

Australian government makes Kosovar refugees as unwelcome as possible

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After a request from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the Australian government has this week re-activated a scheme to airlift 4,000 Kosovar refugees to Australia and consign them to military barracks around the country. The displaced victims of NATO's war will be granted temporary entry visas for three months only, and will have no legal right to apply for permanent asylum.

Official disagreement evidently exists on how the refugees will be selected. An eight-person government team is in the 26,000-person Stankovic camp in Macedonia carefully vetting applicants. According to a UNHCR officer in Canberra: "We are trying to identify the most vulnerable. It is extremely urgent to evacuate the medically at risk; women at risk; survivors of torture and trauma; elderly people; in specific cases single parents and children; and, where we cannot reunite them with their parents, unaccompanied children." However, an Immigration Department official said the selection criteria would emphasise the ability to undertake the long air flight without medical supervision. This would count against the ill, the injured and the elderly, he indicated.

Once selected, the refugees will first be bussed from Macedonia to Thessalonika in Greece--a three-hour journey--and then flown for 20 hours or more in chartered jumbo jets to Sydney. There they will be initially consigned to military establishment at East Hills for a four-day health screening. Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock said it was important to ensure that no communicable diseases carried by the refugees posed a threat to Australia.

Provided they pass the health tests, refugees will next be sent to a disused army base some 30 km north of Hobart, the capital of the island state of Tasmania. Located on a flat, exposed plain, the former Brighton base is a spartan site, known for its rudimentary dormitory-style huts and freezing winter weather. Its 67 old buildings are far removed from community, social and commercial

facilities such as shops, movie theatres and clubs. The base is even further removed from the sizeable ethnic Albanian communities in Melbourne and Sydney, some two to three hours' flying time away. Only a handful of Albanian families are known to live in Tasmania, none from Kosovo.

All overt war materials, including ceremonial guns, are to be removed from the base, given that many of the men, women and children have been traumatised by the Balkans conflict. What cannot be hidden, however, is the determination of the Howard government to prevent the refugees from establishing links with local people, particularly those from their homelands, and to block their right to stay in Australia if they choose.

While the government says the refugees will not be prisoners, Ruddock has discouraged suggestions that Australian residents offer to take them into their homes. To allow the billeting of refugees would be "fraught with difficulties" he said on Sunday. To reinforce this isolation policy, the government will restrict its provision of clothes, meals, health care, counselling and schooling to those remaining in the camp. Moreover it will pay a contemptible allowance of \$20 a week for each adult and \$5 per child--not even enough to pay for snacks and telephone calls, let alone venture into Hobart for sightseeing.

Once the Brighton base is full--it can house 500--new arrivals will be dispatched to other equally inhospitable facilities. The government is canvassing sites such as the Puckapunyal army base (50 km north of Melbourne) in Victoria; the Holsworthy (outer Sydney) and Singleton (250 kms north-east of Sydney) army bases in New South Wales; the Leeuwin army base (outer Perth) in Western Australia; the Amberley air force base (40 km west of Brisbane) in Queensland; and a military site at Woomera (on the edge of desert country 600 km north-east of Adelaide) in South Australia. Officials said bed shortages

might mean some refugees would have to shelter in tents.

Other countries, including the US, Canada and New Zealand, have left open the possibility of some Kosovar refugees applying for permanent residency. But the Howard government--with the unanimous support of the Labor Party, Greens, Australian Democrats and independent Senators Harradine and Colston--has rushed special legislation through the Senate to block such applications.

The Migration Legislation Amendment (Temporary Safe Haven Visas) Bill 1999, passed by the Senate last Friday, contains 10 pages of legal provisions designed to exhaustively extinguish all rights to remain in Australia, including all access to appeals to review bodies and courts. In an effort to put matters doubly and trebly beyond doubt, the Bill states that:

- * the refugees have no right to make any immigration application except for a further "temporary safe haven visa"
- any other application shall be invalid, regardless of any other law
- no visa may be granted, directly or indirectly as the result of a review by an officer, body, tribunal or court;
- the Minister can shorten the period of any "safe haven visa"
- the Minister can refuse or cancel any "safe haven visa" on various grounds, including "not of good character", "risk of engaging in criminal conduct", "risk of inciting discord", "danger to the Australian community", "threat to national security" and "prejudice to Australia's international relations"
- the rules of natural justice and other provisions against abuse of authority do not apply
- any refugee ceasing to hold a valid visa must be immediately detained and deported.

The Bill is so comprehensive that it could well constitute a test case for stripping other segments of the population of all legal and democratic rights, even the right of *habeas corpus*, which prevents detention without trial. Ruddock was so pleased with the rapid passage of the Bill through the Senate without dissent that he issued a media release thanking all parliamentary parties for remaining "above party politics" in "alleviating the massive suffering and human tragedy that has developed in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia".

The hypocrisy of these words is all the more stark because Ruddock last week announced that there would be no increase in Australia's annual refugee and "humanitarian" intake of 12,000, despite the suffering of

600,000 or more people now in crowded tent camps in Macedonia and Albania. The government will permit the entry of just 200 ethnic Albanian families, if they can prove that they have relatives already living in Australia, and none of the 4,000 temporary entrants will be included in that quota.

The Albanian communities in Australia and other local people are making plans to make the refugees feel at home. Organisations will greet them at the airport, provide translators, prepare Balkan meals, hold a welcoming party and comfort children and rape and trauma victims. But the official treatment of the refugees will be firmly in the hands of Immigration Department and security officers, augmented by a committee of aid agency officials, headed by retired Major-General Warren Glenny, executive director of Austcare.

The government in Canberra initially announced the safe haven plan on April 6 after a week of twisting and turning. At the beginning of that week, Ruddock and Prime Minister John Howard had adamantly rejected the very notion of accepting refugees, declaring that it would be unhelpful both to the refugees and the war effort against Yugoslavia. They swiftly reversed that stance 24 hours later, after the Clinton administration said it would fly displaced war victims to the US naval base on Cuba. Then on April 10, the Australian offer was abruptly put on hold when NATO's European members objected to the airlift scheme, on the grounds that it would strengthen the hand of the Milosevic regime.

Just like the NATO war itself, the treatment of its victims is said to be motivated by the purest humanitarian concerns. Closer examination reveals that the health, well-being and basic rights of the Kosovars are the last concern of the Australian government, which remains one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the bombing of Yugoslavia.



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