

Australian government dumps refugees in cities without money or basic services

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The Howard government's vicious policy on refugees has become one of the most glaring expressions of its right-wing social policy. Just last month it forcibly deported, or in some cases imprisoned, nearly all the remaining Kosovo war refugees who came to Australia last year.

Now, in his latest initiative, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock has urged welfare charities and state governments not to offer food, clothing, housing or other essential assistance to any successful refugee applicants once they are finally released from the federal government's detention camps.

Ruddock is implementing a new scheme that grants three-year temporary visas to refugees who entered the country illegally, even after they pass the stringent tests for asylum under the international Refugee Convention. The scheme blatantly flouts UN covenants, which stipulate that asylum-seekers who flee across national borders without official permission must be treated no worse than other refugees.

Under the new regime, the government has begun dumping scores of released detainees in Adelaide, Perth or Brisbane with virtually no money and no access to essential welfare assistance, housing and English language courses.

After being locked up for many months or even years in remote, desolate and over-crowded camps at Port Hedland, Derby or Woomera, destitute asylum-seekers from countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan are being bussed thousands of kilometres and abandoned with just \$239.25 each to fend for themselves.

They are not only denied permanent residency but also basic services under the Community Refugee Settlement Scheme and other programs—even after they have proven that they are fleeing from persecution that threatens their lives.

This operation is the latest chapter in the government's bid to carve out a political base for itself in the right-wing constituency once occupied by Pauline Hanson's racist One Nation party. Refugees, together with the jobless, welfare recipients and Aborigines, have become the most vulnerable targets in a wider bid to whip up support for the further gutting of social spending.

In the process, the government is using the refugees as scapegoats for the economic hardships being inflicted by the corporate world on ever-wider sections of working people in

cities and towns across the country.

In March Ruddock wrote to Adelaide's Wesley Mission, saying that the government expected released detainees to take “primary responsibility” for themselves and “turn to their relatives, friends or their communities” for help. Ruddock's spokesman said the minister wanted charities to “justify” placing refugees ahead of other needy people.

Last week Ruddock went further. He denounced the state governments of South Australia and Queensland for suggesting that they would have to provide essential housing and welfare services to the refugees. Ruddock accused his state counterparts of undermining the federal government's policy of deterring refugees.

“If the states then decide to pick up the tag for some of these services, Australia will once again appear an attractive destination,” Ruddock declared in a media release. “I cannot understand why they would provide the additional services to the holders of TPVs [Temporary Protection Visas] and disadvantage other needy people in their community. It undermines the strong signal the Commonwealth is sending to people traffickers and people who would engage their services.”

Typifying his attempt to whip up anti-foreigner sentiment, the media release was titled: “Ruddock stands firm on illegal arrivals”.

Before the temporary three-year visa regime was imposed earlier this year, the federal government provided those afforded refugee status with public housing for 13 to 26 weeks, limited social security benefits and English-language courses—the bare minimum required by international refugee conventions.

Now, however, those refugees who arrive illegally by boat or plane are not eligible for even poverty-line unemployment benefits. They can apply only for discretionary Special Benefits, which are subject to severe means tests and can be paid at substantially lower rates. Minimal rent assistance, family allowances and Medicare health insurance coverage are available. The refugees can try to find work, but language difficulties and their precarious residency status make decent employment difficult to obtain. Instead, they are extremely vulnerable to exploitation by low-wage employers.

South Australian Premier John Olsen last week objected to the federal government's scheme on the grounds that it imposed additional welfare costs on his state. He charged the Howard government with "cost-shifting". Olsen said he had been told that 1,000 Woomera detainees would soon be bussed to Adelaide.

When Ruddock refused to halt the scheme, Olsen proposed an alternative plan to make refugees ultimately bear the cost of their own detention and any subsequent welfare assistance they received in the community. Under the user-pays proposal, the government would recoup the expenses—estimated at \$10,000 or more per individual—from the refugees if they started earning an income.

Ruddock said he would examine whether such an idea would be cost-effective and whether it would breach international treaties. He said it was a "live issue" because more boat arrivals were expected after the current cyclone season, on top of more than 3,600 over the past 10 months. This is a trickle by international standards, but the Howard government and the mass media continually depict it as a "flood".

Refugee groups have condemned the government's actions and the user-pays proposal. Committee for Refugee Advocacy president Marion Le said a charge on refugees would be "punishing the victims, a double tax on people at their most vulnerable". It would create an underclass prone to exploitation by criminal elements and "in sweat shops and restaurants".

Refugee Council of Australia executive director Margaret Piper said she was surprised that Ruddock had expressed concern about infringing international obligations, because the government was already breaking the rules. "As part of the Refugee Convention, people cannot be disadvantaged because they have arrived in a country unlawfully. We actually treat them differently already by detaining them."

The Labor Party's immigration spokesman Con Sciacca described the user-pays proposal as "crazy," saying that not even "murderers and rapists" were expected to repay the costs of their imprisonment. This is somewhat disingenuous, given that in the early 1990s it was the Labor Party that first imposed the practice of locking refugees away like criminals.

Meanwhile, the more than 100 Kosovar refugees who were expelled from Australia in mid-April have also been dumped back on the streets in Pristina without any assistance. Despite the fact that most have no homes, jobs or communities to return to, they were given no money or emergency accommodation on arrival and no Australian officials or aid agencies were on hand.

Helen Gibbs, an Albury woman who has kept in touch with Kosovars removed from the Bandiana barracks near Albury, said she had been told of 30 people sleeping in the same room because of lack of shelter in Pristina. Reporters in Kosovo likewise described pitiful scenes, such as 40 people living without enough food in a three-room farmhouse surrounded by minefields. "We didn't want to come back to see the conditions of life in Kosovo," said Ragip Bylgabashi, 28, who has four

children.

International agencies, such as World Vision, said their resources could not cope because other countries were forcibly expatriating Kosovars in a similar fashion. They expect 250,000 refugees to arrive within two months.

Like the Australian government, those in Britain, Germany and other countries that participated in last year's NATO bombing of Yugoslavia professed to be motivated by purely humanitarian concern for the Kosovo people. With the bombing completed and NATO troops occupying Kosovo, the Western powers are now ordering thousands of Kosovar refugees to return to the devastated province.

Backed by Prime Minister Howard, Ruddock contemptuously dismissed the Kosovars' plight, declaring it was "somewhat naïve" to think that the Australian government would provide help in Kosovo.

As for the 21 Kosovars who refused to leave Australia, they have been imprisoned at Port Hedland, facing the prospect of forced deportation using physical means. They have accused the authorities of depriving them of adequate food, with one young man placed in solitary confinement after complaining of not having enough to eat.

Perhaps the most chilling feature of the government's anti-refugee policy was Ruddock's response to media reports that more than 250 people are feared to have drowned after three boats trying to bring refugees to Australia disappeared last month. One boat carrying 200 people, mostly from Iran and Iraq, was last seen off the west coast of Java. Two other boats, one with 50 passengers, the other carrying an unknown number, have vanished.

Ruddock literally crowed at the news, remarking that as many people were now dying trying to get to Australia illegally by boat as were succeeding. "The odds of getting here aren't good, certainly less than 50 percent," he gloated.

Those who have perished are direct victims of his government's program. With the support of the Labor Party and the Australian Democrats, the government has dedicated tens of millions of dollars to boosting naval and aerial surveillance of the waters between Australia and Indonesia. As a result, refugees are undertaking more perilous voyages in efforts to escape detection prior to landing on Australian territory.



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