

Few refugees leave Australian detention camps under US “swap” deal

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This week 25 refugees detained for years in an Australian-run camp on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea left for the US under what is essentially a cruel swap deal struck with the Obama administration last November. Another 29 detainees from a similar facility in Nauru are expected join them.

The refugees, heavily-vetted for months by US authorities, are drawn from the more than 2,000 men, women and children imprisoned indefinitely in the two remote Pacific island camps. They are being flown to be “resettled” in unknown US locations, with no guarantees of any permanent residency or basic civil rights, in return for unspecified numbers of refugees being flown to Australia from US camps in Central America.

On both sides of the Pacific, refugees who have fled oppression and persecution are being transported thousands of kilometres from the countries in which they sought asylum, and from the families and communities many wished to rejoin.

Much secrecy surrounds all the arrangements, including the vetting process applied by the US government. Interviewed on television, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said: “It’s all subject to the United States’ very, very thorough vetting, their extreme vetting.”

When US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials began the vetting interviews in May, Reuters reported that interviewees had to swear an oath to God to tell the truth before a gruelling six-hour interview. Refugees were asked in-depth questions about their family, friends and associates, as well as any interaction with Islamic State.

In a document given to refugees imprisoned on the islands, the DHS detailed a stringent medical check, including chest x-rays, to assess their “public health

significance.” The document made no mention of where those refugees selected would be living or if they would be eligible for US citizenship.

Instead the document indicated they would be passed to a non-government resettlement agency which would provide minimal housing, medical and job seeker support for 30 to 60 days. While they would “have the legal right to work,” they were “expected to seek employment and become fully self-sufficient as soon as possible.”

With no guarantee of citizenship, these refugees could remain in a similar situation to those living in “community detention” in Australia—constantly monitored by the government with the ongoing threat of deportation. Even if they were able to become US citizens, they would still be barred from living in Australia.

In 2013, the Greens-backed Australian Labor government enacted legislation to prevent all asylum seekers who arrived by boat from ever settling in Australia. The current Turnbull government attempted to extend this draconian legislation last November to block asylum seekers even entering the country. This legislation has yet to be put to the Senate.

No official information has been provided about how or where the refugees will be consigned in the US. Australian Immigration and Border Control Minister Peter Dutton maintained the wall of secrecy around all the government’s anti-refugee measures. “I repeat that we will not be providing running commentary on this matter,” he said in a media release.

The arrangement was a quid pro quo, in which the Australian government would take an undisclosed number of refugees languishing in refugee camps in Costa Rica. The Obama administration set up these camps ostensibly as a humanitarian response to the

increasing numbers of people fleeing gang-related violence in Central America. Their real purpose was to curb the influx of refugees in the US, by funnelling them into camps in which they could be “heavily vetted” by the DHS.

In line with his reactionary anti-immigrant policy, President Donald Trump branded the deal as “stupid” and “disgusting” in a leaked phone call with Turnbull in late January. Turnbull assured Trump he had no obligation to take a single refugee. “Every individual is subject to your vetting,” Turnbull said. “You can decide to take them or to not take them after vetting.” Turnbull also indicated that the vetting process would “comply” with the anti-Muslim ban that Trump had sought to impose via an executive order just days earlier.

Twenty five of those currently approved for transfer are reportedly from Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma. Somalia is on the Trump administration’s latest travel ban list, making refugees from that country especially vulnerable in the US.

As of September 20, there were still 928 men detained on Manus Island and 1,135 detainees on Nauru, including 169 children. They face ongoing degrading conditions.

On Manus Island, the conditions are worsening. Earlier this year, the Turnbull government announced the closure of the detention centre by October 31. The PNG Supreme Court ruled last year ruled that the facility violated the country’s constitution, which bars deprivation of liberty without charge or trial. Hundreds of asylum seekers are being transferred, under the threat of police violence to less secure facilities, from where they can be easily left permanently in the impoverished country.

In Australia, both Labor and the Greens welcomed the swap deal. Labor’s immigration spokesman Shayne Neumann, expressed “gratitude” to the US for accepting the refugees. Greens immigration spokesman Nick McKim said: “We wish the people heading to the United States the very best.”

Both criticised the current Liberal-National government for turning Manus Island and Nauru into indefinite detention camps. But it was the last Greens-backed Labor government that reopened the camps in 2013, forced thousands of refugees into them and enacted legislation to prevent them ever settling in

Australia.

Likewise, Ian Rintoul, a leader of the pseudo-left group Solidarity and the Refugee Action Coalition (RAC), said the resettlement news was good for those approved. He told reporters the refugees were “very happy at the possibilities of having a safe life and rebuilding.”

In reality, the Trump administration, like the Australian governments and governments around the world, is demonising refugees and seeking to make them scapegoats for deteriorating living conditions and growing social inequality.

The life of the handful of refugees being resettled in the US will be anything but safe and economically secure.



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