

Government declares child refugees will not remain in Australia

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About 40 refugee children and their families reportedly have arrived in Australia in recent weeks, after being medically transferred from the tiny Pacific island of Nauru, where successive Australian governments have indefinitely detained asylum seekers.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton last week indicated that the remaining 27 children on the island—many of whom have severe mental health problems after years of trauma and detention—would be evacuated by the end of the year. However, Dutton declared that none of the families would be permitted to stay in Australia.

In effect, they may receive limited medical treatment but will be subjected to equally cruel detention onshore until they can be removed from the country, either by “resettlement” or forced transfer back to the states they fled.

Rather than signalling a relaxation of the inhuman incarceration of innocent people, the move is a cynical bid to placate a public outcry over the barbaric treatment of children, while reinforcing the underlying “Operation Sovereign Borders”—the use of the military to repel all asylum seekers.

The Liberal-National Coalition government is continuing to challenge the right of Australia’s Federal Court to order such medical evacuations, even in the direst of circumstances, in which children suffer “resignation syndrome,” refusing to eat.

Australia’s imprisonment of refugees in concentration-style camps, whether “offshore” or “onshore,” has provided a precedent for the measures announced last week by US President Donald Trump to arrest and imprison all the desperate asylum seekers who manage to enter the US.

This has been a longstanding bipartisan assault on the basic democratic right to flee persecution and seek

asylum.

* In 1992, the Keating Labor government first introduced the mandatory detention of refugees arriving by boat.

* In 2001, the Howard Liberal-National government imposed the “Pacific Solution” of forcibly transporting asylum seekers to remote islands in former Australian colonies—either Nauru or Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

* In 2012, the Gillard Labor government reopened the Pacific camps and vowed that no detainee would ever be allowed to settle in Australia—the policy being enforced by Dutton and the Coalition government today.

The current temporary transfers have come after numerous medical professionals, risking possible jail time, exposed the brutal conditions on Nauru. In August, medical staff and social workers blew the whistle on the treatment of detainees, above all the children. They reported widespread instances of abuses, self-harm and high risks of suicide.

The Australian government, supported by the Nauruan government of President Baron Waqa, which depends on Australian financial assistance, has made every effort to suppress the revelations, in order to hide the abuses from public scrutiny.

Against the backdrop of the 18-member Pacific Island Forum held on Nauru, which concluded on September 5, Waqa made clear that all reports of the treatment inflicted on the detainees would be blocked. A New Zealand reporter who interviewed a refugee was arrested.

Backed by the Australian government, Waqa’s regime blocked the court-ordered medical transfers of numbers of detainees, both during the forum and in the following weeks. The Australian Border Force, a para-

military body overseeing the capture and imprisonment of asylum seekers, endorsed the Nauruan government's stand, saying that any criticism of it would affect their "working relationship."

Undoubtedly with the close collaboration of the Australian authorities, the Waqa government began the deportation of medical professionals who exposed the horrors inflicted on the children. On the October 17, Dr Nicole Montana was deported after allegedly taking a photo of a child, a practice that had been banned in order to censor images that expose the conditions on the island.

Montana's deportation came just one week after Médecins Sans Frontières health workers were forced to leave the island. Nauru's government said the charity's essential psychological and psychiatric services were "no longer required."

Despite decades of anti-refugee rhetoric by the corporate media and both the Coalition and the Labor Party, there is widespread sympathy for asylum seekers. A recent survey conducted by YouGov Galaxy reported that nearly 80 percent of respondents wanted the children off Nauru, while 61 percent of young respondents said the government had a moral obligation to find permanent accommodation for them.

Nevertheless, the Coalition and Labor have reiterated their unity, insisting that none of the children ever be permitted to settle in Australia. Last month, in the lead-up to a crucial by-election in the Sydney seat of Wentworth, Prime Minister Scott Morrison canvassed finally accepting a longstanding offer from New Zealand to take 150 refugees, but only on the proviso that legislation in both Australia and New Zealand barred them from ever travelling to Australia.

Labor's immigration spokesman Shayne Neumann signalled the Labor Party's willingness to support the plan. Last week, however, Home Affairs Minister Dutton ruled out such an arrangement, claiming it would encourage "people smugglers" to offer voyages to asylum seekers.

A similar bill to bar all asylum seekers from entering Australia for life, even as tourists or to visit relatives, was proposed in 2016, but it was eventually dropped amid doubts about its legality.

At a speech at the Lowy Institute last month, Labor leader Bill Shorten vowed that Operation Sovereign Borders would be "fully resourced" under a Labor

government. He claimed, however, that "stopping the boats was never meant to leave people languishing in indefinite detention."

That is a lie. When the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government, in which Shorten was a key minister, reopened the prison camps on Nauru and Manus Island in August 2012, it insisted that lengthy detention was essential to deter refugees. The following year, the Rudd Labor government specifically decreed that no detainee would ever live in Australia, effectively consigning them to indefinite detention.

The Greens have indicated their support for a New Zealand resettlement bill and said they would not agree to a lifetime travel ban. While occasionally posturing as refugee advocates, the Greens fundamentally agree with the entire framework of restrictive national borders, and back the mandatory detention of all asylum seekers to vet so-called non-genuine refugees. They call for the closure of the offshore detention facilities, but only to be replaced by UN-run assessment centres in impoverished countries, such as Indonesia.



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