

Australia: Tamil refugee deported, separated from his wife and baby daughter

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While global attention was focused on the US administration's brutal separation of refugee children from their parents, events in Australia last week highlighted the role of successive governments in deliberately splitting up families as a mean of punishing and blocking asylum seekers.

Malcolm Turnbull's Liberal-National government forcibly removed Thileepan Gnaneswaran, a 30-year-old Tamil asylum seeker, to Sri Lanka under the cover of darkness. He was separated from his 10-month-old Australian-born daughter and his wife, Karthika Gnaneswaran, possibly permanently.

Gnaneswaran was issued with a deportation notice on July 13 and removed less than four days later, in the middle of the night of July 16–17. He was one of 18 Sri Lankan asylum seekers deported via a charter jet, hired by the Australian government.

They were flown to Bandaranaike airport, near the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo, where they were immediately turned over to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). Gnaneswaran was then interrogated, before being released from custody last Wednesday night. He is expected to face court this coming Wednesday on unknown charges.

The CID has a long-documented history of torturing Tamil refugees who are deported back to Sri Lanka, particularly those who are allegedly associated with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Gnaneswaran had fled Sri Lanka after being captured by security forces and tortured until he falsely confessed to being a member of the LTTE. He arrived in Australia by boat in June 2012, and was placed in "community detention" on a bridging visa. After his application for refugee protection was rejected earlier this year, he was imprisoned in Sydney's Villawood Detention Centre.

His future wife, Karthika, arrived on a different boat in September 2012 and was similarly placed in community detention. The pair met and married in 2016, before having their daughter last September.

After Gnaneswaran's removal, Karthika spoke to the Australian media to express her devastation. "We are all so depressed; my daughter is very upset, she misses her father," she said. "My husband is not with us and I have no idea when we will see him again. My daughter needs her father in her life. But we are apart."

The separation may indeed be permanent as Karthika and the baby girl were issued with "safe-haven enterprise" visas two days before Gnaneswaran received his deportation notice. This type of visa explicitly denies the right to family reunion, by not allowing visa holders to sponsor family members to come to Australia. As Karthika faces persecution if she returns to Sri Lanka, she cannot leave Australia and may never see her husband again.

The rapidity of Gnaneswaran's deportation was designed to prevent any legal intervention or injunction. He was removed despite Karthika, along with supporters, organising a demonstration on July 16 in front of the detention centre where he was incarcerated.

The government also defied the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). On July 15, an appeal was made to the UNHCR, requesting its intervention against Gnaneswaran's removal. Two days after his deportation it emerged that the UNHCR had formally requested that the Australian government not deport him.

At a press briefing in Geneva, UNHCR spokeswoman Andrej Mahecic, said the deportation contravened "the basic right of family unity, as well as the fundamental principle of the best interests of the child."

Mahecic added that Australia's policy of "offshore processing and deterrence" had led to the separation of refugee families since 2013. "Asylum-seekers who arrive to Australia by sea have been prevented from reuniting with their loved ones in Australia, including spouses, parents and children."

The UNHCR representative stated: "This latest incident goes beyond a refusal to reunite families, to instead actively and indefinitely separate them."

The treatment of Gnaneswaran and his family is akin to the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy by which children have been ripped away from their parents. While public protests in the US and an international outcry saw Trump rescind the order, more than 2,000 children remain separated from their parents, held in cages or detention centres throughout the US.

These practices have been pioneered in Australia. Thousands of families have been denied the right to reunite through the policies of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments. In 2012, the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government issued refugee visa bans for all asylum seekers reaching Australia by boat, forcing them onto temporary bridging visas. These visas not only robbed families of the right to family reunion, it forbade them from working and gave them a below-poverty level allowance of just \$270 a week.

In August that year the Gillard government moved to strengthen geo-strategic ties with the authoritarian Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse by beginning the mass deportation of refugees to Colombo, initially sending back around 700.

In December 2012, under the fraudulent banner of combatting "people smuggling," Bob Carr, then Labor's foreign minister, announced that the Australian navy would capture and return any Sri Lankan asylum seeker fleeing to Australia by boat.

Last September, Australia's supreme court approved the forced removal of asylum seekers to Sri Lanka, even though it was proven they face appalling conditions of imprisonment, including "torture, maltreatment and violence."

The current Sri Lankan government of President Maithripala Sirisena, whose administration has been presented as less ruthless than Rajapakse's, has continued these arrangements.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of Sri Lankan refugees

have been either captured or deported. In March this year, the Australian Border Force seized a family of four and they were on the brink of deportation, but it was stalled by a powerful campaign waged by the residents of Biloela, the small rural town where the family lived.

Across the globe, refugees are being scapegoated for the deteriorating social conditions inflicted by the corporate elites and the governments that serve them. Workers are witnessing barbaric scenes, in the United States, throughout Europe and in Australia, of families being ripped apart, and men, women and children dying at sea or being detained indefinitely. As living conditions continue to worsen, these policies will be turned against the working class more broadly.



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