

Australian government refuses visas to Liberian youth soccer team

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Only weeks after denying visas to 51 delegates to the World Federation of the Deaf congress, the Howard government last month barred 12 members of a Liberian youth soccer team from visiting Australia. The Australian High Commission in Lagos claimed that the Millennium Stars were refused visas because there was no indication their visit was “genuine”.

The boys, aged between 13 and 17—many of them orphans—were due to arrive in Australia on August 25 to participate in a human rights and sports conference organised by the Human Rights Council of Australia and to play in exhibition soccer matches. Their visit was sponsored by CARITAS, a well-known Roman Catholic aid agency. The Australian Governor-General, Sir William Deane, had also invited them to a reception at Government House.

This exclusion followed other visa rejections highlighting the racist character of the government's immigration policies. The barred Deaf Congress delegates were almost all from Africa and the Indian sub-continent. Most were refused visas for the same reason—there was no proof of a “genuine visit”. The government implied that delegates would try to stay in Australia after the expiry of their visas.

At the beginning of the year, the government meted out similar treatment to the Vietnamese Thang Long Water Puppet Troupe. Its members gained visas only after a public outcry, following protests from the organisers of the Sydney Festival, where the troupe was due to perform. Officials also initially blocked a visit by Farida Zaheer, chairwoman of Pakistan's national textile union, to attend an international union conference.

On December 30, 1998, the government refused a visitor's visa to Rajendiram Sutharsan, a Tamil member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka. He

had been invited to attend an education conference and address meetings on the successful international campaign last year to free him from imprisonment by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In his case, however, the government refused to reverse its decision, even after his sponsors supplied a full written submission, including a guarantee of his return to Sri Lanka.

A CARITAS spokeswoman, Jane Woolford, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the government's claim that the Millennium Stars visit was not genuine was “blatantly untrue”.

“The conference has been widely advertised,” she said. “We were surprised at the tough regulations, particularly given that they were to attend a human rights conference. They were told to give reasons why they would return. These kids were involved in a war and were not necessarily even going to school.

“We're particularly disappointed given that it would have been a wonderful experience for the Liberian boys who will probably never get another chance. They were going to visit schools and to speak to the students about their experiences and to attend a youth festival with 200 students from around the country.”

The government's pattern of discrimination has become so blatant that some in the business and media establishment fear a major international embarrassment in the lead-up to next year's Olympic Games in Sydney.

Under the headline “Basalt heart defies facts on arrivals,” an editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* on August 24 warned: “Our reputation as a country of compassion is constantly being betrayed by the Immigration Department and the present minister, Philip Ruddock. The latest disgrace is the arbitrary refusal to allow a group of young Liberian soccer players to enter the country... Appeals to both the

Foreign Affairs and Immigration departments fell on deaf ears and even when the minister was approached, no sign of leniency or understanding was shown.”

After referring to the Vietnamese puppeteers and the deaf delegates, the editorial made the obvious point that: “It seemed no coincidence that they came from either Africa or India”. It concluded that: “Sexism, racism, even religious prejudice often seem to play a definitive role.”

Murdoch's publications are not generally known for their opposition to discrimination against people from oppressed countries. An article in the same edition of the newspaper pointed to the actual reasons for the concerns aired in the editorial.

Human Rights Council of Australia executive director Andre Frankovits said the ban had implications far beyond human rights and could adversely affect the decision of African nations to participate in the Sydney Olympics. “There will be fans and athletes in the same position as the boys who may not think they can come. The word will get around that Immigration officials treat African applicants this way,” he said.

Frankovits said Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock had been “ill advised”. The decision was wrong and it “sent all the wrong messages about human rights and how they are protected in Australia”.

Based on these recent experiences, it is highly likely that Olympic athletes, coaches and supporters from impoverished countries will have difficulty getting into Australia. But the government's actions are not simply the outcome of bad advice.

The government has a blacklist of 43 countries—nearly all Asian, African and Middle Eastern. Most visitors seeking entry from these countries are almost automatically excluded. They must show that there is “very little likelihood” that they will overstay their visa. Not only do they have the almost impossible task of proving a negative—the existence of “very little likelihood,” they are not even told of this requirement when they apply. In addition, they must satisfy a number of arbitrary requirements—such as passing medical tests, proving their “good character” and demonstrating “independent means of support”.

Such tests inherently discriminate against ordinary working people, particularly young people and those from the poorest countries. Effectively only members

of the wealthy elites can visit Australia—even temporarily. Apart from the publicised exclusion of international delegates and performers, this policy affects thousands of families living in Australia who cannot obtain permission for their parents or other loved ones to visit them from abroad.

And it is part of a wider agenda. While claiming to oppose the anti-immigrant and anti-Asian program of Pauline Hanson's “One Nation” Party, the Howard government routinely panders to racial prejudice, seeking to make immigrants, asylum seekers and their families scapegoats for the worsening social conditions in Australia.



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