

Indonesian government discusses offering Australia an island to detain refugees

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11 December 2015

Confronted by rising numbers of refugees trapped in Indonesia as a result of Australia's "Operation Sovereign Borders" regime of forcing asylum seekers back to the country, President Joko Widodo's government is discussing with Canberra the establishment of an Australian-financed refugee detention island.

Co-ordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs Luhut Panjaitan, who visited Sydney last month, told the *Jakarta Post* and *Straits Times* newspapers he had early talks with Australia on setting up such an island facility. Ministry spokesman Agus Barnas told NZ Newswire that the plan was "still under discussion" and was first floated under previous president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Luhut, an ex-general, told the *Jakarta Post* last month: "We can discuss the possibility of allocating an island [for the refugees]. But Australia is required to entirely finance it."

According to the newspaper, the motivation for such discussion was the more than 13,000 refugees and asylum seekers now living in the impoverished provinces of Aceh, East Nusa Tenggara and West Nusa Tenggara. Luhut claimed that the asylum seekers living in these areas could live "sufficiently" due to aid from the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), creating envy among the local residents.

Luhut said there was a precedent for such a plan—a camp operated by the UNHCR from 1979 to 1996 on Galang Island near Batam on the Riau Islands, approximately 50 kilometres south of Singapore. During that time around 170,000 refugees, the majority from Cambodia and Vietnam, were imprisoned there while they were "processed" by the UNHCR, before being eventually relocated to countries such as Canada, Australia and the United States.

The waiting period for relocation could range from 12 months to many years, with as many as 15,000 refugees at one time living in squalor. The Indonesian Mobile Brigade, a paramilitary national force, policed the camp and violence from guards or other refugees was a daily threat. Suicides through hanging or self-immolation were common.

Luhut said Indonesia wanted to avoid these problems by having Australia and other countries agree to take refugees promptly. However, the reality of Australia's "turn back the boats" regime and increasingly restrictive policies internationally is that any Indonesian camp would again detain asylum seekers indefinitely, just as currently is the case in the Australian-financed and controlled camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

Luhut insisted that Australia should end its "tow-back" regime by which Australian naval vessels intercept refugee boats and force them back to Indonesia or offload their passengers onto other boats to be sent back. But Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has repeatedly stated that this policy will not change.

The refugee island scheme has evidently been discussed at the highest levels in Indonesia. Special advisor for legal affairs at the Office of Presidential Chief of Staff Lambock V. Nahattands told the *Jakarta Post* that the proposal should be meticulously planned. "If we agree to put them in a special area, there should be a guarantee from Australia that they will not be there indefinitely," he said.

This concern is not for the plight of the refugees, but for Indonesia being left to bear the burden of enforcing lengthy detention. For these reasons, Mahfudz Siddiq, chairman of an Indonesian parliamentary defence and foreign affairs commission, urged the government to be

cautious with the proposal. Referring to Papua New Guinea's experience at Manus Island, he said: "Once a detention centre is open here, it will become a long-term issue for us even if Australia is fully funding the project."

After the *Jakarta Post* published his interview, Luhut denied the government was actually offering Australia an island and reiterated that any plan hinged on Australia ultimately agreeing to accept some refugees. Clearly, there is frustration in the Indonesian government over the anti-refugee policies pursued by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments in Australia.

Largely as a result of Australia's illegal turning away of refugees, the numbers stranded in Indonesia have risen substantially. According to the UNHCR the number of persons of concern in Indonesia rose to 13,110 by August, compared to 2,894 in 2010.

In the most recent incident, 16 asylum seekers nearly drowned off the coast of Indonesian West Timor after being intercepted by the Australian navy, offloaded onto another small boat and forced to sail toward Indonesia.

Both Immigration Minister Peter Dutton and Labor's immigration spokesperson Richard Marles refused to comment on the *Jakarta Post* reports, displaying a bipartisan readiness to embrace a refugee island proposal.

The Greens' spokesperson on refugees, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, praised the idea. She said it "could be a step towards a genuine regional solution" and that "we need to establish a fair and efficient system where people's claims are assessed before they're forced to get on a boat in order to reach Australia." In order to meet Indonesia's requirements, and to give the plan a humanitarian gloss of eventually allowing refugees into Australia, she said: "For this to work, Australia must be willing to take the people who are found to be in need of protection in Indonesia."

While the Greens posture as advocates for refugees they are unequivocally committed to maintaining the framework of national borders, which is the backbone of the "border protection" regime. The suggestion of a refugee island is right in line with the policy of the Greens. At a recent public meeting, Hanson-Young advocated the establishment of "assessment" stations in Indonesia to determine whether asylum seekers were

"genuine" refugees according to the narrow official definition under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

This would effectively be an alternative form of the mandatory imprisonment in "offshore processing" centres, similar to those on Manus Island and Nauru.



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