

# Australia: Government and Labor boast of stopping refugee boats

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At his weekly media briefing on asylum seeker arrivals last Friday, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison boasted of halting the arrival of refugee boats. No vessels arrived in the previous week, he said, while refusing to say whether the Australian navy pushed any back to Indonesia.

Both Morrison and Lieutenant-General Angus Campbell, the commander of the Abbott government's military campaign, dubbed Operation Sovereign Borders, to prevent boat arrivals, responded to questions about boats being forced back by saying they would not comment on "on-water operations."

These remarks reinforced the extraordinary secrecy and military atmosphere surrounding the government's anti-refugee policy. Boats could be fired upon, towed out to sea or refused rescue, all in the name of "border protection." This regime is designed not just to deter asylum seekers but also prevent public scrutiny of the criminal measures taken to stop them seeking protection in Australia, as they are entitled under international law.

There is fundamental bipartisan unity on this reactionary objective. The Labor opposition's responded to Morrison's boasts by insisting that the previous Rudd government had already succeeded in stopping refugees by deporting all arrivals to detention in remote Pacific island camps in Nauru or Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Manus Island.

Labor's immigration spokesman Richard Marles told the media: "The reality is that boat arrivals reduced by 40 percent in the month after the PNG arrangement was put in place. There is absolutely no question that Labor in government was responsible for getting the upper hand."

Just as the campaign for the September 7 election featured a contest between Labor and the Liberal-

National Coalition to produce the most punitive anti-refugee policy, since the election there has been a fight to claim credit for repelling asylum seekers, accompanied by a cover-up of what is happening to the victims of the new regime.

Like the Labor government, the Coalition insists that no refugees will be allowed to enter Australia by boat, no matter how desperate their circumstances. In a display of utter contempt for asylum seekers, Morrison declared: "It does not matter if you're an ethnic Hazara, a stateless Rohingya, whether you have an education or not, whether you are male, female, accompanied, unaccompanied, child or adult, the policy is the same and it will not change."

For his part, Lieutenant-General Angus Campbell insisted that while five boats arrived during October, carrying 339 people, "none ... will come to Australia." The military commander provided a bare glimpse of the scale of the removals to Nauru and Manus. Last week, 76 people were transferred to "offshore processing centres"—44 to Manus and 32 to Nauru. As of Friday morning, there were 1,137 detainees in Manus, 591 in Nauru and 2,184 in facilities on Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean.

Most are being housed in overcrowded conditions, including in military-style tents, in hot tropical weather. Asked to explain how the official capacity at Manus suddenly rose from 600 to 1,200, Morrison was equally blunt, stating: "[T]he majority of our offshore processing accommodation is in tents and that's what people can expect to find."

The government is openly using indefinite detention in these shocking conditions to coerce refugees into giving up their asylum applications. General Campbell boasted that since Operation Sovereign Borders commenced a month ago, 67 people had "voluntarily

returned to their country of origin” from the offshore camps.

Likewise, the Coalition government is prolonging Labor’s regime of keeping detainees in indefinite limbo by delaying any processing of their refugee claims. During the week, Morrison’s spokesman confirmed an *Australian* report that only one refugee application had been determined in Nauru since the Labor government started sending asylum seekers there a year ago. “There is no timetable yet for when likely decisions are expected,” he emphasised.

The government’s determination to block any public knowledge of the plight of detainees was highlighted when two women complained to ABC reporters on October 24 through a fence at the Darwin airport detention facility about the conditions inside the camps. Several days later, they were removed to Christmas Island.

A number of detainees who spoke to the ABC had been transferred from Christmas Island for medical treatment. They said they did not want to return there because it was overcrowded, there were not enough toilets and people had to line up for hours to get meals.

While Morrison denied that detainees were transferred offshore for speaking to the media, he pointedly added: “It has been long-standing policy of both Coalition and Labor governments that media are not given access to detainees.”

Morrison has instructed his department to refer to asylum seekers as “illegal” arrivals, a term he used throughout last Friday’s briefing. It is not illegal under Australian or international law to claim asylum. The 1951 Refugee Convention recognises a right to flee persecution, and refugees arriving in Australia have committed no crime under domestic law.

Nevertheless, they are detained indefinitely without charge for exercising what is a fundamental democratic right. More than 12,000 asylum seekers remain incarcerated within Australia, including in remote camps at Weipa in Queensland, and Curtin and Leonora in Western Australia. Another 2,800 are in slightly modified “community detention.” About 21,000 more are living outside detention on bridging visas that deny them work rights, consigning them to poverty on welfare payments that are less than unemployment benefits. Among the detainees are hundreds of children, including 58 babies born in detention during 2012-13.

The government has yet to release its foreshadowed plans to strip all asylum seekers of legal appeal rights, and force them to work for welfare payments—another policy designed to drive them to leave the country. Those eventually granted refugee status will be restricted to temporary protection visas, denying them any security of residence and preventing them from reunited with their families.

Like the Labor government, the Coalition insists that its regime will permit the entry of more refugees who apply through official channels, but this quota is limited to 13,700 a year—a tiny fraction of the millions of people trapped in refugee camps overseas, especially in the Middle East and Africa.

Last month, the government said it would admit only 500 refugees from Syria, even though the Syrian war—which both the Coalition and Labor fully back—has killed more than 100,000 people and driven around 6.5 million others from their homes. According to the UN, more than 2 million Syrian refugees have fled into Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, where they are mostly housed in squalid sprawling tent cities.

Having helped create this catastrophe in Syria, just as they did in backing US-led interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya before it, successive Australian governments have increasingly sought to shut the door to those fleeing the consequences.

Around the world, refugees are dying in ever-greater numbers—whether in the Mediterranean Sea, the Sahara Desert or the waters between Indonesian and Australia—as a result of being shut out by governments. The Australian political establishment is in the forefront of this barbarism, demonstrating its readiness to tear up all the democratic rights of the working class, including one of the most essential: to flee oppression and live freely with full political and civil rights.



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