

Australian government to dump refugees in Cambodia

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Another draconian measure is being prepared against asylum seekers. The Australian government is preparing to consign refugees to Cambodia, one of the world's most impoverished countries.

No details have been released, yet plans are clearly well underway to ship up to 1,100 asylum seekers, currently detained in an Australian-controlled camp on the remote Pacific island of Nauru, to be “re-settled” in Cambodia, after they have been officially recognised as refugees under the UN refugee convention.

Immigration Minister Scott Morrison confirmed last week that Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government has been secretly conducting negotiations with the Cambodian People's Party government of Prime Minister Hun Sen on a formal memorandum of understanding.

Morrison claimed that a final deal was still some time away, but Ouch Borith, Cambodia's secretary of state in the Foreign Ministry, said a Cambodian government study of the proposal had been completed and Phnom Penh would be delivering a counter-offer to Canberra in the coming days.

In radio interviews, Morrison vehemently defended the proposal, claiming that refugees would not be compelled to go to Cambodia. If they refused, however, he declared, that would indicate that they were not “genuine” refugees. He also reiterated that they would “never” be allowed to live in Australia. In reality, the Nauru detainees will have no real choice: either they remain on the tiny island, with a population of just 10,000, no jobs and few services, or be flown to Cambodia.

Once in Cambodia, the refugees will be forced to live in squalor, or become sweatshop labour, including in the unsafe, low-wage garment industry. According to UN figures, 45.9 percent of Cambodia's population

lives in “multidimensional poverty,” while an additional 21.4 percent are vulnerable to “multiple deprivations.”

This scheme marks a further escalation of the anti-refugee regime established by the previous Australian Labor government, which reopened detention camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island during 2012 in a punitive bid to stop people seeking refuge in Australia. Under Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Labor also sought to negotiate a similar refugee dumping deal with impoverished East Timor and, when those talks met opposition in Timor, signed an agreement with Malaysia to send 800 asylum seekers there.

Labor's “Malaysian solution” was ultimately thwarted when the High Court ruled the scheme unlawful because it violated elementary rights under the international refugee convention and other human rights treaties. Morrison claimed that the Cambodian plan would avoid that fate because none of the asylum seekers would be sent direct from Australia, but instead from Nauru.

News of the Cambodian plan broke last week when Hun Sen posted a message on Facebook that “Cambodia will sign a memorandum of understanding with Australia in order to help the refugees, who are already interviewed, in the near future.” His revelation that Australia had already interviewed some of the refugees indicated that the arrangements were well advanced. According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, some family groups among the Nauru detainees have been told that their future is in Cambodia.

No doubt, Hun Sen's government will seek a substantial financial payoff from Canberra. It also wants new sources of cheap labour, especially for the garment industry, which employs around 350,000

workers in 500 factories and produces around 80 percent of the country's exports, generating about \$US6 billion a year.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop commented: "They're looking for people who are able-bodied who would be able to contribute to Cambodian society."

In January, Hun Sen's government launched a violent military crackdown to break a 15-day strike by 300,000 garment workers. The repression left four workers dead, more than 20 seriously injured and at least 23 detained, facing serious criminal charges. The strikers were demanding an immediate doubling of the minimum monthly wage from \$80 to \$160, still far short of the \$283 living wage calculated by the union and human rights group, Asia Floor Wage Alliance.

The prospect of Australia sending refugees to Cambodia has provoked criticism in Phnom Penh. Virak Ou, chairman of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, accused Australia of exporting its own problem.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) appears ready to rubberstamp the scheme, despite it being clearly designed to block refugees from seeking protection in Australia, in violation of the international refugee convention. The UNHCR originally condemned the agreement, but apparently shifted its ground after talks with Canberra. The UN's Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Flavia Pansieri said the UN would be willing to provide "support to ensure that standards are met."

Australian Labor leader Bill Shorten, a former Gillard government minister, refused to comment on the Cambodian scheme, claiming the details were unclear, thus leaving the way open to endorse it. Interviewed on the ABC, Labor's immigration spokesman Richard Marles repeatedly declined to criticise the plan.

Despite this, and Labor's record, the Greens are holding out the illusion that the plan could be blocked in the Senate. Greens' immigration spokesperson, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young said: "I'm not sure what the Labor position would be, but I would hope that, given the experts' opinion about how disastrous it would be from a human rights front, from a human care front, that they wouldn't accept dumping vulnerable refugee families in Cambodia."

The Greens propped up the last Labor government as it resorted to ever-more draconian policies in a bid to

outdo the then Liberal-National opposition led by Tony Abbott in demonising asylum seekers and declaring that it would "stop the boats" carrying people trying to get to Australia.

While the Greens purport to oppose the bipartisan policy of totally barring access to asylum seekers, they are committed to the underlying framework of national "border protection" that denies the basic democratic right of refugees, and all working people, to live and work where they choose, with full civil and political rights.



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