Australia: Biloela residents protest at pre-dawn removal of Tamil refugee family

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In less than 24 hours this week, more than 60,000 people joined a petition launched by residents of a small rural town asking that a family of Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers, summarily seized by the Australian Border Force (ABF), be allowed to remain in Australia.

At 5am on March 5, ABF officers, accompanied by police and private Serco guards, arrived at the family's home in the central Queensland town of Biloela, effectively tearing the children out of bed. The husband and wife, Nadesalingam and Priya, along with two-year-old Kopiga and nine-month-old Dharuniga, were given just 10 minutes to pack, before being taken to an airport and flown to a detention centre in Melbourne, over 1,600 kilometres away.

This Tuesday night, despite the fight launched by the town's people, the family was about to be deported via Perth airport, on the other side of the country, to Sri Lanka, where official mistreatment of Tamils, particularly those forced to return, remains endemic. They were pulled off the plane at the last minute after a legal intervention.

This dramatic development further underscores the determination of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government, led by Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, to deport the family, in violation of their basic legal and democratic rights. The family was about to be removed from the country even though Priya still had a court appeal pending in May against the government's refusal of her asylum visa application.

Ben Miller, a Tamil Refugee Council spokesman, said that during the March 5 raid Nadesalingam "was separated from his wife and children, and Priya, in her van, was separated from her children and not allowed to sit with them, despite the children being obviously distressed."

Similar raids may be taking place across the country. The chilling events in Biloela have only come to public attention because of the fight taken up by the town's people.

The pre-dawn raid was conducted despite Priya's bridging visa expiring by just a single day and despite the couple being informed that an extension would be granted.

The family later reported that, once imprisoned in Melbourne's Broadmeadows detention centre, they were ordered to sign documents in which they supposedly approved their "voluntary removal." They were threatened with being denied access to a phone, and the forcible deportation of each family member separately, if they did not sign.

A Home Affairs Department spokesperson flatly defended the raid, saying the family's refugee visa applications had "been comprehensively assessed by the department, various tribunals and courts" and they were "found not to meet Australia's protection obligations."

Nadesalingam and Priya fled to Australia separately in 2012 and 2013, marrying in 2014. Both were escaping the aftermath of the 26-year-long civil war in Sri Lanka, in which thousands of Tamils were killed before the war ended in May 2009 with a military occupation of the country's north and east.

Nadesalingam allegedly has links to the former separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Suspected associates of the LTTE face persecution by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in Sri Lanka, including harassment, imprisonment, torture and death.

Despite this, Nadesalingam's application for protection was repeatedly rejected, forcing the family into an increasingly stressful and insecure position.

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They made a home for themselves in Biloela, a town with less than 6,000 residents, and had lived there for four years. Nadesalingam worked at the Biloela meatworks.

The community was outraged over their brutal removal. Angela Fredericks, a resident, launched a change.org petition. Fredericks wrote: “Our community is not ready to let this family go. They love living and contributing to our society. We want them here.” She added that the couple “were settled in Biloela after fleeing torture and suffering in Sri Lanka.”

Other residents voiced their anger on social media. Katrina Mears wrote on Facebook: “Omg, they are such a beautiful family and integrated so well into Biloela. This is a shame and a travesty.” Michelle Horrocks wrote: “Omg, these are just a lovely family, have them in my prayers for a speedy and safe return to our community here in Biloela.”

Rex Gruspe, who lived next door to the family, said they were good neighbours. “We happened to see each other when I [was] going to work and Priya was taking the children for a walk. Nadesh was always happy to help when he saw me doing DIY in the house.”

Mike Tye, a former neighbour and work colleague of Nadesalingam, wrote: “He is one of many hard-working refugees striving to provide for their family. These are the sort of people who deserve to become citizens.” He said the family “were shy, but friendly and generous people who would share what little they had.”

This response cuts across the frequent media depiction of rural Australians as being “xenophobic” or “racist.” The residents insist that the family has a right to live in Australia, in direct opposition to the anti-refugee policies created and maintained by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments.

This raid is not, however, an isolated incident. It is part of a series of political developments that has laid the groundwork for mass deportations. In 2012, the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government set up an agreement with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse for the deportation of all Sri Lankan asylum seekers who flee to Australia by boat, initially sending back 700.

Since then, hundreds of Tamil refugees have been forcibly returned to Sri Lanka, including 46-year-old Santharuban Thangalingam, who was deported last month, despite warning he would face persecution due to his links to the LTTE. He has faced harassment from the CID since his return.

Last March, the current Liberal-National government, which has deepened Labor’s policies, announced that as many as 30,000 asylum seekers in Australia could be cut off welfare if they failed to complete complex visa documents within 60 days. This month, the government ended the status resolution support service (SRSS), a form of income support of about $478 a fortnight, on which about 12,000 asylum seekers rely, leaving them facing destitution.

Some Labor and Greens politicians are cynically trying to distance themselves from their parties’ role in creating the legal and political conditions for the Biloela raid. On Facebook, Andrew Miles, a federal Labor MP, said reports of the raid were “deeply disturbing.” Greens Senator Andrew Bartlett released a media statement condemning the raid. But the Greens kept the Gillard government in office as it summarily deported hundreds of Sri Lankan refugees in 2012–13.

Similar shocking scenes are occurring internationally, as capitalist governments shut their doors to the millions of people, mostly fleeing US-led wars or terrible poverty and exploitation. In the United States, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are daily grabbing workers and families from their homes or off the streets.

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