

# Australian government defends its brutal treatment of refugees

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Despite mounting domestic and international condemnation of its anti-refugee measures, the Australian government is continuing to thumb its nose at its critics. Recent weeks have seen substantial demonstrations in Australia, as well as statements by professional, welfare and human rights groups opposing the conditions inside detention centres.

The criticism has been fuelled by television and news reports revealing some of the violent methods instituted by the government to turn back refugee boats and repress protests by detainees.

Speaking at the National Press Club on May 7, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer denounced critics of the so-called “border protection” policy as “the pseudo-intellectual bourgeois Left”. Critics of the government’s alignment with the US “war on terrorism” were also an “anti-American pseudo-intellectual bourgeois clique”.

Among those who have condemned the government’s practices are doctors, psychologists, social workers, lawyers, church groups and welfare organisations, as well as global agencies, such as Amnesty International and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Yet, Downer repeated claims by Prime Minister John Howard that Australia’s world standing was at an historic high, insisting that criticism in the British *Guardian* and the *New York Times* did not constitute international condemnation.

In a media conference on the same day, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock declared that the government did not intend to appease critics, calling them “naïve”. He labelled many refugee detainees as “rejectees”—a new derogatory term for all those exercising the legal right to contest the rejection of their asylum claims in the Refugee Review Tribunal or a court.

As Downer’s remarks indicate, the government has taken advantage of the Bush administration’s global “war” to ride roughshod over the 1951 Refugee Convention, defying international law and expunging basic democratic rights.

Since last August, when Howard ordered the navy and

SAS troops to bar entry to the rescued refugees aboard the *Tampa*, his government has erected a naval blockade around the country’s northern shores, transported hundreds of asylum seekers to armed camps on remote Pacific and Indian Ocean islands and stepped up punitive measures inside the detention centres.

Having scraped back into office at last November’s general election by exploiting the *Tampa* affair to divert attention away from deteriorating social conditions, government leaders are continuing to foment nationalism and xenophobia.

The government’s measures are directed at deterring refugees from seeking safe haven in Australia by treating them as harshly as possible. This orientation flies directly in the face of the Refugee Convention, which declares that governments must not attempt to discourage, punish or discriminate against refugees who arrive on their shores without permission.

Downer and Ruddock made their comments just two weeks after an Australian Broadcasting Corporation *Four Corners* program reported that a naval squad, assembled by the government to board and turn around refugee boats, used cattle prods, batons and capsicum spray to force asylum seekers back toward Indonesia.

One of the overcrowded, unseaworthy boats later ran aground off the coast of Timor and three Iraqi men drowned. Many of the 238 men, women and children crammed on the boat were suffering heat exhaustion, seasickness, diarrhoea and scabies, but the government instructed naval commanders to force the boat into the open sea without medical attention.

Mohammed Ali, one of more than 1,400 refugees now trapped in Indonesia, described what happened after the boat’s passengers were sprayed with capsicum gas. “People passed out, you know. I cannot describe that moment because it was very horrible. I cannot describe it at all. All the people were down, crying, you know, shouting, hitting themselves, slapping, you know. It was a very horrible situation.”

These methods were used on the direct orders of the Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Under Operation Relex, all decisions and reports bypassed the naval chain of command and went directly to Canberra. Asked for his reaction to the *Four Corners* report, Defence Minister Robert Hill was unapologetic. “Well, we’re protecting our borders. That’s the point,” he stated.

His comment was reminiscent of Ruddock’s response last October, when a refugee boat sank between Indonesia and Australia, drowning more than 350 people. Ruddock commented that the tragedy “may have an upside” in terms of deterrence. Evidence recently came to light that the government blocked reports that the boat was sinking from reaching the navy, which could have rescued the refugees. Testimony to this effect was given to the current parliamentary inquiry into the government’s false election claims that refugees had thrown children overboard.

A day after the *Four Corners* report, another ABC program, *Lateline*, screened a security video from Western Australia’s Curtin Detention Centre in June 2001. It showed sickening scenes of Afghan refugees locked in isolation cells, beating their heads against the walls and slashing themselves with razor blades. They received no medical or psychological help. Instead, security guards carrying mace, handcuffs and riot gear confronted them.

In one scene, detainees repeatedly bashed their heads against shatterproof glass after guards locked them in an isolation cell. One prisoner lay on the floor unconscious after a guard dragged him along the ground. Other detainees became distressed, thinking that the man had died.

The detainees, Hazaras who had fled the Taliban regime, had been protesting against the blanket refusal of protection visas. They had been “screened out” by immigration officials at initial interviews. In these interviews, conducted upon arrival in Australia, asylum seekers were not told of their rights to apply for visas or to obtain legal advice. Only after the protests, were the detainees permitted to make visa applications, which were subsequently successful.

After watching the video, a panel of experts—a psychologist, an official prison visitor and a former government adviser—described the events as appalling. Asked for his response, however, Howard defended the treatment of the detainees. “[N]o behaviour by people protesting would be pleasant,” he said, “But I am happy to support what is occurring, as does the [Immigration] Minister [Philip Ruddock].”

Far from an aberration, the initial denial of asylum to the Afghan refugees has become a systemic policy. Despite the obvious dangers created by the continuing US and allied bombing and other military operations, and the destitution of Afghanistan’s people, the government is adamant that

Afghan detainees must return there.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* recently reported that last December a special management unit in the Department of Immigration denied visas to 160 Afghans, overriding decisions by officials that the applicants had satisfied the test of persecution under the Refugee Convention. Under the Convention, decisions must be made on an individual, case-by-case basis.

Likewise, the government has refused to accept most of the Afghan refugees who have been incarcerated for more than six months at Australia’s behest in Nauru and on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. Only 7 of the 292 Afghan detainees have been granted refugee status. The decision provoked protests in the Nauru camps, with 200 asylum seekers breaking out for several hours. In a delaying tactic designed to prevent further disruption, officials announced that the rest could re-apply, a process that could take many more months.

To facilitate the deportation of the Nauru and Manus detainees, the government, backed as always by the Labor Party, passed legislation to allow them to be shipped through Australia as “transitory persons”. Officials can use “necessary and reasonable” force to remove them, they cannot apply for visas and no-one, including an Australian citizen, has any right to legally challenge their treatment.

This latter provision is a further warning that the treatment of refugees is part of a wider assault on democratic rights. At the same time, the government is exploiting the alleged post-September 11 threat of terrorism to push through ASIO and “counter-terrorism” legislation to undermine civil liberties, including freedom from detention without trial.



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