

Australian government considers removing refugees to Kyrgyzstan

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The Australian government is reportedly considering the poor Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan as a dumping ground for some of the 1,500 refugees imprisoned in its “off-shore” detention facilities.

The Liberal-National government refused to confirm or deny the report, first published in the *Australian*, which also stated that Kyrgyzstan was just one of a number of other former Soviet Union states being considered, along with countries in Africa and South America.

There has been mounting public opposition to the bipartisan policy of blocking all asylum seekers travelling by boat from reaching Australia. In response, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and his government are scrambling to find places to relocate refugees held in the detention facilities on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked country that borders Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and China. It was socially devastated by the restoration of capitalism during the 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and now ranks among the 50 poorest countries in the world. Its gross domestic product (GDP) per person, according to International Monetary Fund data, is just \$3,261 per annum, compared to \$46,550 in Australia.

The *Australian* reported that Kyrgyzstan was chosen particularly for the “resettlement” of Hazara refugees. Hazaras are an historically persecuted minority, primarily from Afghanistan. They practice Shia Islam and have been the target of numerous killings and other attacks by Sunni governments and extremist forces, notably the Taliban.

As a result of the Australian-backed US-led occupation of Afghanistan, which has exacerbated the sectarian conflicts, many Hazaras have fled the Middle

East. About 30,000 Hazara refugees are in Australia, many on temporary bridging visas, with numerous others in detention centres, both within Australia and offshore.

If Hazaras were removed to Kyrgyzstan they would be the victims of further abuse and discrimination, including by the country’s predominantly Sunni government.

Australian governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, have a sordid history of attempting to take advantage of impoverished states by strong-arming them into taking refugees detained by Australia. Kyrgyzstan would be just the latest.

The previous Labor government was rebuffed by East Timor before striking a deal with Malaysia, only to have that agreement outlawed by the Australian High Court because it would have involved an egregious breach of the international Refugees Convention.

Most recently, a deal was announced with Cambodia in May, accompanied by offers of \$15,000 payments and other benefits to refugees on Nauru who opted for “resettlement” in that country.

Only four refugees have taken up the offer, with one soon requesting to be returned to his country of Myanmar, after seeing the conditions in Cambodia. Cambodia is also ranked in the 50 poorest countries internationally, with a GDP per person of just \$3,275 per annum.

The Australian government has reportedly paid \$US55 million to Cambodia for the arrangement, but despite numerous visits by government officials, no more refugees have been settled there.

After the Cambodia fiasco, the Australian government began talks with the Philippines at the beginning of October, reportedly offering a \$150 million deal over five years. However, President

Benigno Aquino III announced on October 27 that the Philippines had “no capacity” to resettle Australian refugees.

Aquino told a media conference in Manila: “If this proposed agreement ... is not one of just being in a transit point but actually relocating these people we think we are not in a capacity at this point in time to afford a permanent residency to these people.”

The Turnbull government also announced that all refugees processed on Manus Island would have to live in Papua New Guinea (PNG). On October 23, Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton said “persons transferred to PNG, who are found to be refugees, will be resettled in PNG. No-one will be resettled in Australia.”

The Labor Party, which introduced mandatory detention of asylum seekers in 1992 and reopened the Nauru and Manus Island centres in 2012, with the avowed intent of “stopping the boats,” has condemned the Coalition government from the right. Shadow immigration and border protection minister Richard Marles reiterated Labor’s support for permanently blocking access to Australia, criticising the government for not finding another country in which to offload refugees.

“Were the policy to end and refugees resettled in Australia then asylum-seeker vessels would again set sail from Java and many asylum-seekers would inevitably die,” Marles stated. “A third country option for the refugees on Nauru must be found, yet Malcolm Turnbull’s government has dropped the ball.”

The claim by both Labor and Liberal-National to be motivated by a humanitarian desire to stop deaths at sea has always been a fraud, above all because the closing of borders and erection of a military blockade around Australia compels asylum seekers to undertake dangerous voyages. But the repeated efforts by successive governments to deport refugees to countries where they are likely to face destitution and violence has made the hypocrisy all the more obvious to broad layers of working people.

During the past month, numerous protests have been held in Australia, including rallies by more than 1,000 health professionals outside hospitals last month, declaring their refusal to send any refugee children patients back to Nauru or Manus Island if their health would be endangered.

In an attempt to politically capitalise on this outrage, the Greens have ridiculed the Kyrgyzstan option and called for “genuine refugees” to be admitted to Australia. Party leader Senator Richard Di Natale said: “This is ridiculous that we would look for any option other than the most logical, humane and economically responsible option which is to ensure we process people here in Australia and, if they are found to be genuine refugees, that they are settled here.”

It was the Greens, however, that kept the previous minority Labor government in office as it adopted the “Malaysian Solution” in 2011, then reopened the Nauru and Manus Island camps with the avowed intent of permanently barring entry to Australia of all asylum seekers arriving by boat.

While the Greens insist that they oppose the bipartisan policy of totally blocking access to refugee boats, they are just as committed as the rest of the parliamentary establishment to the entire 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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