

Australian government sends refugees back to Vietnam by naval warship

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This week, as up to 1,400 refugees perished in the Mediterranean Sea, information began to emerge of a criminal operation by the Australian government to repel asylum seekers and hand them back to the government they were fleeing.

Canberra's increasing violation of the basic legal and democratic rights of asylum seekers during the past 15 years has reached a new level. Over the past two weeks, a boat carrying 46 people from Vietnam was intercepted, its passengers were imprisoned on board an Australian naval warship and they were forcibly offloaded at a Vietnamese port.

Details of how the refugees were detained and handed over to Vietnamese authorities remain hidden behind the wall of secrecy that Australian government has thrown around "Operation Sovereign Borders"—a military mobilisation to stop all refugees reaching Australia.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton still refused to confirm or deny that the expulsion even took place, claiming the need for military operational secrecy. However, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) confirmed that HMAS Choules, a naval landing ship, had completed its week-long mission to transfer the asylum seekers back to Vietnam.

A source told the ABC the detainees were offloaded in the southern port city of Vung Tau last Friday. The asylum seekers, who were thought to have left Vietnam in March, were seized by the navy earlier this month before their boat could reach Australia. Their detention and interrogation on board a warship was designed to be terrifying and intimidating, as was their transfer into the hands of the Vietnamese authorities.

The Liberal-National Coalition government blatantly contravened the international Refugee Convention, which prohibits any government from refouling

(deporting) asylum seekers to face the danger of death, imprisonment or other forms of persecution. This marks an escalation of the bipartisan drive, pursued by successive Australian governments over the past 15 years, to prevent all refugees from entering the country.

Both Labor and Coalition governments have used the military to turn back boats, and deported refugees back to the countries they fled, but this is the first time that a naval vessel has been used to ship asylum seekers back to the government from which they escaped.

The repudiation of international law was so flagrant that it drew criticism from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which has acceded to previous Australian measures to block asylum seekers. The UNHCR sought details of the "screening process" to which the refugees were subjected on board the naval vessel, supposedly to determine that they were not genuinely fleeing persecution.

UNHCR spokeswoman Vivian Tan said people seeking asylum needed to be properly and individually assessed for protection in an environment where they feel they can safely explain their situation. "We are concerned that the group wasn't screened and assessed in a way that's fair and effective, that somehow their lives may be at risk," she said.

The fate of the 46 people is not known. A report on Vietnam published last year by the US-based Human Rights Watch reported "a severe and intensifying crackdown on critics, including long prison terms for many peaceful activists whose 'crime' was calling for political change."

Immigration Minister Dutton indicated that a "very strong bilateral" relationship with Vietnam led to a deal for Hanoi to accept the return of the refugees in return for the Australian government not talking about the arrangement. In recent years, Vietnam has been drawn

into the US strategic “pivot” to Asia, which involves Washington and its allies strengthening their military ties to encircle China. The Obama administration has encouraged Vietnam, together with the Philippines, to aggressively pursue territorial claims against Beijing in the South China Sea.

The refoulement to Vietnam went even further than last year’s bid to dump 157 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees back in Sri Lanka or southern India after incarcerating them in an Australian naval ship for almost a month. India and Sri Lanka eventually refused to accept the asylum seekers, who were then transported to the Australian detention camp on the tiny Pacific island state of Nauru.

Australia’s parliament passed legislation last year specifically authorising such operations, giving the government powers to remove refugees to anywhere in the world, even if they face persecution or torture. The legislation explicitly states that an asylum seeker can be removed from Australia “irrespective” of any “non-refoulement obligations” under the Refugee Convention and the Convention Against Torture.

As news of the Vietnam turn-back operation spread, Prime Minister Tony Abbott urged the European powers to adopt similar measures to stop refugees fleeing across the Mediterranean, primarily to try to escape the war, devastation and bloodletting created by the US-led interventions in Libya and Syria.

“The only way you can stop the deaths is in fact to stop the boats,” Abbott said. “That’s why it is so urgent that the countries of Europe adopt very strong policies that will end the people smuggling trade across the Mediterranean.”

Abbott hypocritically claimed to be concerned by the “terrible, terrible tragedy” occurring in the Mediterranean. His government, and its Labor and Liberal-National predecessors, bear direct responsibility for the catastrophe created by repeated invasions and military interventions in the Middle East by the US and its partners, including Australia.

Ever since the first Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991, Washington and its allies have been engaged in endless wars to establish their dominance over the oil- and gas-rich regions of the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa. These wars have shattered entire societies, fomented sectarian conflicts and produced human misery throughout the region.

Abbott was backed by one of his advisers, retired Major General Jim Molan, a former commander of US-led forces in Iraq, who helped develop “Operation Sovereign Borders.” Molan said the Mediterranean deaths highlighted Europe’s “policy incompetence” and cynically declared that countries had a “moral obligation” to control their borders.

In reality, more than 1,000 people have died trying to sail to Australia, like those drowning in the Mediterranean, because Western governments everywhere have increasingly shut their borders to the victims of their militarism and neo-colonial plunder.

Similar pretences of “humanitarian” motives for stopping all refugees reaching Australia, supposedly to prevent them drowning at sea, were pioneered by the previous Labor government to justify reopening the detention centres on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island and trying to consign asylum seekers to Malaysia.

Labor’s current immigration spokesman Richard Marles said he believed Australia may have breached international law, but the Labor government charted that course by detaining refugees indefinitely in hellhole camps and by initiating the “fast-track” processing of Tamil refugees to send hundreds back to Sri Lanka.



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