

Australia to offload refugees in Cambodia

Mike Head
27 September 2014

Australia's illegal and inhumane treatment of refugees reached a new low yesterday when the Abbott government signed a formal agreement to dump refugees in Cambodia, one of the poorest countries on earth.

Australian Immigration Minister Scott Morrison flew to Phnom Penh to initial a still largely secret Memorandum of Understanding with Cambodian Interior Minister Sar Kheng, and seal it with a champagne toast.

Under the pact, an unknown number of refugees, starting with those detained on the remote Pacific island of Nauru, will be consigned to Cambodia. Kheng insisted that only a few families would be involved initially, and that Cambodia reserved the right to decide the intakes. Morrison, however, declared that the arrangement was “uncapped,” meaning there is no limit on its potential size.

Morrison boasted that the scheme would help eventually clear the Australian-funded detention centres on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as at August 31 there were 1,084 detainees on Manus Island and 1,233 in Nauru.

Morrison and Kheng claimed that any removals of refugees to Cambodia would be “voluntary,” but those incarcerated on Manus and Nauru have no real choice. Their only other option is to languish indefinitely in over-crowded locations, with Morrison reiterating that they will “never” enter Australia.

Asylum seekers on Nauru staged protests against the “cruel deal,” saying they would refuse to move to Cambodia. “No one will go,” one told the *Guardian*. “We don't want special treatment, we only want justice, we only want to be treated fairly. To be thrown away like rubbish, this is not fair, this is not what Australia should do.”

Neither government released the agreement's full

terms, but according to a report in the *Australian*, Canberra will only provide “settlement support”—basic needs, daily subsistence, health services, and education or vocational training—for 12 months. In what amounts to a bribe to the Cambodian government, Australia will give an additional \$40 million in “development aid” over the next four years.

This pact expands on the punitive anti-refugee regime of the previous Labor government, which reopened the Nauru and Manus camps and sought similar agreements with East Timor and Malaysia. By seeking to stop all refugees reaching Australia, these arrangements flout the international Refugee Convention, which recognises the right to apply for refuge and forbids governments from *refouling* (deporting) asylum seekers to face possible persecution.

Although Cambodia, like Australia, is a signatory to the convention, Prime Minister Hun Sen's government also has a record of rejecting refugees, including by sending refugees back to the countries that they fled, such as China, Vietnam and North Korea.

The Refugee Convention was first adopted in 1951 to attempt to prevent the horrors of the 1930s, when refugees, including Jews fleeing the Nazis, were turned away. Today the advanced capitalist countries are again shutting their doors to asylum seekers, most of whom are fleeing from wars or brutal regimes that are the direct result of the US-led military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria.

While Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government declares that it has “stopped the boats”—an illegal policy objective shared by the Labor opposition—more refugees than ever before in history are seeking asylum around the world. By closing their borders, the Western powers are necessarily consigning many to death. This month alone, over 700 refugees from the Middle East and Africa are feared to have drowned in catastrophic shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea.

UNHCR commissioner Antonio Guterres said the UN refugee agency was “deeply concerned” by the precedent set by the Cambodian scheme. “This is a worrying departure from international norms,” he said. “We are seeing record forced displacement globally, with 87 percent of refugees now being hosted in developing countries.” Guterres, however, merely called on the Australian government to “reconsider its approach.”

Protests also erupted outside the signing ceremony in Phnom Penh, which was shielded by heavily-armed riot police, who physically attacked demonstrators. Around 100 protesters, including families evicted from their homes to make way for real estate developments.

The protests, led by the Independent Monks Network of Social Justice and Federation of Cambodian Intellectuals and Students, took a distinctly nationalist line, declaring that the poverty-stricken country was unable to look after its own people and should not take in Australia’s refugees.

Opposition leader Sam Rainsy who is notorious for Cambodian chauvinism, against Vietnamese people in particular, made a similar statement. “Cambodia is not a place to resettle refugees, because the local people in this country cannot lead decent lives,” he said.

There is certainly acute poverty and oppression in Cambodia. Even by official estimates, 37 percent of children under the age of 5 suffer from chronic malnutrition. But by criticising the government for letting in foreigners, Rainsy is seeking to channel social and class tensions in xenophobic directions.

Ever since the Cambodian scheme was first mooted in May, the Australian Labor Party opposition has signaled its readiness to embrace it. Yesterday, Labor’s shadow immigration minister, Richard Marles, only called for more details to be divulged, and chided Abbott’s Liberal-National Coalition for opposing Labor’s “Malaysian solution” in 2012.

The detainees in Nauru were also protesting against new legislation unveiled by Morrison on Thursday designed to extinguish any hope that they, or any other boat arrivals will ever live in Australia. A far-reaching 112-page bill makes even more explicit the repudiation of the Refugee Convention by successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, particularly since the turning away of the 433 Tampa refugees in 2001.

Among other things, the bill explicitly authorises the minister to disregard Australia’s “international obligations,” as well as “natural justice,” in ordering the interception of refugee boats and the removal of their passengers anywhere in the world. It replaces the Refugee Convention’s already narrow definition of “refugee” with an even more restrictive one; institutes a “fast track” process for denying asylum claims; and creates temporary “Safe Haven Enterprise Visas” that can force refugees already in Australia to work in remote regions of the country.

The bill seeks to retrospectively legalise and institutionalise the treatment of 157 Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers who were imprisoned like cattle on an Australian naval ship on the Indian Ocean for nearly a month during July in an ultimately unsuccessful bid to transport them back to Sri Lanka or India.

Mining millionaire Clive Palmer’s Palmer United Party (PUP) struck a deal with the government to back the legislation. An editorial in yesterday’s *Australian* praised PUP’s “crucial support” for the bill, describing the consignment of refugees to “designated regional areas” as a “humane and practical measure.”

This sums up the utter contempt of the ruling elite and its political servants for fundamental legal and democratic rights, and their determination to lock the doors to asylum seekers—unless they can be exploited as new sources of cheap labour.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact