

Australian authorities bar Deaf Congress delegates from entering the country

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17 August 1999

Last month the Howard government barred over 50 delegates to the 13th World Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf from entering Australia. The Congress, held in Brisbane from July 25 to 31, was forced to convene without them.

In an official protest, Jeff McWhinney, Chief Executive of the British Deaf Association, declared: "It is outrageous that representatives of Deaf organisations in developing countries have been treated this way. It is the first time in 50 years that WFD delegates have been refused visas to any country.

"The WFD Congress is an important opportunity for deaf people to come together, share information and learn from each other's experiences. By denying entry to delegates in this way, the Australian authorities are only adding to the social exclusion of deaf people all over the world."

Around 2,000 delegates from 75 countries participated in the Congress, which is held every four years.

Visas were refused to delegates from Ethiopia, Uganda, Pakistan, Kenya, India and the Republic of Guinea. Delegates from Nepal decided not to attend the congress due to difficulties and delays in obtaining documentation.

According to Congress organizers and confirmed by the Australian Association of the Deaf (AAD), the hosts of the Congress, Alex Ndeezi, a Member of Parliament in Uganda and a keynote speaker was initially denied entry, but then allowed in after top level representations to the Minister of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Philip Ruddock. However, Ndeezi's interpreter, who was funded by the Danish Association of the Deaf, was not so lucky. His exclusion then made it impossible for Ndeezi, who is also Chairperson of the Uganda National Association of the Deaf (UNAD) and Chairman of the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda, to give his presentation.

Following inquiries by the *World Socialist Web Site*, a spokeswoman from the Department of Immigration and

Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) claimed that "the application from the Ugandan MP was never rejected. The interpreter's application was rejected because he had no independent means of support and his incentive to return was not strong... Following representations, immigration officials agreed that a fresh application from the interpreter, accompanied by stronger documentation would be considered as a priority. No application was lodged."

But a fresh application was logistically impossible in the time available. There are only three Australian embassies on the entire African continent and the Ugandan delegates had to make a three-day journey to Nairobi to apply.

Congress organisers pointed out that this was not an isolated incident. "There are many delegates from all over the world who have been refused entry to Australia. Many of them have been funded by their local organisations who have raised money for their travel and Congress fees".

Several reasons were advanced for excluding the delegates, including doubt over the "legitimacy" of the application, concerns that the applicant was not of "good character" and that the deaf association in the applicant's country of origin did not support the application. One delegate was allegedly refused a visa because he had never previously travelled overseas.

Francis Oranit, one of the Ugandan delegates, was told by the Australian High Commission in Nairobi that there was a limit of five people from any one country.

An article by journalist Jeff Sommerfeld, published in the July 22 edition of the *Courier Mail* in Brisbane, quoted a letter sent from the Australian High Commission in Lagos, Nigeria, to the conference organisers, seeking further information before officials could process visa applications from Ghana and Guinea. The letter expressed "particular concerns with regard to the delegates from Guinea as to their ability to benefit from the conference

without an interpreter.” “Can you please explain the concept of International Sign Language?”

A media release issued by the Australian Democrats claimed the Australian government's treatment of the delegates from developing countries was “paranoid”. In fact, it is government policy.

In January of this year a three-part series of articles, published on the WSWs, revealed details of a blacklist of 37 countries whose residents are classified as “risk factors” by DIMA according to their age, sex and country of origin.

In response to further WSWs enquiries, DIMA has now revealed that the list has been extended to include 43 countries from which applicants are considered “at risk because of the previous performance of nationals from these countries.”

“That is, nationals from these countries breached the conditions of their visas by, among other things, overstaying or arriving on one visa and applying to change to another visa after arrival”.

Most of the countries on the list are in the Asian-Pacific region, including India and Sri Lanka. Others are South American, Middle Eastern or Eastern European. Greece and Portugal, two southern European countries—the two poorest—are also listed.

Aside from a number of arbitrary requirements—such as passing medical tests and proving their “good character”—those applying for a short-term visitor's visa from any one of the 43 gazetted countries must demonstrate that their visit is “genuine”. Unless they can prove there is “very little likelihood” they will overstay their visa, their application is automatically rejected. According to the government, people from impoverished countries pose an “unacceptably high risk”.

An examination of the government's own figures, however, reveals that only .02 percent of visitors overstay their visas, a tiny fraction of the 2.8 million temporary visas issued annually. And of those who do overstay, the highest percentage come from the United Kingdom (11.8 percent) and the United States (9.9 percent), two countries that are not gazetted. In fact, of the 10 countries whose nationals overstay the most, six are not on the exclusion list—underscoring the racist and discriminatory nature of the government's visa policy.

Based on the “unacceptably high risk” premise, the visas of the twelve members of the famous Vietnamese Thang Long Water Puppet Troupe, the star attraction at this year's Sydney Festival, held in January, were also initially rejected. Thousands of tickets to the show had

already been sold. The resulting public outcry convinced the government to back down. Also in January, Farida Zaheer, chairwoman of Pakistan's national textile union, who had been invited to attend an international union conference, had her visa application rejected. It was only later granted after representations by the unions to the government.

On December 30, 1998, a visitor's visa was refused to Rajendiram Sutharsan, a Tamil member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka on the same basis. Sutharsan had been arrested and detained by the LTTE in the north of Sri Lanka, and was only released after a major international campaign organised through the *World Socialist Web Site*. He was to attend a socialist educational conference in Sydney, and to address public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne about his experiences. That Sutharsan had a wife and children, a job and political commitments in Sri Lanka was of no consequence to the Australian authorities. Even after written guarantees were made on his behalf by his sponsor, the Australian SEP, the government refused to reverse its decision “in the interests of consistent decision making”.

The government's attitude to the 50 Deaf Congress delegates is entirely in keeping with its discriminatory approach to all non-wealthy visitors from developing countries. What treatment it will mete out to the Sydney 2000 Olympics athletes from these countries, not to speak of their families, officials and other spectators, has yet to be seen.

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