

War refugees treated like criminals

Australian government moves to deport Kosovars

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In one of the most disgusting examples yet of the Howard government's pandering to anti-immigrant, racist and extreme right-wing sentiment, it is forcibly removing the remaining Kosovar refugees who came to Australia last year in the wake of the US-NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. The Kosovars, many expressing fears for their lives, are being sent back to a country that is still devastated by war and wracked by communal conflicts.

Just 11 months ago the government went to great lengths to appear to be magnanimous and compassionate in welcoming 3,900 refugees fleeing from the Balkans war. In early May 1999 Prime Minister John Howard and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock personally greeted the first planeloads arriving at Sydney airport. According to some refugees, Howard and Ruddock shed tears as they talked to the arriving families.

Now the government is going to even greater lengths to deport the few hundred remaining refugees. It has rounded them up like criminals, stripped them of their meagre subsistence allowances and threatened to use physical force.

Last Sunday, at the stroke of midnight, the former military barracks where the refugees were housed were transformed from "Safe Havens" into detention centres. Security guards moved into the premises and all entrances were sealed off. Police commenced manhunts in the homes of relatives and friends for those not living in the barracks.

Ruddock warned that if 182 Kosovars who had been ordered to leave immediately did not comply they would be forcibly ejected. "Removal could involve having to supervise people to aircraft and supervising

them on the way home," he stated. Recently the *Four Corners* ABC TV program revealed that Algerian refugees had been drugged, bound and gagged, and dragged onto aircraft in order to deport them to South Africa.

Late on Tuesday Ruddock gave the refugees a deadline of 9am today to leave or be sent to remote detention centres at Woomera, in Australia's central desert, or Derby or Port Hedland, on the far north-west coast. Those who refused to meet the deadline would be banned from applying to return to Australia for at least three years and would be charged the full costs of their unsuccessful appeal to the High Court.

Ruddock's threats came just days after he announced that he had personally rejected the applications of 259 Kosovars to stay longer. For medical reasons, Ruddock allowed another 130 to remain—but only temporarily.

Some families departed under protest over the weekend but many vowed to defy the order. Refugees at the Bandiana barracks near Albury-Wodonga held hunger strikes, protests and marches, pleading for the right to stay. Others were severely traumatised by the prospect of suddenly landing back in Kosovo. At least one girl attempted to commit suicide and several people were taken to hospital suffering from serious stress-induced conditions.

On Monday night about 100 Albury-Wodonga residents staged a rally at Bandiana, denouncing the government and defending the right of the Kosovars to live in Australia. They chanted, "Let them stay" and sounded car horns. Those interviewed on radio were at pains to differentiate themselves from the government's callous actions, insisting that the refugees be permitted to remain. Security officials later allowed the

participants into the detention centre, where they exchanged lit candles and embraced refugees through a wire fence.

The government not only dismissed these pleas, it refused to even wait for the outcome of a last-ditch legal appeal by 81 refugees to the High Court before ordering the closure of the “Safe Havens” and trying to herd the refugees onto a weekend charter flight to Bulgaria.

Ruddock's decisions were then rubberstamped on Monday by the Howard government's most recent High Court appointee—Chief Justice Murray Gleeson. The judge refused to even grant an interim injunction to delay the deportations, stating that the refugees had no serious legal questions to raise.

Today at least 50 Kosovars were still rejecting the government's edict, despite an agreement being pushed by local Albanian community leaders for them to leave in return for offers of some assistance on arrival in Kosovo. Ruddock appears to be personally involved in the negotiations, anxious to secure a hasty departure. Police also launched a new manhunt for 33 refugees who had reportedly disappeared from the detention centres.

The government's determination to remove the Kosovars expresses two things—first its efforts to forge a right-wing nationalist electoral base and second the hypocrisy of last year's claims to be motivated by humanitarian concerns.

The government now has almost 2,000 asylum seekers locked up in barbaric and over-crowded conditions in its remote detention centres. It has removed their rights of appeal to the courts against decisions to deny refugee status, clearing the way for mass deportations. It has also dramatically slashed the annual quota of “family reunion” immigrants—the parents and siblings of residents—requiring nearly all immigrants to have job skills suited to employers.

A year ago the government initially refused to accept any Kosovars. Under international pressure it performed an embarrassing about-face when it became obvious that the closed-door policy undermined the official humanitarian rationale for conducting the NATO bombing.

As the WSWs warned at the time, the official welcome afforded to the Kosovars was a façade behind which the government prepared sweeping anti-

democratic legislation stripping “Safe Haven” refugees of all legal rights in Australia.

The Safe Haven Refugee Act—rushed through parliament with the backing of all MPs—even deprived the Kosovars of the internationally-recognised right to apply for refugee status. It created a new type of temporary entry visa that could be shortened or cancelled by the Immigration Minister with no right of appeal or review by a tribunal, court or other body. These unprecedented powers are now being used against the Kosovars.



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