

Australian government expands refugee detention

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In what was billed as a major policy announcement, Prime Minister Julia Gillard this week said the Australian government would extend its asylum seeker detention facilities and gradually shift detained children into so-called community detention.

Gillard and Immigration Minister Chris Bowen said the plan delivered on a commitment to “balance” the government’s mandatory detention policy with “the humane treatment of those fleeing persecution and seeking asylum in our country”.

Far from becoming more humane, Australia’s system of compulsorily imprisoning all refugees who arrive on the country’s shores—first introduced by another Labor government in 1992—is being substantially expanded. Up to 8,000 people will be held without charge or trial—something unprecedented in peacetime. This will include more than 700 “minors” (aged under 18), some of whom may be held outside the detention camps, but under close monitoring and house arrest-style restrictions.

Gillard’s plan involves the commissioning of two new detention centres, at Northam, northeast of Perth, and Inverbrackie, in the Adelaide Hills, to cater for up to 1,900 asylum seekers, including 400 in family groups. Both are disused military facilities—the worst places to house people fleeing war and persecution.

In addition, Gillard said the government was prepared to use the 11 Mile Antenna Farm outside Darwin and further expand the Melbourne immigration transit accommodation. As previously announced, the Darwin Airport Lodge also will be expanded to hold 400 people, and two remote mothballed air force bases will be “adapted” to house single adult men—Curtin in northern Western Australia to hold 1,200 and Scherger in far north Queensland to take 300.

These facilities on the Australian mainland, together with others in Sydney and Brisbane, and the overcrowded centre on the Indian Ocean territory of Christmas Island (where about 2,700 people are detained, some in tents) will take the total holding capacity to close to 8,000. This is double the peak detention population of just less than 4,000 during the previous Howard government. The Gillard government is also trying to pressure East Timor to host a “regional processing centre” that would imprison about 2,000 more refugees.

In 2007, after years of mounting public opposition to Howard’s prolonged incarceration of refugees, which provoked hunger strikes, protests, breakouts and suicides, the Labor government took office promising to ensure that asylum seekers would be treated more humanely and released from detention within 90 days of their arrival.

According to the Immigration Department, there are now more than 5,000 people detained—4,000 men, 319 women and 738 children, including 382 teenagers who arrived without a parent or guardian. In March, the Labor government froze new Afghani and Sri Lankan asylum claims for six and three months respectively, in violation of the international Refugee Convention. The decision condemned these refugees to extended arbitrary detention and increased the backlog of claims by about 1,200 cases.

Those freezes have now been lifted, in preparation for moves to deport as many Afghanis and Sri Lankan Tamils as possible, but this process takes time. All detainees are also subjected to interrogations and investigations by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). By some estimates, detainees will have to wait up to five years for decisions on their protection visa applications.

For months, refugee advocates have been warning that, as during the Howard years, detainees are becoming increasingly desperate. Even in lower security detention facilities, where some children and families are kept, people are mutilating themselves in protest against their treatment. According to immigration department figures, the rate of self-harm last financial year was four times the year before. Reports are surfacing of mothers in detention too traumatised to produce breast milk for their babies.

Seeking to head off public opposition, Gillard and Bowen foreshadowed efforts to transfer several hundred child detainees and their families into community detention by June 2011. But those children will still be detained, in accommodation supervised by churches and charities. They may not be behind razor wire any longer, but they will not be permitted to live freely, their parents will be prohibited from working and families will have to survive on 89 percent of the lowest available government welfare benefit.

Under the existing Migration Act, the minister can make “residence determinations”, imposing any conditions whatsoever—including curfews and obligations to report regularly to authorities—on those placed in community detention.

Far from being a new initiative, “residence determinations” were introduced in 2005 by the Howard government, in its own attempt to quell public outrage over the incarceration of children. An amendment to the Act requiring that “a minor shall only be detained as a measure of last resort” has been flagrantly flouted under the Labor government.

Bowen declared that not all children would be taken out of the detention centres, saying he needed to retain “flexibility” over when to authorise such releases. He also insisted that each child would undergo a security check to ensure that “they are not considered a risk to the community and are assessed as unlikely to abscond”.

In making her statement, Gillard denied allegations by the Liberal opposition that the government was “softening” its policy. After the changes, she emphasised, there would be “a mandatory detention system with a softer edge but nonetheless a mandatory detention system”. In effect, the new measures for children are designed to whitewash the detention regime while extending it.

The Liberals and right-wing media commentators have, over the past three years, accused the Labor government of encouraging asylum seekers by supposedly watering down the Howard government’s measures. So far this year, despite a continuing Australian naval cordon, 108 boats have arrived, exceeding the previous record of 99 under Howard.

The fundamental cause of increased arrivals is the deteriorating global situation. The latest statistics from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show that 43.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2009, “the highest number of people uprooted by conflict and persecution since the mid-1990s”. The number of new individual asylum claims worldwide grew to nearly 1 million.

The biggest sources of refugees are Afghanistan (2.9 million), Iraq (1.8 million) and Somalia (678,000)—three countries devastated by US-led or US-backed military interventions. Largely because of increasingly draconian measures taken by all Western governments to exclude refugees, more than 80 percent of the world’s total are trapped in impoverished neighbouring countries, including 1.75 million in Pakistan, 1 million in Iran and 1 million in Syria.

Successive Australian governments are responsible for helping to create the disasters from which refugees are fleeing—in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan through direct military involvement in the US-backed wars. Canberra backs the Sri Lankan government which restarted the country’s civil war in 2006 and since the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s defeat last year has continued

its persecution of the island’s Tamil minority.

Advocacy groups and media commentators welcomed the announcement by Gillard and Bowen, falsely portraying it as a victory for families and children. An editorial in one Murdoch tabloid, the Melbourne *Herald Sun*, included an endorsement that Gillard was “absolutely right” and “700 children are destined to find a quality of life that has long eluded them.”

The most effusive praise, however, came from the Greens, who are de facto partners in the minority Gillard government, having signed a pact to support it following the August election on no confidence and budgetary matters. In fact, party leader Senator Bob Brown and immigration spokesperson Senator Sarah Hanson-Young claimed credit for the child detention changes.

Hanson-Young said in a media statement: “I want to congratulate Immigration Minister, Chris Bowen, for acting swiftly, and for recognising the need for a more compassionate approach to vulnerable young asylum-seekers ... This is broadly in line with what the Greens have been pushing for, about the need to get children, unaccompanied minors and families out of detention.”

Hanson-Young called for amendments to the Migration Act to exempt children and minors from mandatory detention, and to set a time limit for the detention of adults. While proposing these cosmetic modifications, the Greens fully support the entire framework of detention, so-called “border protection” and the forcible deportation of those not accepted as refugees. More than ever, they are directly responsible for this inhuman and reactionary anti-asylum seeker regime.

Every Western government is shutting its doors to the millions of people worldwide fleeing war and oppression, but Australia is the only state that indefinitely locks up all asylum applicants, and gives them no right to legally challenge their detention.



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