

Australian government returns refugees to Sri Lanka

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According to *Colombo Page*, an online news site, the Australian government repatriated 29 asylum-seekers to Sri Lanka last Thursday. The group had reportedly arrived on a boat the previous day near Learmonth Beach on the northern coast of Western Australia.

The incident is the latest example of the criminal policy, introduced by the previous Labor government, of forcibly expelling Sri Lankan refugees from Australia, without even the pretense of considering their claim to asylum.

Successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National, have continued the policy in defiance of warnings by the UN and humanitarian organisations that Sri Lankan refugees, who are often from the Tamil minority, face imprisonment, persecution and torture at the hands of the Colombo government.

The 29 refugees were reportedly from the southern Sri Lankan towns of Matara, Hambantota, Hakmana and Tangalle. They included two children, aged 12 and 15 years old, who were travelling with their father and uncle. The group was apparently arrested by Australian Border Force officers on arrival, then placed on a chartered flight to Colombo the following day.

A spokesperson for Immigration Minister, Peter Dutton, told the *Australian* newspaper that they could not comment on the plight of the group, or even confirm that they had arrived in Australia.

The spokesperson cited the government's policy of not commenting on "operational matters" relating to the actions of border force and naval personnel, on the grounds that the "interception" of asylum-seekers is a matter of "national security." This means that the number of refugees attempting to arrive in Australia, their treatment by the authorities and subsequent plight, is treated as a state secret, and hidden from the population.

Significantly, the deportation of the refugees occurred the same day that the UN committee against torture requested that the Australian government halt the scheduled deportation of a Tamil refugee facing imminent removal to Sri Lanka.

The refugee's lawyer, Alison Battisson, had warned that the asylum-seeker faced the prospect of "a range of torture practices, including rape," if deported. The Sri Lankan government alleges that he had assisted the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Sri Lanka's decades-long civil war formally ended in 2009, with the government and the military defeating the LTTE. At the conclusion of the conflict, and in subsequent years, the military carried out mass roundups of Tamils and political opponents, along with extrajudicial killings and widespread torture.

In the 2015 elections, the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, which prosecuted the war, was ousted in a US-backed regime-change operation aimed at curtailing growing Chinese influence in the country.

Despite its attempts to don a "democratic" mask, the new government of President Maithripala Sirisena has maintained a virtual police-military occupation of war-ravaged sections of eastern and northern Sri Lanka, and has continued the persecution of Tamils.

Faced with a deepening political crisis this year, the government has deployed the military against striking workers and has promoted communal hostilities towards the islands' Tamil and Muslim minorities.

Last month, Associated Press (AP) published an investigative report, based on the medical and psychological evaluation of 50 Tamil refugees in Europe, and interviews with them. The men said that prior to fleeing the country, they had been subjected to horrific abuse by the Sri Lankan authorities, who accused them of being Tamil militants.

One man told AP he had been kidnapped by five security personnel, and taken to a “‘torture room’ equipped with ropes, iron rods, a bench and buckets of water” and with blood on the wall. Another said he was “held for 21 days in a small dank room where he was raped 12 times, burned with cigarettes, beaten with iron rods and hung upside-down.”

The abuses documented by AP occurred between early 2016, and mid-2017. The reports tallied with the interim findings of a UN Working Group on arbitrary detention, released Friday, which noted numerous allegations of “harassment, intimidation and threats” against Tamils and their advocates, along with “ill-treatment and torture to extract confessions.”

In September, the Australian High Court heard the appeals of two Sri Lankan asylum-seekers against their imminent deportation to Sri Lanka. The former Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard in 2012 began the process of removing over 650 Sri Lankan refugees to Colombo, and denying them the right to seek asylum.

The High Court upheld the policy, which is a violation of international law, despite the sitting judges conceding that the two refugees could face imprisonment on return, and appalling conditions, including “torture, maltreatment and violence.” The court noted that all Sri Lankan refugees deported from Australia since November 2012 had been arrested, held on remand and charged under the country’s immigration legislation.

The persecution of Sri Lankan refugees is one aspect of a brutal “border protection” program defended by the entire official political establishment. This has included consigning hundreds of refugees who arrived in Australia by boat to concentration camps in the Pacific Islands, another policy reintroduced by Labor.

Last month, the Australian government “closed” its refugee detention centre on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG), because that country’s supreme court ruled that their confinement was unconstitutional. Despite their protests, the refugees were deprived of food and water and forced to leave the camp to unsafe “alternative accommodation.”

The Australian government’s close collaboration with Colombo, against Sri Lankan refugees, is also bound up with geopolitics. The US and Australia view Sri Lanka as strategically critical to their aggressive

policies in the Indo-Pacific region, including preparations for war against North Korea and China.

Successive Australian governments have directly enabled the crimes of the Sri Lankan authorities. In a program initiated by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, the Australian Federal Police trained and equipped Sri Lanka’s Criminal Investigation Department, a unit notorious for torture and political kidnappings.

During a Sri Lankan visit in November to “celebrate 70 years of bilateral relations” between the two countries, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull signalled even closer collaboration in the persecution of Tamil refugees, and opponents of the Colombo regime. Turnbull declared his commitment to “our work together to combat trans-national crime, particularly people-smuggling”—the derogatory term used to refer to refugees attempting to flee by boat.



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