

Australian foreign minister visits Sri Lanka to tighten anti-refugee measures

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Australia's Labor government has sent Foreign Minister Bob Carr on a four-day visit to Sri Lanka in order to intensify its collaboration with President Mahinda Rajapakse's regime, above all in stopping refugees fleeing from persecution in that country.

During his trip, commencing tonight, Carr will hold talks with Rajapakse himself, as well as senior Sri Lankan ministers. According to Carr's media release, the discussions will cover "aid, economic development, human rights and people smuggling issues".

However, the central focus of the visit is indicated by the fact that Carr is accompanied by the head of the Australian immigration department, as well as the head of the foreign affairs department, and senior immigration and customs officials. Unnamed government sources told the *Australian* the meetings would aim to "enshrine and formalise a mechanism for greater cooperation" on halting refugee voyages.

In other words, Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government is stepping up its partnership with the Sri Lankan police-state apparatus in intercepting refugee boats sailing from Sri Lanka. Australian Federal Police based in Colombo already work closely with the Sri Lankan Navy and Coast Guard.

Carr emphasised in his media release that Sri Lanka was "an important regional partner in the fight against people smuggling, having disrupted more than 60 separate people smuggling ventures this year involving around 2,900 people." Those rounded up by the Sri Lankan authorities can be jailed for up to three years for trying to leave the country without permission. There is a proven record—documented by international

human rights agencies—of returnees being interrogated, beaten, tortured and disappearing at the hands of the police and the military.

Australia's collaboration in these operations is a blatant breach of the international Refugee Convention, which recognises a right to flee persecution, as well as a violation of the basic legal and democratic rights of Sri Lankan workers.

Much of northern Sri Lanka remains under military occupation more than three years after the end of the protracted communal war conducted by successive Sri Lankan governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Tens of thousands of civilians, mainly Tamils, were killed by the military in the final stages of the war, and those who survived have been subjected to systemic harassment, discrimination and police-military violence. Thousands of Tamils still languish in detention centres without trial.

Since September, the Gillard government has also worked hand in glove with the Sri Lankan regime to forcibly return more than 650 asylum seekers who had sailed to Australia. According to refugee lawyers, they include poor Sinhala fishermen from western Sri Lanka, as well as members of the persecuted Tamil minority.

These refugees have been deported from Australia in large groups, after being arbitrarily "screened out" of the refugee visa application process. They have been systematically denied the right to apply for asylum, and blocked from access to legal advice. On arrival on Australian shores, they are subjected to intimidating official interviews, whose purpose is hidden from them,

and then bundled onto planes as soon as possible, sometimes within 48 hours.

This procedure is another violation of the Refugee Convention, as well as Australian domestic law, which both require due process and procedural fairness. In order to evade court rulings, the government has postponed deportations in numbers of cases where the refugees had managed to contact lawyers and instigate legal challenges. After side-stepping a High Court injunction to halt the removal of 56 Sri Lankans last week, the government is continuing its unlawful process. It deported another group of 48 yesterday. Refugee lawyers report that 92 more asylum seekers are facing imminent removal, including some who had been previously placed in “community detention” within Australia.

Carr’s trip is bound up with reactionary political calculations. Amid a deepening economic downturn and rising unemployment, both the Labor government and the Liberal-National Party opposition have seized on the refugee issue, aided and abetted by the media. The relatively small numbers of boat arrivals are being depicted as a “tide” of asylum seekers, especially from Sri Lanka, accompanied by inflammatory media demands to “stop the boats.”

Seeking to outdo the Liberals, Gillard and her ministers have resorted to increasingly draconian methods to block asylum seekers, including by detaining refugees indefinitely in primitive camps on remote South Pacific islands, either Nauru or Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. Carr’s trip is aimed at reinforcing the government’s message that it is tough on refugees ahead of next year’s federal election.

All this is to divert public attention from the government’s austerity agenda of slashing social spending and enforcing corporate restructuring, at the expense of jobs, wages and conditions. The corporate elite is demanding that this offensive must be rapidly escalated, regardless of which party wins the scheduled 2013 federal election, in line with the deep cuts being imposed on working people across Europe, the US and internationally.

An editorial in *The Australian* Murdoch’s this underscored the political considerations behind Carr’s visit. It praised the government for making “a good call in sending Foreign Minister Bob Carr to Colombo next week to plot joint action to stop the boats from Sri Lanka.” It urged the government to pursue a proposal by the opposition—which plans to send its own delegation to Colombo next year—to assist Sri Lanka to intercept boats, even though the government is already doing that.

The editorial underlines the readiness of the political establishment to tear up the most fundamental legal and democratic rights of working people in order to pursue its program. By colluding with a regime notorious for its illegal methods, constitutional violations and abuses of basic rights, the government and opposition are demonstrating their willingness to use anti-democratic methods at home, in order to deal with popular opposition to its austerity offensive.



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