

Exposure of Australian government's policy on Sri Lankan refugees

Mike Head
26 May 2010

Two reports released last week further undermined the pretext of “improved conditions” given by the Australian government for its suspension of all refugee visa applications from Sri Lanka. Most of the Sri Lankan refugees are Tamils who are fleeing the country after the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last year.

Last month, the Rudd government froze the processing of asylum claims from Sri Lanka for at least three months, and those from Afghanistan for at least six months. Immigration Minister Chris Evans claimed that circumstances were “evolving” for the better in both countries. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Australian government has based its claims heavily on assertions by the Colombo regime itself that no one, including Tamils, faces persecution.

In reality, the Sri Lankan government has systematically lied about its numerous abuses of democratic rights in the same way that it repeatedly denied that the military was responsible for war crimes during its operations against the LTTE. Tamils confront systematic official discrimination and the danger of arbitrary arrest and torture. Over the past five years, hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, have been murdered or “disappeared” by pro-government death squads.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) released a detailed report on May 17 on war crimes in Sri Lanka which punctures many of the government's lies. It accuses top government and military leaders of being responsible for the deaths of “tens of thousands of Tamil civilians, countless more wounded, and hundreds of thousands deprived of adequate food and medical care, resulting in more deaths”. While the report focuses on the final months of the Sri Lankan government's war against the Liberation Tigers of

Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended last May, it also documents the continuing unlawful internment of Tamils, including more than 10,000 alleged LTTE supporters.

The Brussels-based think tank specifically calls on the major powers, including the US, Canada, European Union members and Australia, not to extradite LTTE “suspects” to Sri Lanka “unless guarantees of humane treatment and fair trials are in place”. The report further urges these powers to “grant asylum or other protected status to witnesses” of the atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan military. These atrocities included the intentional shelling of civilians, hospitals and humanitarian operations, the deliberate shooting of civilians and the calculated infliction of suffering on civilians.

Elsewhere in the report, the ICG notes that all these foreign powers “turned a blind eye to the violations when they were happening”. In fact, the Western powers, including Australia, tacitly backed the Rajapakse government's renewed war against the LTTE in open violation of the 2002 ceasefire. The Rudd government's refugee freeze is a continuation of that complicity.

The ICG notes that 80,000 civilians were still interned in military-run camps as of last month. As many as 12,700 individuals allegedly involved with the LTTE were held under “arbitrary confinement” in separate camps, denied access to their families, lawyers, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other protection agencies. “These detentions are unlawful and pose particularly grave risks given the government's history of alleged enforced disappearances and torture,” the report states.

In sum, the ICG report makes it clear that anyone deported back to Sri Lanka, or even prevented from

fleeing the country by the Australian government's freeze, is in real danger. Moreover, crucial testimony about the Sri Lankan government's serious war crimes will be suppressed.

On May 19, the Edmund Rice Centre, an Australian Catholic agency, issued a statement documenting the fact that Sri Lankan asylum seekers deported from Australia face arrest and imprisonment. The agency's director, Phil Glendinning, who recently returned from Sri Lanka, said the authorities there viewed any Tamil who fled the country as a LTTE sympathiser, and any Sinhala refugee as a traitor.

"On our most recent visit we found that all asylum seekers returned to Sri Lanka in recent months, are handed over to the CID, the Sri Lankan police, and taken into custody," Glendinning said in a media release. "Some are detained, some have been assaulted. One man who is still in jail has lost the hearing in one ear given the severity of the assault he suffered, and another has received damage to his sight."

Glendinning added: "The Sri Lankan government was a party to one of the most brutal wars the world has seen in the past 100 years. In the absence of independent international observers being allowed in, to investigate the human rights situation, any guarantee from the government of Sri Lanka about the safety of people they regard as their enemies cannot be taken seriously."

The agency stated that nine asylum seekers removed back to Sri Lanka by the previous Howard government were later killed. Details of these and other killings of refugees deported from Australia—including 21 who had died in Afghanistan—were provided by two earlier Edmund Rice Centre reports, *Deported to Danger* and *Deported to Danger II*.

Glendinning told the WSWS that the Rudd government refused to provide figures on how many Sri Lankan asylum seekers it had deported, but his agency had examined the plight of 11. Each had been detained at the Colombo airport and although some had been released, others had been charged with "suspicion of terrorism" offences. He emphasised: "No one can believe the claims of the Sri Lankan government, because it has lied about every aspect of the war."

The two reports make it undeniable that the Australian government is violating the international Refugee Convention, which specifically prohibits

discriminatory or punitive measures against asylum seekers, and their deportation to face serious risks of persecution.

Nevertheless, the Rudd government is publicly stepping up its deportations of Sri Lankan asylum seekers, and is set to extend the three-month freeze. On May 20, Immigration Minister Evans told reporters in Darwin: "The rate of refusal [of refugee applications] is climbing quite quickly." Against all the evidence, he continued to claim that conditions are getting better in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Evans said cabinet would make a decision next month on whether to extend the freeze.

This stance is driven by both foreign and domestic policy calculations. Internationally, the Labor government regards its relations with the Sri Lankan government, and its commitment to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, as vital to the strategic and business interests of the Australian establishment. Domestically, it is determined to out-flank the Liberal-National Coalition in vilifying refugees as a means of distracting attention from deepening economic turmoil and social unrest.

No less than the Howard government before it, the Rudd government has proven to be a willing participant in sacrificing the basic legal and democratic rights, and lives, of those fleeing the wars and devastation for which it shares responsibility worldwide.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact