

Australian government prepares to forcibly deport refugees

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The Australian government orchestrated a show of force by riot police this week to broadcast a worldwide message of the methods that will be employed to carry out its new policy of deporting refugees to Malaysia.

Images of training drills on Christmas Island by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) “public order management squad”—in full riot gear—were given front-page coverage in Murdoch media outlets on Monday. Prime Minister Julia Gillard issued a blunt warning to asylum seekers: “We will do what is necessary to ensure people who are taken to Malaysia under the agreement are taken.”

An AFP spokesperson said police would “escort” asylum seekers onto charter flights and physically hand them to officers at the Malaysian airport terminal.

The *Australian* reported that, “in line with the rules about police use of force,” AFP officers would be able to use tear gas, batons and synthetic bullets. The government first sanctioned the deployment of this weaponry in March to suppress protests among Christmas Island detainees.

In a calculated bid to deter refugees from seeking asylum in Australia, the government plans to film the removal of the first group of refugees to Malaysia and post the footage on its “No to people smuggling” Youtube channel. The channel already features a one-and-a-half minute video, translated into eight different languages, publicising the Malaysian agreement.

The first group of 54 asylum seekers—mostly Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan—to be deported to Malaysia were intercepted in waters north of Australia last Sunday. Initially, they will be detained—possibly for weeks—on Christmas Island in clear breach of international legal restrictions on arbitrary detention. They will be housed in a compound previously only considered appropriate for single adult men that is surrounded by two rows of electrified wire fencing.

Under its deal with the Malaysian government, Labor plans to deport all new asylum seekers within 72 hours of their arrival, but the so-called transit detention centres in Malaysia have not yet been prepared.

The aim of the Malaysian agreement is to strip refugees of their legal right to seek asylum. The next 800 asylum seekers who arrive by boat in Australia’s waters will be forcibly taken to Malaysia. They will languish there in squalid conditions for years, if not decades, without access to public education or healthcare, along with more than 90,000 other refugees.

This is a violation of international refugee law that goes far beyond anything carried out under the previous Liberal government. Australia is a signatory to the international 1951 Refugee Convention, but Malaysia is not. As a signatory, Australia is obliged not to “refoule” or return refugees to face the danger of persecution. The agreement states that in most cases Malaysia “will respect the principle of non-refoulement,” but the document has no legally binding effect. This makes the Gillard government complicit in a scheme that flouts the most basic right in the Convention.

Since the deal was signed last week, Immigration Minister Chris Bowen has falsely stated that those transferred from Australia will have access to education and health care and the right to work. In fact, they will be offered the same education as received by other refugees—improvised schools run by the United Nations. Similarly, they will have to seek private medical care or, if they cannot afford to do so, resort to the limited facilities offered by the International Organisation of Migration.

Refugees in Malaysia are routinely exploited as a cheap source of illegal labour and are blackmailed to pay money to avoid being thrown into the country’s overcrowded detention centres, with poor bedding in sweltering heat. According to the Malaysian Human Rights Commission,

1,300 people have died in the centres over six years as a result of neglect and lack of access to medical treatment.

Far from guaranteeing the right to work, the agreement provides only that “Transferees will have ongoing access to self reliance opportunities particularly through employment.” Renuka Balasubramaniam, the director of Malaysian human rights group Lawyers for Liberty, told the *Australian* that media accounts of the deal in Malaysia did not include references to work rights. “It seemed to be only Bowen that was saying that,” Balasubramaniam said.

The Greens, who hold the balance of power in the Australian Senate and are in an effective parliamentary coalition with Labor, have claimed to oppose the Malaysian deal since it was first announced in May. Because the Labor government can implement the agreement without a parliamentary vote, the Greens have claimed that their hands are tied.

The bogus character of this posturing was revealed at a press conference last week with Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young. The Senator was asked whether her party would consider opposing other legislation in parliament as a means of placing pressure on the government to alter its refugee policy.

Hanson-Young responded: “We’re responsible parliamentarians, and you take pieces of legislation that come through the parliament here based on its merits... If you’re asking me to start participating in horse-trading on totally different issues, well no—I’m not prepared to do that. I don’t think that’s a responsible way of ensuring stability in parliament or a responsible way of behaving as a parliamentarian.”

As these remarks demonstrate, the Greens are thoroughly integrated into the political establishment and committed to ensuring parliamentary stability through their support for the minority Labor government. The government depends on the Greens to pass all its budget measures, including those funding its punitive detention network. The Greens bear equal political responsibility for the damage inflicted on the lives of asylum seekers sent to Malaysia.



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