

Australian minister whitewashes Sri Lankan repression

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Australian Immigration and Border Protection Minister Scott Morrison was feted by the Sri Lankan government and media as he briefly visited the country this week in an attempt to justify handing refugees back into the arms of the regime they were fleeing.

Morrison posed for press photographs alongside President Mahinda Rajapakse on the deck of one of the two naval patrol boats that the Australian government has given to the Sri Lankan military for the stated purpose of boosting its capacity to intercept and detain asylum seekers.

As the Australian minister heaped praise on Rajapakse's administration, claiming that it had made Sri Lanka "safe," a boatload of 153 Tamil asylum seekers remained incarcerated on an Australian Customs vessel—a cramped makeshift detention ship—at an undisclosed location in the Indian Ocean.

They are still threatened with being pushed onto Sri Lankan naval boats or else being shipped to be detained indefinitely in one of Australia's detention camps, on Christmas Island, Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Morrison has refused to provide any information on the whereabouts or conditions of the passengers.

During Morrison's visit, some Sinhala refugees from the first boatload of 41 forcibly transferred to the Sri Lankan navy earlier in the week sat in a high security prison. Others, released on bail for now, told Fairfax Media of having faced death threats, attacks on their homes, kidnappings and extortion demands for being associated with critics of the Rajapakse government.

Morrison attended a grandiose commissioning ceremony in Colombo of two Bay Class patrol boats donated by Australia. President Rajapakse officiated, accompanied by his defence secretary and brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse, plus a coterie of government

ministers, senior officials and military top brass.

Morrison hailed the "very close cooperation" and "strong partnership" that existed between the two governments and their security forces in stopping refugee boats, and declared that continued collaboration was essential.

Responding, Sri Lankan Navy spokesman Commander Kosala Warnakulasuriya said: "This is another historic day for the Sri Lanka Navy since it strengthens the bilateral ties between the two countries. Moreover it is an evaluation of the active participation of the Sri Lanka Navy in mitigating human smuggling."

Morrison made a secret helicopter dash to Jaffna, the main city in northern Sri Lanka, the Tamil majority region that was devastated during the final months of the Rajapakse government's military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. He told local journalists he was "amazed and impressed by the scale of transformation that's been taking place over the past five years."

Morrison had only met with the Rajapakse administration's handpicked provincial governor, G. A. Chandrasiri, a former senior military officer. He snubbed C. V. Vigneshwaran, the elected chief minister of Northern Province, who was not even told of Morrison's visit. Vigneshwaran represents the Tamil National Alliance, the main party of the Tamil capitalist elite.

Back in Colombo, Morrison contemptuously dismissed reports by refugees from the first boatload of 41 that Australian Customs officials mistreated them as they were being transported to a rendezvous with the Sri Lankan navy. "I find those allegations offensive and reject them absolutely," he told reporters.

One of the asylum seekers, N.A. Nilantha, said

Australian officials acted “in an inhumane manner.” He told Reuters: “They knelt us down, they dragged us, holding our necks... They gave meat for a dog on board while we were given only a slice of bread. When we complained of being sick and having headaches, they said we were pretending. They did not treat us for any of our illnesses.”

Another refugee accused customs officials of barring the detainees from speaking to each other. “In this ship, we were not allowed to talk,” he said. “When we asked for a basin for a baby less than two months old, they did not give us one.”

These accusations provide some indication of the conditions being experienced by the 153 men, women and children illegally detained on the Ocean Protector, an Australian Customs boat that has been equipped to bunk about 150 people.

On returning to Australia, Morrison yesterday ramped up his defence of the Rajapakse government, declaring that it was “offensive” as well as “dangerous, arrogant and indulgent” to oppose people being returned to Sri Lanka.

Bob Carr, the former Labor government’s foreign minister, also accused refugee advocates of indulging in “urban mythology” about Sri Lankan authorities abusing returnees. Carr was a key member of the Gillard government that initiated the practice of deporting refugees en masse back to Sri Lanka.

This bipartisan whitewashing of the Sri Lankan government flies in the face of all the evidence that the persecution of Tamils and Muslims is worsening, not lessening. On the pretext of combatting an LTTE “revival,” Rajapakse’s government has launched a new wave of arrests, while whipping up anti-Muslim violence with claims of potential Islamic terrorism.

This repression is not confined to Tamils and Muslims. It is aimed against the entire working class as struggles develop against the government’s austerity measures and deepening attacks on living standards and basic rights.

Amnesty International this week reported that asylum seekers have faced torture upon their return to Sri Lanka from Western countries. “Torture has been reported in rehabilitation camps, by police and military personnel,” it stated. “In several known cases, Tamils who have been returned to Sri Lanka have faced arbitrary arrest and detention.”

Since an Australian High Court week, during which the Abbott government admitted for the first time that it had intercepted and detained the 153 refugees, the government has rejected an urgent appeal by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for information about the group, which includes about 40 children.

During a Senate committee hearing yesterday, Lieutenant General Angus Campbell, the military commander of the government’s “Operation Sovereign Borders” to repel refugee boats, also refused to answer basic questions about the fate of the 153 asylum seekers, including whether Australian Customs vessels had adequate provisions for children or what their capacity, communications capabilities and supplies were.

In a joint statement, the Sri Lankan and Australian Socialist Equality Parties have urged the working class in both countries, and internationally, to come to the defence of the refugees.



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