

Australian government intensifies crackdown on asylum seekers

Richard Phillips
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Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has intensified his government's crackdown on asylum seekers with plans to pay Indonesia to detain refugees intercepted while trying to sail to Australia. In-principle support for the deal was secured by Rudd with Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono at the Indonesian president's swearing-in ceremony in Jakarta last week.

The subcontracting arrangement, estimated to cost \$50 million per year and dubbed the "Indonesian Solution", could see hundreds of poverty-stricken refugees languishing in Indonesian detention camps for years. A final agreement is expected to be signed at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Singapore next month.

According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), a bounty would be paid to Jakarta for "'warehousing' detainees, processing their refugee applications and deporting those who fail to secure refugee status". There would be additional funds for air and naval surveillance, undercover police operations and Indonesian detention centres. Canberra is currently involved in high-level negotiations for a similar deal with Malaysia.

Labor's proposal is a variant on the former Howard government's so-called "Pacific Solution" in which Papua New Guinea and Nauru were paid to incarcerate asylum-seekers intercepted by Australian navy and immigration authorities.

While in opposition, Labor denounced the measure as "inhuman" and ended the arrangement last year. However, the agreement now being organised by the Rudd government is even more regressive. Indonesia and Malaysia are not signatories to international refugee laws and are notorious for their treatment of asylum seekers.

Prior to visiting Jakarta last week, Rudd contacted Yudhoyono and secured an agreement that Indonesia authorities would detain 78 Tamils intercepted by Australian customs ship Oceanic Viking on October 17. The Tamils—men, women and children—were rescued from a fishing boat

attempting to sail to Australia.

The asylum seekers have spent 10 days on the Oceanic Viking and are now being transported to an Australian-funded detention centre at Tanjung Pinang on the Indonesian island of Bintan, about 40 kilometres from Singapore.

The Tamils, who staged a hunger-strike when they learnt that they were being returned to Indonesia, have refused to disembark from the ship. They have threatened to kill themselves rather than leave the ship and be interned in Indonesia.

While Australian authorities are now discussing forcible removal of the asylum-seekers from the ship, provincial governor Ismeth Abdullah has told the media that he opposes Canberra's deal with Jakarta. Abdullah said he did not want Indonesia becoming a "dumping ground" for asylum-seekers that should be taken by Australia.

Even as Rudd was insisting that his Indonesian plan was "humane", Afghan refugees in Tanjung Pinang told the media that they had been beaten by Indonesian immigration officials. The ABC says it has seen evidence of the beatings and refugee and asylum-seeker support groups have verified these claims. When Rudd was asked by journalists about these allegations at an ASEAN summit in Bangkok last weekend, he refused to comment.

Like the previous Howard government, Labor, with the assistance of the media, is whipping up anti-refugee sentiment to deflect attention from rising job losses, endemic youth unemployment and social problems which have been intensified by the global financial crisis.

Even the rhetoric is similar. Last week Rudd branded asylum-seekers arriving as "illegal". In fact, it is the government, not the refugees, that is breaching international law. As a signatory to the UN convention on refugees, Australia is legally obliged to afford all asylum seekers the same treatment irrespective of how they arrive or whether they have passports or other official

papers.

Some sections of the political establishment have voiced concern that Rudd is too closely following the former Howard government and that the “tough on asylum seekers” bidding war between Labor and the opposition is escalating out of control.

Australian Industry Group chief Heather Ridout, for example, told the Fairfax media on October 19 that Rudd’s “hard-line” approach and the anti-asylum rhetoric from the Liberal-National coalition was “causing the worst possible outcome”. She called for a calm, bipartisan response. Ridout’s comments reflect concerns in corporate circles that the furore will impact on Australia’s international business relations, particularly in Asia.

Similar points were made by Australian Workers Union (AWU) national secretary Paul Howes, who called on Rudd to adopt a “more compassionate approach”. This was followed a week later by a declaration from the Australian Congress of Trade Unions (ACTU) that it was “disappointed” over “the demonisation of asylum seekers for political gain”.

These comments are entirely cynical. The union bureaucracy has fully backed immigration controls, mandatory detention of asylum seekers and the round-up of so-called illegal workers. The latest remarks are warning to the government that its current anti-asylum seeker campaign risks a political backlash. In the lead-up to the 2007 election, there was growing popular revulsion over the Howard government’s draconian anti-refugee methods.

Rudd and Immigration Minister Chris Evans reacted to these concerns by claiming that the Indonesian plan was “compassionate”. The prime minister has repeated ad nauseam that Labor was “tough but fair” with refugees.

However, the claim that the so-called Indonesian Solution is “humane” is a cruel hoax as any examination of the plight of asylum seekers in Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrates.

Jessie Taylor, a lawyer and filmmaker who visited 11 Indonesian detention centres in July, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that conditions for asylum seekers varied but in some cases were “horrendous”. Families with babies were locked in third-world style high-security prisons.

“One place I visited was one of the filthiest I have ever seen. It was a converted grain-storage warehouse and had rodent problems, fungus and mould. It had an uncovered water supply, which had big chunks of fungus and faeces floating in it. While we were there we saw someone fishing a dead cat, possum or

something like that out of the water supply,” she said.

Taylor explained that even when refugees are registered they are not officially allowed to work and there is no schooling for their children.

“One place we visited had an empty class room that the IOM [International Organisation of Migration] was supposed to open once or twice a week for educational purposes. But if the IOM considers that there has been misbehaviour or too many demands by the refugees then it refuses to open the classroom. In other words, the children are punished. This happened while we were visiting this place. The IOM don’t supply teachers or anything but one Iraq refugee woman who speaks a little English was teaching the children.

“Even when people are given refugee status they are not resettled and sit in these places—jails and prisons—for years on end, holding their refugee certificate and not knowing whether they will ever get out of there,” Taylor said.

Conditions in Malaysia are also appalling. The government refuses to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross access to detention centres. According to a recent Amnesty International (AI) report, forcible deportations, malnutrition, disease, beatings and suicide attempts by asylum seekers are commonplace. There are 22 detention centres in Malaysia, many of them holding over 1,000 men, women and children.

According to AI, in one centre 120 men were held 24 hours a day in a building about the size of a tennis court. The report noted that treatment of refugees depended on their nationality or religion. Some Burmese refugees had been held for over a decade.

These are the conditions into which the Rudd government is determined to force the Tamil refugees on the *Oceanic Viking*. Like the Howard government’s decision in August 2001 to prevent the *Tampa*, a Norwegian freighter that had rescued 433 Afghan refugees, from entering Australian territorial waters, the standoff over the *Oceanic Viking* is rapidly becoming a symbol of Labor’s repressive asylum seeker policies.



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