

Australian government twists and turns on Kosovar refugees--A case study in duplicity

Mike Head
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The Australian government's policy on offering shelter to refugees driven out of Kosovo has changed every day this week. One backflip has followed the other, as the calamity produced by NATO's bombing became increasingly obvious.

On Monday, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock faithfully adhered to the Howard government's general anti-refugee policy. Even after days of harrowing scenes of human misery in the Balkans, Ruddock flatly ruled out taking any refugees. After consulting with Prime Minister John Howard's office, Ruddock insisted that Australia was too far away to offer assistance. "Flying planeloads of refugees into Australia would not be an appropriate response," he declared.

And there would be "no increase in the humanitarian intake" this year, he emphasised. It would remain at 10,000, with perhaps 4,500 coming from the various war-ravaged parts of the former Yugoslavia.

Tens of thousands of asylum-seekers--mostly from Asia and Africa--are denied entry to Australia every year. Thousands who succeed in entering the country on temporary visas are rounded up by police, detained and deported. Ruddock made it clear there would be no exception for the Kosovars.

For the next 24 hours, Ruddock pushed this line heavily in the media. He confidently predicted that the Cabinet, due to meet that day, would endorse his response. "I would think a considered response would not suggest we open our doors in a temporary way to the movement of people with the expectation that they would have to be returned." Just five hours later, Cabinet took exactly that decision.

Undoubtedly, pressure was brought to bear from Washington, where the Clinton administration had hurriedly drawn up plans to dump Kosovar refugees in prison camp conditions at the US naval base on Cuba (after earlier proposing Guam) and was urging its NATO allies to unveil similar schemes.

The Howard government's stance also provoked widespread outrage at home, accompanied by nervous expressions of concern in the media. To many people, there was an obvious contradiction. As soon as NATO began its assault on Yugoslavia, the Howard government declared its full backing for the bombardment, echoing the White House line that this was a war waged for genuinely humanitarian purposes. Yet it would not provide safe haven for a single victim of the war.

The contrast is all the more stark because Canberra is making a critical contribution to the NATO operation via the so-called jointly operated US bases on Australian soil. The Nurrungar base provides early warning of enemy missiles and other military responses--helping to identify NATO targets; Pine Gap is part of a global electronic eavesdropping network--needed to monitor the Milosevic regime's plans; and North West Cape maintains telecommunications and navigational facilities for US warships and submarines.

Late on Tuesday, Prime Minister John Howard hastily convened a media conference where, with Ruddock standing mutely by his side, he announced an about-face. As a purely temporary measure, the government would admit up to 4,000 ethnic Albanians. They would be airlifted to Australia and provided with food, health care and basic necessities, but only for three months.

Howard spoke of the need for an affluent country such as Australia to be seen to be generous. In the same breath he said his government's offer of safe haven had two conditions. The first was that none of the refugees would be permitted to apply for permanent residency, or even for social security benefits. The second condition was that the Labor Party opposition agree to the passage of retrospective legislation to formalise those restrictions once parliament resumes. The Labor leaders, who also back the NATO bombing, readily agreed.

In effect, although this was not spelled out, the refugees will be permitted to physically land on Australian soil, but will be stripped of all legal rights, including the right to apply for refugee status and to obtain welfare. After three months, they will be forcibly repatriated back to the Balkans. How this will be achieved legally is yet to be seen. The courts have in the past objected to individuals being locked up or deported unless they have been proven guilty of a criminal offence (invoking the doctrine of *habeas corpus* --no detention without trial). Presumably the Howard government will extend the principle introduced by the former Labor government of declaring unwanted refugees to be a special category of "unlawful non-citizens" who have no legal or democratic rights whatsoever.

Asked if the refugees would be under some form of restraint or in effective captivity, Howard did not deny the suggestion. He said the government was still considering that issue. Initial

reports in the media, citing Defence Department sources, said the Kosovars--who are fleeing from tents and military control--would be housed in tents at large or remote military bases. As for the tens of thousands of refugees remaining in the Balkans, Canberra would increase its aid contribution by just \$4 million to a paltry total of \$6 million.

The government's proposals evoked images of traumatised refugees being locked away in military barracks or, even worse, the notorious detention centres used since the 1980s to imprison Asian and African asylum seekers at Port Hedland, Villawood and Maribyrnong. There was further popular consternation. Paul Nicolaou, chairman of the Ethnic Communities Council of New South Wales, posed the question: "In remote areas, how are they going to get access to trauma-related services, counsellors who understand their culture, and interpreters? These people will not know a word of English. What are they going to be doing for three months? They'll go mad."

To make matters worse for the government, the Australian-Albanian Association firmly rejected the option of remote military camps. "The Kosovars have already had too much of that kind of experience," commented the Association's president Erik Lloga. Others pointed to the barbarity of consigning families from the snow-capped valleys of Kosovo to the fierce heat of northern Australia.

The next day saw another turn. Ruddock denied that the government had in mind any form of detention. It might even allow some of the refugees to stay with friends, relatives or other Albanian-speaking immigrants, he said. The refugees would be "free to move" although the government was not keen to have them spread throughout the community.

Only Peter Beattie, the Labor Party Premier of Queensland, advanced a more callous attitude. He ruled out a Townsville military base as a refugee site, on the grounds that it was not remote enough. Beattie said the newly-established Scherger airforce base near Weipa on the far north York Peninsula would be more acceptable.

Finally, on Thursday it was confirmed that the government would send the refugees to remote military barracks and former migrant hostels around the country, after initial processing at an army base near Sydney. About 500 would be housed at the country's first and largest post-war migrant reception centre at Bonegilla, about 300 kilometres north of Melbourne. Even when it was new, Bonegilla was a spartan camp for immigrant labourers.

The government's attempt to restore its credibility took a further blow when David Oldfield, the New South Wales leader of the extreme right-wing One Nation party, issued a statement. Oldfield, an unabashed "national socialist," said the decision to accept the refugees on a strictly temporary basis was a "direct application" of One Nation's immigration policy. Oldfield said that when One Nation announced its policy (which essentially calls for a return to the "White Australia" policy), "we were said to be racist, discriminatory, uncaring and inhuman--so

what is John Howard?"

The government's twists and turns are driven by two considerations. The first is to ensure that no breach is made in the official policy of cutting immigration quotas and stopping most refugees seeking entry to Australia. The government's fear is that some of the destitute Kosovars, having been uprooted and flown to the other side of the globe, may want to live and seek work in Australia. The war victims are to be assisted--temporarily--but denied the basic freedom to reside where they choose.

The second consideration is to use the Kosovar refugees as political pawns in the war against Yugoslavia. Like other Western governments, notably the Blair government in Britain and the D'Alema government in Italy, the Howard government declares that to offer permanent refuge would help Belgrade drive Albanian Kosovars from their homelands. But this decision is not to be left to the refugees themselves. This only demonstrates that the primary purpose of the relief operation is not their well-being, but the pursuit of the offensive against Serbia.

Canberra's policy is on a par with that of NATO itself, which is bombing the people of Kosovo whose interests it claims to defend, and that of the NATO-backed Kosovo Liberation Army, which, as many media reports have now confirmed, is systematically preventing young men from leaving Kosovo, in order to conscript them into its depleted ranks. The Howard government's clumsy policy shifts have only helped expose the sham of the humanitarian mask donned by NATO and its apologists.



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