

Australian government plans to repatriate refugees to war-torn Iraq

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Even before the Bush administration has officially claimed victory in its criminal war on Iraq, the Australian government is proposing to repatriate Iraqi asylum seekers. The plan, which was revealed 10 days ago by Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock, came as millions of Iraqis confront an unprecedented social catastrophe.

Electricity, water supply and communications infrastructure has been destroyed and there are desperate shortages of medical supplies, food and other basic requirements in the war-torn country. But the Howard government, which sent 2,000 troops, 14 F/A-18 Hornets and two frigates to participate in the illegal US-led military onslaught, has no qualms about forcing Iraqi refugees to return home.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock told Channel Nine television on April 13 that Iraqi asylum seekers currently imprisoned in Australian detention camps or those on Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) would be “offered” a “reintegration package” to return to Iraq. The package includes a one-way airfare and an estimated lump sum payment of \$2,000 for individuals or \$10,000 for families.

Now that Iraq is under the military control of the US, Iraqi refugees on three-year TPVs are likely to be denied any visa extension. “[I]t will be a question of judging whether they have an ongoing need for protection,” Ruddock told the media. If a refugee’s visa is denied and he or she refuses repatriation, the government will be free to detain and ultimately deport them.

Ruddock said details were still to be finalised with Prime Minister John Howard, but the “offer” would be similar to that used to repatriate Afghans after the US-led invasion of that country in 2001. Afghan asylum seekers were sent home despite Department of Foreign

Affairs and Trade warnings against any Australian travelling to Afghanistan. According to its travel advice, the security situation was dangerous outside Kabul, with “warlords controlling many areas” of the country.

A recent Asian Development Bank study reported that Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world. It has the lowest literacy and life expectancy rates, the highest infant, child and maternal mortality rates and the highest proportion of disabled people. Prior to the US invasion, annual per capita income was \$300. It is now only \$200. These conditions, however, were of no concern to the Australian government in its decisions regarding Afghan refugees.

Ruddock’s claim that the Afghan package was “voluntary” and that Iraqis would likewise be able to “elect” for repatriation is utterly spurious. In reality, the refugees will be “offered” the “choice” of returning to devastated Iraq or indefinite imprisonment in Australia’s notorious detention centers, with eventual deportation the likely outcome.

There are currently over 4,100 Iraqi refugees on TPVs in Australia. At the same time, the government is holding 39 Iraqis in detention on the mainland and has financed the incarceration, for more than 18 months, of another 126 Iraqis in Nauru and seven on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. Last month, 64 Iraqis on expired visas within Australia were awaiting government decisions on the renewal of their refugee status.

The Howard government’s cruel treatment of asylum seekers has become so infamous that it was raised last week in Iraq, at the first meeting of the “local leaders” who had been handpicked by the US. Shiite cleric Sheikh Sayed Jamaluddin, who supported the US-led

invasion, criticised the Australian government's imprisonment of Iraqi refugees, accusing it of breaching human rights.

Responding to Deputy Secretary of Australian Foreign Affairs Peter Varghese and other Australian government officials who were attending the meeting, Jamaluddin said: "If you come here and tell us that we need to build an Iraq that is democratic and respects human rights you should respect the rights of the Iraqis who happen to be in your prisons."

The Howard government arrogantly dismissed Jamaluddin's comments, with Ruddock claiming the cleric was "misinformed". The government hopes its participation in the war will be enough to secure a refugee-repatriation deal with whatever US-appointed regime comes to power.

The Labor Party, which formally opposed the war on the basis that it did not have UN Security Council backing, has made no criticism of the repatriation plan. Shadow Immigration Minister Julia Gillard kept her mouth shut over Howard's treatment of Afghan refugees last year and appears set to do likewise over the fate of Australia's Iraqi refugees.



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