

Opposition in Papua New Guinea to Australian refugee pact

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The anti-democratic character of the refugee deal signed last month by the Papua New Guinean and Australian governments was on display last week when armed police and other security personnel in Port Moresby threatened hundreds of students from the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) who were protesting against the deal. Police stopped students from marching on the Australian High Commission in the PNG capital and prohibited them from leaving the university grounds.

Protesters burned the Australian flag and copies of the one-page communiqué issued by PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neill and Australian PM Kevin Rudd. Carrying anti-O'Neill and anti-Rudd placards (including “All about Labor”), demonstrators demanded that the PNG government tear up the agreement.

Under the Rudd-O'Neill agreement, asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat, including women and children, will be transported to PNG. Initially, they will be detained in tents at an expanded detention facility on remote Manus Island, hundreds of kilometres north of the PNG mainland. Australian Immigration Minister Tony Burke last week revealed plans to erect a new detention centre on Manus capable of holding up to 10,000 people.

Even those asylum seekers determined to be refugees will never be permitted to settle in Australia. In effect, they will have to remain indefinitely in PNG or return home to face the threat of death or persecution.

There is no prospect that refugees can be genuinely protected and adequately settled in PNG, given the extraordinary levels of poverty that beset most of the country's people. In Port Moresby alone, squatter settlements are home to almost half the city's growing 400,000-plus population.

More than 15,000 people live in just one settlement, Hanuabada, one of many communities in PNG that lack reliable power, clean water or sewage systems, and services such as garbage collection. Some of its residents came looking for jobs or schooling, to access medical care or support family. Many are internally displaced, forced from their homes by crises such as tribal fighting, land disputes, family violence, poor crop yields, extreme weather events, mining or forestry.

According to the UN, one third of PNG's people live on less than \$1.25 per day. Infant mortality is among the worst on the globe—some 5.5 percent of children die before the age of 2. Only 40 percent of the population have any kind of formal education. As a result of the acute social tensions fuelled by this destitution, PNG has a murder rate 13 times higher than Australia.

PNG's infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and transport, is generally primitive. Welfare is non-existent and most people survive on subsistence agriculture, leaving little prospect that refugees could establish decent livelihoods. These appalling conditions are the legacy of Australian colonial rule over PNG that only formally ended in 1975 and Australian imperialism's continued dominance that has continued to stunt the country's economic development.

In fact, the threat of poverty and insecurity in PNG lies at the heart of Labor's “PNG solution.” As O'Neill stated candidly at the time of the deal's announcement, “we hope that the boats [to Australia] will stop and there will be nobody coming to Manus and that is the objective of these arrangements.” Nevertheless, desperate refugees, facing even worse dangers in their home countries, are likely to keep trying to reach Australia.

O'Neill signed the refugee arrangement behind the backs of the PNG population and without any political

discussion whatsoever. He owes his position to a parliamentary coup in 2011 executed with the backing of the Australian government. The previous prime minister, Michael Somare, had been strengthening PNG's links with China, a stance strongly opposed by Canberra and Washington. Following elections last year, O'Neill's Peoples National Congress Party currently holds office with the support of an array of small coalition partners.

The Rudd government's willingness to purchase, as well as bully, the PNG government's complicity will no doubt play a critical role in helping O'Neill secure whatever parliamentary backing he needs for the plan. Rudd has promised that Australia will substantially fund, at a total cost of about \$500 million, the rebuilding of a hospital in Lae, renovation work in PNG's universities, the construction of a highway between Lae and Madang, and the building of a new courthouse in Port Moresby.

Australia will also spend \$19 million on deployments to the PNG prison and police services, and send some 50 Australian police to local stations for the supposed purpose of tackling crime. Such deployments echo the dispatch of paramilitary Australian Federal Police units to other countries in the region, most significantly the approximately 400 armed police in Solomon Islands.

Even if O'Neill has sufficient parliamentary numbers to push the refugee agreement through, however, he will face opposition. According to opposition whip Tobias Kluang, the deal has been "shoved down the throat of the PNG people without scrutiny."

Emmanuel Narokobi, a PNG journalist, told the *Global Mail* that O'Neill headed "an inefficient government that still does not know how to provide basic services to its own people—schools and hospitals ... Did our Government even attempt to conduct a social impact study of some sort? We can see the benefit to Kevin Rudd and his party; we can see the benefit to the PNG government; we can see the benefit to all the AusAID agencies and contractors that will be involved. But as Papua New Guinea citizens, what do we get out of it?"

Narokobi said many of his contemporaries anticipate that the costs of food and housing, already hyper-inflated by the mining resources sector, will be pushed up even further with the arrival of the inevitable corps of Australian-based officials required to construct and

administer the refugee operation.

O'Neill is riding roughshod over opposition, as well as basic legal and democratic rights. A proposed legal challenge, announced by parliamentary opposition leader, Belden Namau, will argue that the deal breaches international law and that the detention of asylum seekers on Manus is unlawful imprisonment and therefore violates PNG's constitution, which formally guarantees personal liberty. O'Neill has told the Australian media that he will simply move to change the constitution to exempt asylum seekers from that right.

The PNG opposition is effectively relaunching a previous challenge to the government's earlier arrangement for detention on Manus. The original challenge failed last month on supposedly procedural grounds—PNG's Supreme Court ruled that the case had been commenced using the wrong documents.

Opposition leader Namau has also pleaded for the protection of PNG "sovereignty." That call, and the flag burning last week in Port Moresby, indicates that the opposition parties are seeking to channel popular hostility to the deal and sympathy among ordinary working people to the refugees in a reactionary nationalist direction.

As well as seeking to bolster its own position through populist demagogic, the PNG opposition is expressing the interests of layers of business whose only objections to the Rudd-O'Neill agreement are that they want a greater involvement in implementing it. No section of the country's ruling elite has the slightest concern for plight of refugees fleeing persecution, any more than they are concerned about the poverty and lack of services facing workers and villagers in PNG.



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