

New Australian government appoints military commander to oversee anti-refugee regime

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Prime Minister Tony Abbott's newly sworn in Liberal-National Coalition government wasted no time in introducing even more draconian measures aimed at preventing refugees from seeking asylum in Australia.

Last Wednesday, his first day in office, Abbott declared that a new regime had come into immediate effect. It includes instructing the military to turn asylum seekers' boats back into Indonesian waters, collaborating with the Sri Lankan government to stop all refugee boats leaving that country, and halting the granting of any permanent protection visas.

The incoming government also fully embraced the previous Labor government's policy of forcibly removing all asylum seekers to Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, thus stripping them of the basic legal and democratic right to seek protection from persecution.

On Thursday, Immigration and Border Protection Minister Scott Morrison launched "Operation Sovereign Borders," which places a three-star military general in control of not just repelling boats but of the entire system of immigration border control.

Army deputy chief Angus Campbell, who was swiftly promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, will oversee the relevant operations of 15 civilian agencies. These range from the Australian Federal Police and five intelligence services (Office of National Assessments, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Australian Secret Intelligence Service, Australian Signals Directorate and Australian Geospatial Intelligence Organisation) to the Australian Maritime Safety Agency, the customs service and the departments of prime minister, foreign affairs, immigration and attorney general.

Campbell will also bypass the usual military chain of command and report directly to Morrison. Under the previous structure, a vice-admiral was seconded from the navy to take charge of the Border Protection Command, which involved a mixture of military and customs

operations, while the immigration department separately had control over detention and visa processing.

It is not yet clear whether the new system extends to the military running detention centres, processing visa applications and deciding whether to inform the public of the arrival, repulsion or sinking of any boats. So far, the government has stopped reporting all boat voyages, saying that General Campbell will handle all such information. Likewise, no detail has been provided as to whether extra naval warships, air force surveillance planes and other military resources will be deployed in the waters north of Australia.

General Campbell is a graduate of the neo-colonial operations conducted by Australian governments over the past 15 years. He was a commander in the Special Air Service (SAS), and served in East Timor during 2001 and 2002 as part of Canberra's intervention to exert control over the newly created state and its offshore oil and gas fields. In 2005, under Howard, he was appointed to head the Office of National Security in the Prime Minister's Department, and was later promoted to deputy national security adviser. In 2011, under Gillard, he was made commander of all Australian forces in the Middle East, including Afghanistan.

Abbott initially unveiled the military plan in July, during the lead up to the federal election, declaring that the arrival of refugee boats constituted a "national emergency." This militarisation of refugee policy—treating vulnerable people seeking protection as military threats to be disposed of accordingly—builds on the deployment of the navy and air force by both the previous Rudd-Gillard Labor and Howard Liberal governments to intercept asylum-seeker boats.

This process began in 2001, when Prime Minister John Howard used SAS troops to force the cargo ship MV Tampa to turn away from delivering refugees to Australian territory, flouting the then legal requirement to

bring them ashore to be detained and processed.

That operation laid the basis for “Operation Relex,” involving the mobilisation of the navy and air force in the waters between Australian and Indonesia, and parts of the Indian Ocean. This and subsequent similar operations, which were maintained by the Labor government after 2007, were mounted on the pretext of tracking refugee vessels. Yet, the resulting intensive surveillance over the strategic sea lanes to Australia’s north did not save hundreds of asylum seekers who perished aboard boats that sank. Instead, substantial evidence emerged that both the Liberal and Labor governments permitted vessels to sink, and then exploited the deaths to try to deter other would-be asylum seekers. (See: “Ten years on: The SIEV X tragedy and the assault on democratic rights”)

In 2012, Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s Labor government reinforced the military’s role when it called on retired Defence Chief Air Vice Marshall Angus Houston to head a report panel that recommended a more far-reaching new version of Howard’s “Pacific Solution”—consisting of detaining all asylum seekers indefinitely in primitive camps on Nauru and Manus Island.

There have been misgivings within the military community over the involvement of soldiers and sailors in pushing back boats. Retired Admiral Chris Barrie, a former chief of the armed forces, warned on Thursday of the dangers. Referring to sailors, he said: [O]ur people are going to jump into the sea to save their lives and do extraordinary things because they’re so compassionate about it... it puts people at risk and that’s why it’s a bad policy in my view.”

As a result of the government’s halt to permanent protection visas, refugees already in Australia can only apply for temporary visas (TPVs). Even if the government rules that they are “legitimate” refugees, they will never be permitted to settle in Australia or bring their families to join them. More than 23,000 people who arrived since last August will live in “limbo,” subjected to restrictions on welfare and employment, and unable to even leave the country without forfeiting their visas.

Abbott’s anti-refugee regime may produce the government’s first foreign relations conflict—with neighbouring Indonesia. The Indonesian government has objected to the policy of “turn back the boats” as violation of its sovereignty. Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa has also rejected Abbott’s proposals to buy Indonesian boats or pay Indonesians for information about supposed “people smuggling” operations. Tantowi

Yahya, the head of the Indonesian parliament’s foreign affairs commission, described the policy as “very offensive.”

Abbott said he will attempt to negotiate with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, in a face-to-face meeting arranged for September 30. Earlier this week, however, Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop stated: “We’re not asking for Indonesia’s permission, we’re asking for their understanding.” Alexander Downer, her predecessor under Howard, declared: “Never, ever did we ask another country’s permission to protect our borders.”

Greens parliamentarians, who propped up the minority Labor government for the past three years, and backed Houston’s report, expressed reservations about some of the new policies, but did not disagree with the establishment of the military command. Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young largely echoed the limited misgivings voiced by Barrie. In reality, the Greens share responsibility for Labor’s measures, which cost hundreds of lives, and helped pave the way for the Abbott government’s further measures to shut the country’s borders to all asylum seekers.

The speed with which the Abbott government has moved against refugees is a warning to working people of the methods it will use to drive through the austerity agenda being demanded by big business against the working class as a whole. The brutal measures meted out to some of the most vulnerable layers of the world’s population, overseen by the military, foreshadow further deep attacks on the basic democratic rights of working people.



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