Australian government pressures Timor refugees to leave

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The Howard government's contemptuous treatment of the East Timorese refugees in Australia further exposes the fraud of its “humanitarian mission” in East Timor. The refugees, whose temporary “safe haven” visas expired on December 8, are being subjected to mounting threats and intimidation in order to force them to leave.

Refugees are understandably reluctant to go back to East Timor given that Indonesian troops and militia destroyed much of the territory's infrastructure. Now the rainy season carries with it the threat of diseases such as cholera, typhoid, malaria and dysentery, which are particularly dangerous to children and the elderly. Tuberculosis is already widespread and many more people will become infected in the damp overcrowded conditions.

The government claims that no-one is being forced to return and that it will review each application for a visa extension on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, it is clear enormous pressure is being exerted on people to leave.

Last weekend, 220 people returned to East Timor from Perth in Western Australia, amid tearful scenes. One East Timorese man who was interviewed said he did not want to go. He was leaving his wife and children behind in Australia. Others told the media they were leaving because they no longer felt welcome.

On December 5, 140 East Timorese refugees remaining at Leeuwin Barracks near Perth were to be relocated to East Hills in Sydney—some 4,000 kilometres away—but refused to leave because they did not want to be separated from 46 others who were too sick to move.

The government's immediate response was to threaten to cut off their $27 weekly allowances, deny them telephone call cards and close the community centre and coffee shop.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock commented in typical fashion: “If people want, as some of those Kosovars did, to live in the community, those who want to keep them in Perth could support them.”

The refugees agreed to the move on the following day when the government resorted to strong-arm tactics and threatened to deport them.

The government plans to save $1 million per month by closing the Leeuwin facility, as well as the Puckapunyal "safe haven" near Melbourne. Yet it plans to spend $2.5 billion over the next year alone on its military intervention in East Timor. The fate and feelings of the East Timorese people are purely a secondary question.

The government's treatment of the East Timorese refugees is following a similar pattern to that of the Kosovars, who were initially brought to Australia, at the height of the NATO bombing, to create the impression of official humanitarian concern. The government subsequently adopted an increasingly belligerent attitude towards the Kosovars in an effort to get them to leave the country as soon as possible.

In the case of the Kosovars, the government sought to avoid a legal confrontation with those who did not wish to leave. It offered each Kosovar refugee a $3,000 "winter allowance" if they left Australia before the end of last month.

The Timorese refugees were not even offered that paltry sum. Instead, each family would receive, wrapped in plastic, 50kg of rice. If the family had more than 10 people, each person would receive 5kg of rice, water and two blankets.

These allocations themselves indicate the conditions facing the East Timorese people. The plastic sheets are meant to be for shelter and the blankets for bedding.

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The rice and water point to the lack of food and clean water.

Liz Blok, a lawyer involved with the refugees, has told the media of a woman who returned with her sick six-week-old baby. The child died the day after she arrived in East Timor.

There have been numerous reports of children dying of disease in the camps in West Timor, but there is little information about the conditions in East Timor. The media presents pictures of smiling children. But what are people eating? How long can they survive on rice alone? Is there even elementary healthcare? How can people support themselves? Even before the destruction wrought by the militias and the military, East Timor was one of the most impoverished places on earth.

One of the 200 Kosovar refugees remaining in Australia spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, calling on the government to allow the Kosovar and East Timorese refugees to stay.

“The government should let them stay for good. They should be given the right to work and to get Social Security and healthcare. The 200 [Kosovars] who want to stay have nowhere to go back to."

The young woman was a student in Pristina at the start of the NATO bombing and was forced to flee when the Serb police and army began raiding houses following the bombing by NATO. She described the terrible conditions in the refugee camps that led her to seek asylum in Australia.

“My brother and I went to Macedonia, where we lived in tents. The conditions were very poor. There were five people in our tent. The mud was very bad. Up to 11 people would stay in each small tent.

"We went to the Australian Embassy because we had been told that each country would take a certain amount of refugees. At the embassy we were forced to sign papers saying that we only had the right to stay here until the situation is normalised—for three months. We no choice but to sign. We would have gone anywhere—it was so bad at the camp.

"After Macedonia, the East Hills barracks looked like a 5-star hotel, but after a while the place didn't look so good. The rooms were horrible—made out of unpainted concrete blocks. Some had bad carpet. There were two beds in the tiny room, which I shared with my brother. The toilet was in the hallway. There were no heaters and it was freezing cold. Everyone was complaining about the food.

"But as soon as anyone left the camp to stay somewhere else, their money would be cut off.”

She was told last August that she would be allowed to stay until the end of March next year and she undertook an English course with the Adult Migrant English Service that will cost $1,500. Now she has been told that she has to leave soon.

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