

Australian officials detain French student of African descent

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The recent detention of a newly-arrived French student by immigration officials highlights the Australian government's contempt for basic democratic rights. Even though officials wrongfully detained 23-year-old Mahamadou Sacko for four days, without notifying the French consulate, the Howard government has refused to apologise.

Sacko, who is of Algerian descent, flew into Australia on August 31 to attend a seven-week English language program at a Sydney college. Despite having a valid visa and passport, immigration officers accused him of holding false documents. That night, the Immigration Department held Sacko in a Sydney airport holding-cell without calling the French consulate to confirm his identity.

The next day, officials transferred the young student to the Villawood detention centre and continued to deny him access to a telephone. For two days, officials forced Sacko to answer questions, including the name of the French president, France's highest mountain and the significance of D'Artagnan, the fourth musketeer. To add to the humiliating ordeal, officials ordered him to sing the French national anthem, *La Marseillaise*. He refused.

It was not until two days after his detention that staffers in Villawood allowed him to call the French consulate. The consulate checked Sacko's passport and informed the Australian government of its authenticity within 24 hours. Yet, immigration continued to detain him another night until consulate officials protested.

Sacko "spent four days in unacceptable conditions," according to a French diplomat who spoke to Agence France Presse (AFP). "He wasn't given a change of clothes and he had to pay for the call to the consulate in violation of diplomatic conventions that require that the consulate be contacted by the authorities," he told AFP.

Sacko, who had worked for a transport firm in Paris to save the money to study English in Sydney, told the AFP that he found the detention "incredible". "They held me for four days, they made up charges against me and they destroyed my passport," he said.

A spokesperson for the French embassy, Olivier Bove, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that normal procedures require immigration officials to contact the French consulate if they suspect a passport is false. Even if there had been a scratch on the passport photograph, as the Immigration Department claimed, the French authorities could have confirmed Sacko's identity and issued a new passport inside 24 hours.

After the French consulate confirmed that the passport was valid, Australian officers destroyed it by cutting out the photograph. Bove told the WWS that embassy staff believed that Sacko was detained because he was black.

Sacko's detention is bound up with the Howard government's undermining of democratic rights as a whole. Utilising the September 11 terrorist attacks as a pretext, it has passed "anti-terrorism" laws giving the intelligence agencies and the federal police unprecedented powers to detain and question individuals without charge or trial, on the mere suspicion that they may have information relevant to terrorism. Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) officers can question detainees for a week, or even longer with repeat warrants, without informing them why they have been detained and bar them from contacting their family, friends or the media.

The government, backed by the media, has also gone to new lengths to promote xenophobia, particularly against refugees from Asia, the Middle East and other less developed regions. Prime Minister John Howard and other leading ministers promoted the claim that

boat refugees, mainly from Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, were possible terrorists. Asylum seekers have been repelled by naval warships or transported to detention camps, on remote Pacific islands or in semi-desert locations internally, where they have been held indefinitely.

The groundwork for these policies was laid by the previous Labor government, which imposed mandatory detention of asylum seekers in 1992. Labor also introduced a regime of profiling potential visitors based on nationality in 1994. Citizens of countries considered to have a high “risk factor,” allegedly because they have a higher percentage of visa over-stayers and refugee applicants, find it almost impossible to visit Australia. Most of the countries that the government classifies as high-risk are in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as South America, Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Although the government claims the laws are non-discriminatory, they bar people from countries that were traditionally excluded under the “White Australia” policy. A key plank of the White Australia policy, the Immigration Act of 1901, was one of the first pieces of legislation passed through the Australian parliament. The legislation was enforced by a dictation test, which could be applied in any European language, effectively barring virtually all non-whites.

Immigration’s detention of Mahamadou Sacko and its degrading insistence that he sing the French national anthem has a similar political content to the dictation test, which Australian governments used in order to bar Asian, African and South American immigrants until 1958.

The French embassy sent a formal letter of complaint about the incarceration to Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This protest has nothing to do with opposing racism and the undermining of the democratic rights of refugees. In France itself, the government is stepping up its own assault on immigrants and asylum seekers.

The French government’s motives are bound up with the defence of its own diplomatic and strategic interests. Australia and France are rival powers in the South Pacific, where France retains colonies, while Australia is increasingly asserting its hegemony. The Howard government recently intervened militarily in the Solomon Islands and has used that intervention to

step up its pressure on Papua New Guinea and Fiji.

Despite the blatantly anti-democratic character of the student’s detention, the Howard government is unapologetic. It refused to reprimand the officials involved and the Immigration Minister’s office defended their actions. A spokesperson told the *Age* that officials did not tell Sacko to sing the national anthem, but merely to name it. Sacko’s statements fully contradict this.

An Immigration Department spokesperson refused to speak to the *World Socialist Web Site* about Sacko’s case, citing privacy issues. The department also refused to release general information about its protocols for detaining immigrants suspected of having a false passport, claiming immigrants would use the information to avoid border controls. In other words, the government insists on detaining and interrogating immigrants without informing them or the public of their basic legal rights.

Sacko’s detention received wide coverage in France, yet only one Australian newspaper briefly covered the story. Similarly, despite the extraordinary attack on the democratic rights of a foreign citizen, the Labor opposition has not questioned the government or raised the incarceration in any forum.



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