October 2010 that he lost consciousness and died.



Despite the outcome of an inquest in July 2013, which found Mubenga was unlawfully killed, the UK’s Crown Prosecution Service has yet to press criminal charges against the guards who were employed by G4S, the largest security company in the world. The UK’s Home Office faced no criminal liability, and simply switched providers, awarding a new contract for deportations to the company Reliance (now called Tascor), which has since been linked to numerous allegations of [abuse](#) .

Phil Miller, a researcher with UK-based non-profit [Corporate Watch](#) who has investigated the main contractors employed by the UK’s immigration authorities, agreed that “once the government has decided to run these things privately, there are only a handful\* of companies to choose from”, none of them with a record free of abuse allegations or safety lapses.

Don Flynn, director of the [Migrant Rights Network](#) , a UK-based NGO, argues that the low cost, high volume model that now characterizes detention services is inappropriate when dealing with immigration detainees, a high proportion of whom are [asylum seekers](#) with a history of trauma. “You’re dealing with severely depressed people who’ve got multiple needs,” he told IRIN.

For some migrant rights activists, the most worrying aspect of the privatization of migration control is how it has helped drive the global trend towards greater criminalization of migration. The UK now has about 4,000 designated immigration detention beds (spaces allocated in detention centres) compared to between 200 and 300 beds 15 years ago and [detains](#) nearly 30,000 asylum seekers and undocumented migrants a year.

In the last 20 years, the US has also seen a massive expansion in immigration detention, and now maintains 34,000 detention beds at a cost of about \$2 billion a year. Private security companies like [GEO Group](#) and the [Corrections Corporation of America](#) (CCA) manage nearly half of these beds and have lobbied legislators for laws that would detain immigrants

more frequently and for longer periods of time, according to a [2013 report](#) by the National Immigration Forum.

Gammeltoft-Hansen notes that once governments have gone down the road of privatizing migration control, it is very difficult to reverse direction due to the loss of expertise and manpower in the public sector. In both the UK and in Australia, incoming administrations have promised to abandon privatization of detention centres, only to award more contracts to private security firms after taking office. "It's what we call the lock-in effect," said Gammeltoft-Hansen.

"Over time, these private companies will have more know-how about how to do these tasks and increasingly are going to be setting the parameters and setting the policy directions," he warned.

\* [G4S](#) continues to run two immigration removal centres in the UK. It also provides electronic monitoring services and shares a contract with two other companies to manage asylum seeker housing. One of its main competitors, Serco, has been caught up in sexual abuse [allegations](#) involving guards at its Yarl's Wood immigration removal centre in Bedfordshire. Another company, Mitie, has just been awarded contracts to run two detention facilities in West London despite failing to follow [recommendations](#) by the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service to install a sprinkler system at its Campsfield House Immigration Removal Centre, which would have prevented a fire from spreading there in October 2013.

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