

Australia: Rudd intervenes to block Tamil asylum-seekers

Richard Phillips
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One week after his government forcibly deported two young Sinhalese asylum-seekers to Sri Lanka, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd phoned Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono last Saturday, urging him to prevent a boat carrying 255 Tamil asylum-seekers from reaching Australia. The poverty-stricken men, women and children from Sri Lanka's war-ravaged north were on a 30-metre wooden cargo boat traveling to Australia's Christmas Island.

Following Rudd's call, and on the basis of intelligence provided by Australian authorities, the Indonesian navy intercepted the vessel in the Sunda Strait, near Anak Krakatau, and escorted it to Merak in West Java, where it is now under military guard.

Rudd's response is completely predictable and reflects the views of the entire political establishment, from the crisis ridden Liberal-National coalition to the corporate media and the unions. Just as they have done for more than a hundred years, the ruling elite and its apologists have seized on the plight of these desperate refugees to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment and divert attention from their own responsibility for unemployment, homelessness and the myriad other social problems confronting ordinary working people.

For its part, the Rudd Labor government is using the issue to intensify its anti-asylum seeker measures, in a manner similar to that of its predecessor, the conservative Howard government.

After being towed to Merak harbour on Sunday, the Tamil asylum seekers refused to leave the boat and on Thursday, more than 200 of the passengers began a hunger strike protest. Their spokesman, Alex, told the media that after leaving war-ravaged Jaffna in Sri Lanka's north, they spent a month in the Malaysian jungle and had been at sea for 13 days before being captured by Indonesian authorities.

In a desperate appeal for asylum Alex, a former Jaffna English teacher, declared: "We are civilians, not Tamil Tigers. Every day there are Tamils being killed and raped in the refugee camps. Men are blindfolded and shot in the back of the head. In Sri Lanka if you are Tamil there is no opportunity—the government can detain you without cause, and take you to trial without evidence...."

"If you had no place, if you had no country of your own, what would you do? And how long would you stay in a boat before you were able to enter a country that will give you asylum? We are not animals. We are not stray dogs. We are people without a country to live in."

These comments, which accurately describe the situation facing tens of thousands of Tamils in Sri Lanka, along with a moving plea by Brindha, a nine-year-old girl, were nationally broadcast on Australian radio and

television.

Rudd and immigration minister Chris Evans immediately rejected their appeals. Rudd accused the asylum seekers of violating the law, a position that echoes the inflammatory rhetoric of the Howard government and violates Australia's obligations under the UN Convention on refugees and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. "I make absolutely no apology whatsoever for taking a hard line on illegal immigration to Australia. No apology whatsoever," Rudd said.

Commenting on the young girl's plea and the hunger strike, Rudd claimed that it would be "irresponsible for any prime minister of Australia to send out a message of positive encouragement" and would only assist the "people smugglers".

Immigration Minister Evans told the media that the Tamil refugees had nothing to do with Australia and would now be handled by Indonesian authorities. "We process people who arrive in Australian waters in accordance with our obligations under the refugees' convention... We don't have an obligation to accept everyone who is in every other country in the world," he told Sky News.

The likely consequence will be that the Tamils will have to spend years in Indonesian detention camps or return to Sri Lanka, one of the most militarised countries in the world, where racial oppression and the government's anti-democratic methods are a daily reality.

Anti-immigrant racism

Labor's callous indifference and its ratchetting up of anti-asylum seeker rhetoric is no accident. Nor is it a coincidence that it occurs within the context of the global financial crisis.

The Rudd government regularly claims that Australia has escaped recession, but its hysterical reaction to the latest group of asylum seekers is an expression of concerns within ruling circles about growing opposition to the assault on jobs, wages and living conditions.

Urged on by the corporate media and its wild allegations that the country is about to be overwhelmed with refugees, Rudd is now in a bidding war with the opposition Liberal-National coalition.

Opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull has weighed in to try and divert

media attention away from the deep divisions within his crisis-ridden coalition on a range of policies. He declared that Labor's border protection measures had "failed" and that asylum seeker numbers had increased because Labor had modified the former Howard government's immigration policies.

