

Australian government to reopen remote refugee detention camp

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Further escalating its attacks on the basic democratic rights of asylum seekers, the Rudd government this week announced it would re-open a refugee detention centre in the remote far north of the country, initially to house up to 300 single men who have fled from persecution in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

The re-commissioning of the notorious camp at the Curtin air force base near Derby, in northern Western Australia, follows the government's decision last week to suspend the processing of all protection visa applications from Sri Lanka for at least three months, and those from Afghanistan for six months.

With no guarantee that these suspension periods will not be extended, Curtin will become a long-term holding pen for two groups whose persecution is directly bound up with Australian foreign policy. One consists of Tamils fleeing the ongoing detentions and victimisations of the Sri Lankan government, whose military crushing of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last year was tacitly supported by the Rudd government. The other is made up of Afghans escaping the intensified US-led military offensive in their country.

By consigning hundreds of young men to Curtin, the Labor government is deepening its blatant discrimination against people fleeing repression in the two Asian countries. It is also violating the international Refugee Convention, which prohibits measures to punish or deter refugees and requires signatory countries to individually consider asylum claims.

Reopening the Curtin military base is undeniably punitive. It has the reputation of being Australia's worst refugee detention camp. Not only is the facility's military character inherently traumatising for refugees fleeing

official repression, it is in an inaccessible and inhospitable location, more than 2,000 kilometres north of Perth, the Western Australian state capital. In spring and summer, temperatures reach a sweltering 42 degrees Celsius. From December to February, the region is subject to cyclones, very high humidity and torrential rains.

The previous Howard Liberal government shut down the Curtin camp in 2002 after a series of protests and hunger strikes. By reopening it, the Labor government is not simply reviving the past horrors of its predecessor. It is establishing a new regime of indefinite detention, with those imprisoned denied any rights of appeal to Australian tribunals or courts.

Immigration Minister Chris Evans signalled a new permanent status for the camp as a "secure location" for suspended asylum seekers, saying the government would spend an undisclosed sum "upgrading the facilities". He emphasised that refugees transferred there would have no "legal avenues of appeal," just like those on Australia's Indian Ocean outpost of Christmas Island, which the Rudd government has kept "excised" from the Migration Act and hence judicial review.

Not even the Howard government cut off all appeal rights to detainees in Curtin and other mainland camps. Denial of access to courts is another breach of the Refugee Convention, which insists on equal legal rights for refugees. It also flouts the centuries-old principle of habeas corpus—no detention without trial.

The conditions at Curtin triggered a major hunger strike in February 2000. Four months later, about 150 detainees broke out and started marching the 40 kilometres to Derby, demanding freedom, and supporting similar breakouts at two other infamous camps at Woomera and

Port Hedland.

In May 2001, Curtin inmates demonstrated against a number of deportations, allegedly damaging property before guards used tear gas against them, injuring four. When journalists were finally allowed into the centre more than a week later, detainees chanted “We want freedom,” before being hustled away. Children held up handwritten signs saying, “Don’t put us in cages” and “stop demonising us”.

In 2005, three years after the Howard government finally closed the facility, its own Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission reported that it had breached international human rights law when it kept 26 Iranians and Iraqis in isolation at Curtin for up to eight months in 2000–01.

The Curtin, Woomera and Port Hedland centres were shut down in 2002–03 after the use of mass arrests, water cannon, tear gas and solitary confinement failed to quell increasingly determined protests. This fuelled concerns within the media and political establishment that damage was being done to Australia’s international reputation.

The three facilities were replaced by a huge purpose-built camp at Baxter, near Port Augusta, on the edge of the South Australian desert. Baxter soon became the site of further protests. In turn, the Howard government de-commissioned it in 2007, pending the opening of the Christmas Island facility, which was completed by Labor in 2008.

The Rudd government has also taken the first step toward reopening the mothballed Baxter site. Up to 130 unaccompanied minors—mostly teenagers—from various countries will be flown from Christmas Island to a Port Augusta accommodation compound that used to house women and children from Baxter. The detention of so many minors further highlights the cruelty of the entire refugee policy.

When Labor took office in 2007, it had pledged a “more humane” refugee regime, with 90-day limits on detention, and the transfer of women and children to less intimidating forms of housing. Now, with its Christmas Island facilities exceeding their official capacity of 2,040, the Rudd government is re-establishing large-scale detention sites on the mainland. In addition to Curtin and

Port Augusta, it has consigned detainees to facilities in Darwin and Sydney, some pending deportation and others still awaiting visa decisions.

Refugee advocates expressed dismay at the government’s latest moves. Pamela Curr from the Asylum-Seeker Resource Centre told the media: “This is a tragedy. We remember Curtin last time, and even with a different government and a different service provider, it will still be 28 hours from Perth and about as isolated as you can get... they have deliberately chosen the most isolated, the most rundown and the most horrible place in Australia. That a Labor government would do that is shocking.”

These comments, while partly reflecting the shock and outrage felt by wider layers of people who voted for Labor in 2007, ignore the historical record. The previous Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating denounced asylum seekers as “illegal immigrants” and ultimately introduced mandatory detention in 1992, which was extended under Howard.

The Rudd government is now intent on demonstrating that it will attempt to deter and halt the arrival of asylum seekers no less decisively than the Liberals, whose leader Tony Abbott has declared would introduce as-yet-unspecified measures to “stop the boats”. While the mass media claims that both major parties are simply vying with each other to court public opinion, the truth is that a relatively small number of boat arrivals—less than 5,000 people in two years—is being exploited to try to poison public sentiment, for definite political and economic reasons.

In every period of economic downturn and social discontent, Labor and Liberal governments alike have made refugees scapegoats for deteriorating living conditions. Once again, as the Rudd government prepares for deep spending cuts in the May budget, Labor is using anti-refugee measures as a diversion from its own pro-business agenda.



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