

Australian government rushes to deport Vietnamese refugees

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Australia's brutal treatment of asylum seekers was again thrown into the spotlight on August 26 when a small fishing vessel, carrying 17 Vietnamese men, ran aground in northern Queensland.

The passengers waded to shore and ran into the dangerous Daintree rainforest in an effort to escape capture. The Queensland police launched a widespread manhunt for the men, establishing roadblocks. After initially arresting 12 of the men, police captured all 17 by August 31.

The rounding up of the men occurred in the same week as the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents carried out a workplace raid in North Texas, arresting 160 immigrant workers. Across the globe, immigrants and refugees are being treated as criminals.

Australia's Department of Home Affairs has refused to provide any information about the detained Vietnamese men or their fate, in line with the wall of secrecy erected around the militarised "Operation Sovereign Borders" to repel all refugee boats.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton vowed to ensure swift deportation of the group. This violates the international Refugees Convention, which gives refugees the right to apply for asylum and prohibits their return to face persecution in the country they fled.

"We have been very clear that we won't allow people who arrive illegally into our country to settle in this country," Dutton told reporters on August 27. "People will be deported from our country at the first available opportunity."

Dutton refused to provide any details, saying it was "an operational matter." He declared that the men would be deported, regardless of any "processes" required to do so. "People who seek to come by boat will never settle here permanently and we're going

through the processes now and we will make sure that that's the outcome," he stated.

The Liberal-National Coalition government's rush to deport the men, which was echoed throughout the corporate media, was in stark contrast to the sympathy shown by local fishermen and other residents.

Two of the refugees were found in the crocodile-invested mangroves by fishermen, who picked them up on their boat. Justin Ward and Barry Preston told reporters they gave the men a tour and took them crab fishing because this was their "last chance at freedom."

Eventually the two fishermen reluctantly handed the men over to the authorities. Ward recounted: "We got back to the boat ramp and they were like 'which way' and we said 'sorry.' I was genuinely very sorry but there was not much I can do or I'd get into trouble."

The refugees were quickly flown to Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean, some 4,300 kilometres away. The island contains one of Australia's most notorious immigration detention centres, from where refugees and other people denied visas are deported or sent to Australia's prison camps on Nauru or Manus Island, Papua New Guinea.

Immediate deportation was the fate of a similar Vietnamese vessel that the Australian Navy seized in April 2015. Its 46 passengers were forcibly transported by a naval vessel to a Vietnamese port. As in the current case, all information about the refugees and their deportation was hidden from public view.

In 2015, Human Rights Watch (HRW) later reported that the group of 46 faced persecution or imprisonment in Vietnam. Four of them fled a second time, before UN authorities in Indonesia granted them refugee status. The latest 17 refugees are likely to face a similar fate.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and

his party are accelerating economic “reforms,” turning Vietnam into a cheap labour platform for foreign investors. The pro-market *doi moi* policy, which has been pursued since 1986, has turned Vietnam into one of the most unequal countries in the world. A tiny layer at the top enjoys most of the country’s wealth, while the majority of the country’s 93 million population live in poverty. The average annual income in the country is just \$US2,200.

Australia’s treatment of Vietnamese asylum seekers also involves geo-strategic calculations, bound up with US preparations for war against China. Successive Australian governments have committed to backing the escalating American confrontation with Beijing, which now includes trade war measures by the Trump administration.

In 2015, Dutton indicated that a “very strong bilateral” relationship with Vietnam led to a deal for Hanoi to accept the return of refugees. In recent years, Vietnam has been drawn into the US conflict with China. Washington has encouraged Vietnam, together with the Philippines, to aggressively pursue territorial claims against Beijing in the South China Sea.

Australia’s military repulsion of refugees is a policy supported by the opposition Labor Party. In fact, Queensland’s Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk attacked the Liberal-National government from the right. She called for a full investigation into how the fishing vessel breached border security. Palaszczuk accused Dutton of “taking his eye off the ball” during his bid to replace Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister.

Dutton vowed to step up military operations along the country’s northeastern coast. “Clearly there’s been a failing when surveillance has not worked as it should in identifying this vessel or allowing this vessel to get as close to the coastline as it has, but we’ll work through all of that,” he said.

Dutton repeated the government’s claim to have “stopped the boats.” He insisted this was “the first vessel; the first people-smuggling venture in over 1,400 days.” The term “people-smugglers” has been used to justify the criminal “border protection” regime of successive Australian governments, Coalition and Labor alike.

In reality, “people-smugglers” are typically poor Indonesian, Vietnamese or Sri Lankan fisherman whose passengers are forced to resort to their services in order

to seek asylum because of Australia’s illegal shutting of its borders to refugees.

As for “stopping the boats,” an unknown number of vessels has been intercepted or sunk over the past decade. Asylum seekers have been seized by the Australian navy and sent back to sea, in some cases without enough food and fuel to reach their destination.

After the Coalition government took office in 2013, Immigration and Border Protection Minister Scott Morrison, who is now the prime minister, launched Operation Sovereign Borders, combining military force with military secrecy.

Far from opposing this regime, the Labor Party has claimed credit for “stopping the boats,” pointing to its decision in 2012, when it was last in government, to reopen the Nauru and Manus camps, where thousands of refugees have been incarcerated indefinitely.



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