

Australian government removes refugees to Nauru

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The barbaric character of the Australian Labor government's refugee policy has been made plain over the past week by the forced removal of two planeloads of Tamil asylum seekers from Sri Lanka to live in military-style tents on the remote Pacific Island of Nauru.

The 66 Tamil men are just the first of more than 2,000 refugees who will soon be detained indefinitely in primitive conditions on Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, in complete violation of their basic legal and democratic rights, as well as the international Refugee Convention.

In a blatant bid to deter and block refugees from seeking asylum in Australia, Prime Minister Gillard's government has gone far beyond the so-called "Pacific Solution" of the previous Howard Liberal government, which incarcerated people on Nauru and Manus Island for up to five years, causing trauma, mental ill-health and suicides.

As the Tamil men were transported to Nauru, Immigration Minister Chris Bowen and other senior Gillard ministers refused to put any time limit whatsoever on how long they would be held on the island. The government has imposed a so-called "no advantage" rule that means asylum seekers will be detained for as long as they would have had to wait for a refugee visa if they had remained in their home country or an overseas refugee camp. Potentially this will mean years if not decades.

Determined to implement this policy as quickly as possible, the government carried out the first group deportation just a day after the Liberal/National

Opposition joined it in voting in parliament to declare Nauru a regional "processing" centre, even though Australian soldiers had not yet finished constructing the detention facility. As a result, refugees will be housed in tents for months.

Under heavy security, the Sri Lankan men were loaded onto the flight from Christmas Island, an offshore Australian territory in the Indian Ocean. Reportedly, police and security personnel outnumbered the refugees on the first flights, in order to prevent any resistance. Upon arrival at Nauru's airport, the men were removed one-by-one from the plane by Australian Federal Police officers and bussed to the facility, which is surrounded by jungle and the country's only rubbish tip.

Another planeload of Tamils is expected later this week, followed by the first group of Afghan Hazaras early next week. By then, the camp will house more than 150 asylum seekers. Ultimately, it will hold 1,500 refugees, with another 600 on Manus Island.

On Nauru, refugees are now sleeping in tents on army cots of metal and canvas without air conditioning, despite the tropical heat and humidity on the island, a former phosphate-mining location with less than 10,000 inhabitants. According to media reports, large rats arrive at dusk.

At a Sydney press conference to announce the deportations, Immigration Minister Bowen declared: "The message is very clear, if you arrive in Australia by boat you can be taken from Australia by airplane and processed in another country." He also emphasised that women and children would soon be deported to

Nauru as well, declaring: “We are not going to provide loopholes for people to exploit.”

This “message” exposes the lie that Labor’s regime is directed against the so-called “people smugglers” who organise refugee boat voyages—its aim is to force refugees to stop trying to sail to Australia by harshly punishing those who arrive.

Despite previous promises by Bowen that Labor’s system on Nauru would involve a “processing centre,” not a detention camp, the site’s inhabitants are forbidden from leaving. Bowen also announced that the Nauruan government had agreed to process the asylum seekers under local law, stripping them of any legal protections or appeal rights they might have under Australian law.

These developments further expose the efforts of the entire political and media establishment to justify Labor’s anti-refugee regime in the name of “humanitarianism.” The government has exploited the tragic deaths of hundreds of refugees on voyages to Australia to insist that the only way to “save lives” is to deter asylum seekers from making the journey.

In reality, it is the government’s escalating efforts to stop refugees, and its refusal to take responsibility for rescuing those whose boats founder after leaving Indonesia or Sri Lanka, that have driven asylum seekers to undertake ever-more hazardous journeys to get to Australian waters.

The only way to prevent further deaths is to provide refugees—fleeing persecution in war-torn countries such as Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iraq—with safe passage to Australia. Refugees currently have no choice but to attempt the trip in often-unseaworthy boats, precisely because the Australian government blocks all official modes of arrival.

To give Labor’s policy a veneer of international legitimacy, the government’s refugee panel, headed by former military chief Angus Houston, had urged that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) be involved in administering the centres on Nauru and Manus Island, as they were under the Howard government.

However, both agencies have refused to participate, underscoring the unlawful nature of the new measures.

Instead, the Nauruan government will decide on refugee status, while the operation of the detention centres has been handed over to Transfield Services, a private Australian engineering firm, and the Salvation Army, a Christian charity.

Since last month, nearly 2,200 asylum seekers have been intercepted in Australian waters, outstripping the capacity of the Nauru and Manus Island facilities. Far from stopping the arrival of boats, as the government claimed, the new regime has only highlighted the desperation of refugees to find protection, even if it means spending years in isolated detention.

In response, the government is now seeking to revive its refugee swap arrangement with Malaysia, which the High Court ruled unlawful last September because it violated even the limited protections contained in the Australian migration legislation and the 1951 international Refugee Convention. Malaysia does not recognise the Convention and is notorious for the appalling conditions facing refugees.

Labor’s regime is paving the way for even more draconian measures. The Liberal-National Opposition, which has joined hands with the government on its “Pacific Solution,” is now demanding that it automatically return all Sri Lankan refugees because the island’s civil war was over. Despite the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009, the systematic persecution of Tamils continues.

As the pretence of saving refugee lives becomes increasingly threadbare, the logic of Labor’s policy is clear: it is to take ever harsher measures to deter refugees from asserting their fundamental legal and democratic rights to seek asylum.



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