

Australia proposes visas for white South Africans

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The Australian government, notorious around the world for blocking refugee boats and indefinitely detaining asylum seekers, is pushing ahead with plans to grant humanitarian visas to selected white South African farmers.

After first announcing on March 14 that the farmers “deserve special attention and we’re certainly applying that special attention now,” Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton this week declared he is considering “several” such visa applications.

Around the world, more than 65 million people are facing closed borders as they flee persecution and wars, many as a result of military interventions by the US and its allies, including Australia. Nearly a million Rohingya refugees are currently living in squalor and danger in tents and huts in impoverished Bangladesh, driven out of Burma by the military supported by the Western-backed government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

While shutting the country’s borders to these desperate people, Australia’s government is moving to grant expedited visas to white South Africans. Dutton last month provocatively declared that the farmers deserved help “from a civilised country like ours,” claiming they face “horrific conditions” of violence and seizures of their land. South Africa called in Australia’s high commissioner to demand an explanation.

Dutton has responded by ramping up his inflammatory remarks this week. He accused the South African government of falsely claiming, for “domestic” reasons, that the Australian government had retracted his comments. “There has been no retractions of my comments or our desire to assess some of these cases,” he told Sky News.

In his original remarks, Dutton insisted that the white farmers were hard workers who “want to contribute to

a country like Australia.” He continued: “We want people who want to come here, abide by our laws, integrate into our society, work hard, not lead a life on welfare.”

In other words, the farmers should be prioritised because, unlike other refugees, they will supposedly “integrate,” be law-abiding and not seek to live on welfare benefits. These remarks highlight the racist character of Australian immigration policy, which features the demonisation of asylum seekers, especially those from Asia and the Middle East, by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments.

Dutton’s remarks recall the “White Australia” policies of the 19th and first half of the 20th century, which barred the immigration of people to Australia based on skin colour. Both Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop defended Dutton’s comments, while hypocritically insisting that Australia’s humanitarian visa program is non-discriminatory.

Bishop denied there was a double standard in Dutton speaking up for white South African farmers, but not Palestinian farmers persecuted by Israel. “What we do in our humanitarian visa program is assess visas on their merits and that’s what Peter Dutton as home affairs minister does every day,” she said.

In reality, Australia’s refugee and immigration policy has long been thoroughly discriminatory, with nearly all visas tied to selecting people on the basis of their wealth, employability, education levels, health status and English language proficiency, as well as their religion.

While handpicking small numbers of people for humanitarian visas, Australia’s bipartisan “border protection” regime violently turns back or imprisons all asylum seekers who try to reach Australia by boat. The

Greens-backed Gillard Labor government reopened the camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island in 2012.

Last week, the UNHCR rejected Dutton's call for special treatment for South African farmers, saying priority should be given to refugees, including children, detained by Australia for years on the remote island of Nauru.

By alleging widespread violence against white farmers, Dutton is echoing sensationalist campaigns by Murdoch media tabloids and right-wing web sites that have made similar calls for the Trump administration and other governments to come to the farmers' "rescue." Former prime minister Tony Abbott quickly backed Dutton, claiming that 400 farmers were murdered over the past 12 months.

According to various sources, including the fact-checking organisation Africa Check, the reports of widespread murders and land seizures are vastly exaggerated. More reliable statistics indicate that there were 84 farm murders in 2017, with 59 victims being white farmers.

This level has not changed significantly over the past two decades. It is part of a wider pattern of killings and home robberies that reflect the immense social and class tensions wracking the country, where the African National Congress (ANC) government has enriched a wealthy capitalist elite while presiding over worsening poverty and inequality since taking office in 1994, replacing the decades-long apartheid regime.

What has changed over the past year is that the increasingly discredited ANC, now led by the multi-millionaire former trade union leader President Cyril Ramaphosa, has desperately sought to revive its electoral fortunes by promising to shift its "land reform" policy to head off discontent.

The overwhelming majority of South Africa's commercial agricultural land, about 80 percent, remains in the hands of 1 percent of the population, nearly all white farmers, except for a small number of wealthy black operators. This is despite the ANC, then led by Nelson Mandela, promising in 1994 that 30 percent of agricultural land would be transferred to black owners by 1999. According to the latest statistics, only about 8 percent of the land has been transferred under the so-called land reform program.

This became a major issue in Ramaphosa's bid last

year to oust his predecessor Jacob Zuma. As a result, two months ago, the ANC backed a motion in the South African parliament to amend the country's constitution to allow for land expropriation without compensation. A parliamentary committee was appointed to report back by August 30 on the proposal, which would require a two-thirds majority in parliament and ratification by six of the country's nine provinces.

At the same time as holding out the promise of land distribution, Ramaphosa assured the financial markets that no "smash and grab" land transfers would be permitted, nor would any harm to the economy. Nevertheless, some wealthy farmers could now face the prospect of having their holdings expropriated.

Dutton, Abbott and others, including Pauline Hanson's One Nation party, are seizing on the South African crisis as part of their efforts to whip up a nationalist and xenophobic constituency domestically. Last month, several hundred people, mostly white South African immigrants, marched through Brisbane, Dutton's home city, demanding support for his offer of visas for farmers, particularly their families and friends.

Some media commentators have touted Dutton as a possible replacement for Turnbull, whose government is showing signs of unravelling. Last December, Turnbull elevated Dutton to the new position of home affairs minister, allocating him vast repressive powers. In effect, Dutton became a "national security" supremo, in charge of Australia's intelligence agencies, immigration department, the Australian Border Force, the Australian Federal Police, "cyber security" and citizenship laws.



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