

Tamil refugees offloaded into remote Australian detention camp

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After being illegally incarcerated for almost a month on board an Australian Customs vessel—converted into a prison ship—157 Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers have been airlifted, like cattle, to a detention camp at a military base in northwestern Australia.

For four weeks, the refugees—including 50 children—were crammed in a windowless hull, housed in bunks stacked in rows four-high. Husbands and fathers were segregated from their wives and children, except for a three-hour period each day when the detainees were allowed above deck for fresh air.

Now Australia's government will imprison them indefinitely in huts at a barren, partially used, air force base more than 2,200 kilometres away from Perth, the Western Australian capital. The camp was mothballed by the previous Liberal-National government of John Howard following an inmates' riot in 2002, only to be reopened by the ensuing Labor government in 2010.

At Curtin, the refugees will be interrogated, face-to-face, by consular officials from India, the very country they fled about six weeks ago. On top of their detention at sea, during which they were denied the right to seek asylum, this is another fundamental violation of the international Refugee Convention. It prohibits placing refugees back in the hands of the authorities from whom protection is being sought.

Under a still secretive deal struck between the Australian and Indian governments, New Delhi has reportedly agreed to accept the removal back to India of any refugees who have Indian citizenship, and perhaps some Sri Lankan nationals who have been living in southern Indian refugee camps.

Before the questioning process even began, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison declared, without any evidence, that none of the asylum seekers were refugees. Instead, he claimed, they were all “economic

migrants” trying to “illegally” leave India, which he praised as a “safe” and “vibrant” democracy.

Far from being safe, the more than 100,000 Tamil refugees who have fled Sri Lanka to southern India live in overcrowded camps or semi-legally outside them, facing constant harassment. India is also one of the poorest countries in the world, with some 312 million people living in poverty, out of a population of 1.27 billion, according to the World Bank.

Morrison is openly flouting the Refugee Convention, which recognises an elementary right for all asylum seekers to have their situations considered individually by a formally independent process, without discrimination as to the supposedly illegal methods they used to flee persecution.

Compounding the breach of international law, Morrison further insisted that none of the detainees would be permitted to apply for asylum—a right that is recognised in a series of UN covenants, not just the Refugee Convention.

Similarly, Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared none of the 157 would ever be allowed to settle in Australia. “Don't get on a boat to come illegally to Australia,” he said. “Because even if you get here, you won't stay here.”

These remarks are not just contraventions of international law; they also express the government's contempt for domestic legality, because a challenge to the treatment of the detainees is currently before the High Court, Australia's top court.

That case originally sought to prevent the asylum seekers from being handed over to the Sri Lankan navy—the fate that befell another boatload of 41 refugees, who are now imprisoned or facing criminal charges in Sri Lanka for trying to escape the country.

Now that the 157 detainees have been locked away at

Curtin, the High Court case has been altered to challenge their unlawful detention at sea and demand compensation for the imprisonment. The case was scheduled for hearing by the full court next week, but has now been postponed, possibly for weeks, leaving the refugees detained in the meantime.

In line with the military secrecy that the government has maintained on every aspect of its Operation Sovereign Borders to repel refugee boats, Morrison refused to say what will happen to the refugees whom India refuses to take back, or who refuse to go to India. He indicated that they may end up being detained indefinitely in one of Australia's "offshore" detention camps on Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

Morrison ratcheted up the anti-refugee demagoguery that now dominates Australia's political and media establishment, accusing the Labor Party and the Greens of being "surrender monkeys" who would have "had the water taxi out there in a heartbeat," supposedly to rescue and bring the refugees ashore.

Labor's foreign affairs spokeswoman Tanya Plibersek and Greens leader Christine Milne had merely criticised the government for leaving the detainees at sea, rather than taking them straight to Christmas Island, an Australian detention camp in the Indian Ocean.

The previous minority Labor governments of Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd, which were kept in office by the Greens, sought to outdo Abbott's Coalition in imposing anti-refugee measures, including by reopening the detention centres at Curtin, Nauru and Manus Island.

In fact, Morrison declared that he would ensure that the asylum seekers would never live in Australia, despite being landed at Curtin, by relying on measures introduced by the Labor government. Labor's legislation excised the entire Australian continent from the jurisdiction of the Migration Act, which formally permits applications for asylum.

Morrison's confirmation of a deal with India followed a 72-hour flying visit to New Delhi by him to meet Indian Home Affairs Minister Rajnath Singh. Morrison reportedly offered to increase intelligence sharing with India. His visit also coincided with an announcement by Australian Trade Minister Andrew Robb that Australian uranium exports to India were expected to commence soon.

Prime Minister Abbott is preparing to visit India in September for talks with new Prime Minister Narendra Modi that will include India's push to expand its uranium imports from Australia, which has about a third of the world's recoverable uranium resources.

Here too, the Abbott government is continuing the policies of the previous Labor government. In 2012, backed by the United States, Labor overturned a ban on uranium exports to India, a nuclear-armed state, which has long refused to rule out using nuclear weapons, potentially against Pakistan or China.

The steps by the Abbott government toward expanding uranium sales to India underscore the geo-strategic calculations that are being pursued as an integral aspect of the military operations to intercept refugee boats in the Indian Ocean.

As part of its unconditional support for the Obama administration's "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific region to confront China, the Australian government is working closely with Washington to strengthen military and security ties with both India and Japan, which are regarded as key participants in encircling and preparing for war against China.



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