

Australian immigration minister peddles anti-refugee propaganda in the Middle East

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Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock is presently touring Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Syria and Jordan on a publicity campaign aimed at dissuading potential asylum-seekers from coming to Australia.

As part of the Howard government's anti-refugee program, Ruddock's tour is trying to promote Australia not as the welcoming, friendly, relaxed destination endlessly depicted in tourist "infomercials", but as a hostile and racist backwater. Part of the minister's presentation is the crude "anti-promotional" video that he used on a similar tour last year, showing crocodile and shark-infested waters, with people falling overboard and drowning upon entering Australia's territorial waters. Those who manage to survive are locked up as soon as they set foot on dry land, with a barbed wire prison door slammed shut behind them. The message is clear: asylum-seekers will be treated as criminals.

On this visit Ruddock has gone even further. The Department of Immigration had prepared a media kit, including a provocative information sheet translated into Farsi, which the minister intended to distribute at a press conference on January 8 in Teheran, Iran.

The pamphlet entitled *Questions and Answers provided by the Australian Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Philip Ruddock* and dated January, 2001, warned against travelling with people-smugglers. It said asylum-seekers could find themselves "in debt to criminals who will demand you work for them selling drugs or force you and your family members into prostitution to pay off your debt."

It warned refugees may also end up in slums, obliged to become involved in begging or crime to survive and "lose control of their children, who abandon their traditional values for modern Western culture."

"As well, illegal arrivals are often the subject of

racial hatred and violence as citizens are angry at having to support them," the pamphlet declared.

Accusations that Ruddock had gone too far surfaced after copies of the pamphlet in English, Farsi and Arabic, along with a sample of the media kit, were handed to an inquirer in Canberra by Immigration officials.

At the last minute, Ruddock reportedly became concerned with the "tenor" of the publication and withdrew it.

But complaints from refugee advocacy groups in Australia continued to surface. Marion Le from the Independent Council for Refugee Advocacy said Ruddock was treading a "very fine line" between deterring illegal immigration and "inciting racial violence" against immigrants already in the country. Margaret Piper of the Refugee Council of Australia labelled the kit heavy-handed scare-mongering. She questioned the Immigration Department's excuse that the pamphlet was only a draft, since it had already been translated and included in the media kit.

Not to be deflected from his original purpose, however, the minister appeared on Iranian TV to emphasise that unauthorised travel to Australia could be a "life-taking exercise."

The remark has a particularly sinister significance. Last December Ruddock attempted to make political capital of the feared sinkings of two boatloads of asylum-seekers lost at sea during Cyclone Sam. Virtually no official effort was mounted to search for survivors. The minister made threats of criminal action against concerned relatives pleading for information and used the opportunity to warn off other "boat people" from attempting to reach Australia.

Material in Ruddock's current media kit actually announces that 163 people drowned off the northern

Australian coast last December—using the presumed deaths as useful grist to the government's publicity mill.

Moreover, Ruddock continues to push his cynical equation of unauthorised refugees with the racketeering people traffickers who are the purported target of his publicity campaign. He denounces “people who have the money to pay a people smuggler and are in a position to breach our laws in the way in which they arrive here.”

In reality the Australian government forces desperate asylum seekers to undertake dangerous voyages in their efforts to escape religious, racial or political persecution or economic hardship. Sealing up the country's borders has the inevitable effect of driving refugees directly into the hands of the “people smugglers”.



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