

Australian government releases refugees on limited bridging visas

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Since January 20, the Liberal-National Coalition government has released into the community approximately 120 refugees who were imprisoned in cramped hotels across Australia. Around 100 remain detained.

After years of incarceration in the government's "offshore" detention camps on remote Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, these asylum seekers were transferred to Australia for urgent medical treatment under the later-repealed February 2019 "medevac" bill. They had been locked in the hotels for up to two years.

Those released have not been granted permanent visas. Instead, they have been placed on six-month bridging visas, so the threat of deportation looms over their heads. The government has provided virtually no support for those released, only in some cases paying for three or six weeks of temporary accommodation.

The refugees now have to rely on volunteer groups and charities for accommodation, food and clothing. They are expected to find work in order to survive. Under conditions of ongoing mass unemployment due to the coronavirus pandemic, many face the risk of homelessness, extreme poverty and/or exploitation by ruthless employers.

While the releases end the immediate suffering of incarceration, they constitute a temporary manoeuvre that maintains the political establishment's bipartisan "border protection" regime, under which no asylum seeker who tries to reach Australia by boat is permitted to settle in the country.

There are also still more than 1,500 refugees in onshore immigration prisons and approximately 300 in "offshore" detention.

The opposition Labor Party and the Greens hailed the "medevac" bill as permitting a more "humane"

treatment of refugees, but it did nothing to stop their indefinite imprisonment. Instead, it allowed for doctors to apply for their transfer to Australia for medical treatment under narrow and specific circumstances.

The bill was repealed in December 2019, leaving about 200 refugees stranded. In February 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government began forcing them into hotels. Photos soon emerged of the squalid conditions they faced, including dirty rooms and bedbugs.

Typical of those released is a family of four who were imprisoned for more than a year in a hotel in Darwin, the Northern Territory capital. Originally fleeing from Iran, the family was first imprisoned on Nauru for more than seven years.

Reza Golmohamadian and his family were recently accepted for resettlement in Canada but had been waiting in Darwin as Reza's wife and daughter both needed medical treatment. The room in which they were imprisoned was roughly 3x3 metres with bunk beds. Reza's wife, due to her medical conditions, could not climb up the bunk bed and so had to sleep on the floor.

With their release the refugees face a new form of detention. The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) interviewed Ethiopian refugee Betelhem Tebubu, who has been living on six-month bridging visas for four years. She told SBS that every six months the immigration department would remind her of the visa's limitation by temporarily detaining her.

"They used to send us a message saying bring your medication, food, and water because you are [going to be] detained all day." She would be forced into the office "for eight hours, because they locked the door. Even if we wanted to go to the toilet, we had to go with security."

Tebubu commented: “We are free, but we are in a big detention on a bridging visa. I can walk, but my mind is not free... I never ever buy something for my house, because I don’t know what they’re going to do tomorrow. My mind never settles.”

The limited releases cut across several court cases filed by the refugees alleging that their detention is unlawful and that instead of receiving adequate medical treatment, their health has worsened. In many cases, they are seeking immediate release and damages for the months of unlawful detention.

The asylum seekers’ incarceration has been so traumatic that some have applied to be flown back to Nauru or Papua New Guinea, despite the poor conditions there.

A federal court judge, Geoffrey Flick, said the situation was “disturbing.” A “picture” was emerging in which Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton was “not taking any steps at all to give effect to a request made by someone in detention for removal until this court intervenes.” Flick said the government should consider compensation.

Dutton has declared that the releases are for financial reasons. Speaking to 2GB radio in January, Dutton said: “It’s cheaper for people to be in the community than it is to be at a hotel or for us to be paying for them to be in detention.”

Various Labor and Greens politicians have made statements welcoming the releases, while criticising the Coalition government. Queensland state Labor Multicultural Affairs Minister Leanne Linard said releasing people “into the community with the current lack of support verges on cruelty.”

Such posturing by Labor and the Greens cannot hide their own roles in the criminal persecution of refugees. It was the Keating Labor government that, in 1992, first introduced the regime of mandatory detention for all asylum seekers arriving by boat.

In 2012, the Gillard Labor government, which was propped up in office by the Greens, reopened the offshore facilities on Nauru and Manus, thus creating the conditions for the cruelty inflicted on tens of thousands of refugees ever since.

All refugees and workers internationally should have the basic right to live and work wherever they want. They should be provided with the highest possible medical treatment. This is an essential part of the fight

for a unified struggle by the working class worldwide against capitalism and for the socialist reorganisation of society. Those refugees still imprisoned, in Australia, in offshore detention or on temporary bridging visas in community detention, should be released immediately and afforded full citizenship rights.



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