Politically discredited figures, such as Howard's immigration ministers Philip Ruddock and Kevin Andrews, were wheeled out to claim that refugees regarded the Labor government as a "soft touch" and that tens of thousands asylum-seekers were about to descend on the country. Andrews called for a return of a form of temporary protection visa and other Howard government measures.

Last night Grahame Morris, a senior Liberal Party consultant and former adviser to John Howard, told ABC's "Lateline" program that "a conga line of boats" was bringing "all the human flotsam and jetsam from other countries" to Australia. He was not challenged on the show by his Labor Party counterpart, Tim Gartrell, a former ALP national secretary.

Right on cue, the unions added their voices to the chorus, blaming so-called illegal immigrants for unemployment and low wages. Yesterday the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) in New South Wales attacked the Rudd government for failing to prosecute so-called illegal workers.

CFMEU state secretary Andrew Ferguson claimed that "Australian jobs" were being threatened by illegal workers and called for "prosecutions and substantial penalties".

Rudd has responded to these claims by demonstrating that his government is prepared to be even more brutal than his predecessors. Yesterday it was revealed that Canberra would be moving to formally establish a special anti-asylum seeker pact with the Indonesian government.

During the 2007 federal election campaign, Labor promised to end the Howard government's "Pacific Solution", under which it paid smaller Pacific Island nations to incarcerate asylum-seekers intercepted by Australian navy and immigration authorities.

While the Rudd government abolished the Pacific Solution, its new proposal will see it directly financing the Indonesian government to capture and detain all refugees looking for sanctuary in Australia. In other words, as the media have already pointed out, the Pacific Solution has become the "Indonesian Solution".

The plan, which Rudd will discuss with President Yudhoyono in Indonesia this coming week, will include direct Australian funding for the Indonesian navy to capture asylum seeker boats and increased financial support for immigration detention centres, deportations and so-called "voluntary returns".

Canberra also wants the formation of a joint Australia-Indonesia cabinet-level anti-asylum seeker working group and would boost funding for training and intelligence-sharing as well as intensify its military and police cooperation. Under existing "Regional Cooperation" policies, Canberra already provides \$18 million a year for technical and training assistance for "migration management" and "border security" in Indonesia.

At the end of 2008 there were 15.2m refugees internationally—the majority of these created by the US-led wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Pakistan, along with the end of the three-decade racist war conducted

by the Colombo regime against the Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Contrary to the hysterical claims of the Rudd government, the corporate media and the Liberal-National opposition, few of these refugees ever make it to Australia.

The overwhelming majority end up in under-developed countries, where they languish in horrendous conditions for years. In 2008 just over 330,000 gained entry to industrialised nations, with only a handful allowed into Australia.

Last year there were 4,750 asylum seekers out of more than 270,000 people who immigrated to Australia. The number of refugees accepted accounted for less than a tenth of one percent of the world's refugees.

Most of those currently arriving in Australia are from war-ravaged Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, countries where Australia governments have played a direct or indirect role in helping create the current human catastrophe.

In opposition, Labor backed these wars. Since coming to power in November 2007 Rudd has boosted Australian troops to Afghanistan and supported the US-led military attacks on Pakistan. Labor also endorsed Colombo's racist war against the Tamils and is now directly collaborating with Colombo to stop Tamils escape their ongoing repression and secure asylum in Australia.

Not surprisingly the Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Australia, Senaka Walgampaya, yesterday praised the Rudd government and was given extensive media coverage for a series of totally unsubstantiated claims against the Tamil asylum seekers. They were not from Sri Lanka, they were "well-off" and any suggestion that Tamils were persecuted in Sri Lanka was "totally false," he said.

Walgampaya was not asked by journalists to provide any evidence for his allegations or to comment on the ongoing and illegal incarceration in Sri Lanka of more than 250,000 Tamils by the government.

The response of the Rudd government and Australia's political elite to the Tamil asylum seekers makes clear, yet again, that it makes no difference whatsoever which party holds power in Canberra. Whether Labor or the Liberal-National coalition, refugees and asylum seekers are regularly treated like criminals and used as political scapegoats.

Against the divisive and reactionary policies of the Labor and trade union leaderships, the working class must come to the unconditional defence of the democratic rights of all asylum seekers and refugees, above all by developing an independent political movement that unifies working people the world over in a common struggle against the capitalist profit system—the real source of the catastrophes driving millions from their homes.



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