

Australian government abandons citizens infected with COVID-19 in India

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A discriminatory and anti-democratic ban on Australian citizens returning from India supposedly elapsed today. In reality, the government is continuing the callous blockade by preventing the repatriation of citizens who have tested positive to COVID-19 or who are a close contact of an infected person.

The policy is plainly homicidal. Citizens with a potentially deadly disease are being denied their right of return, guaranteed under international law. They are being condemned to seek treatment in India's hospital system, which has been overwhelmed by a coronavirus tsunami that has seen confirmed daily infections of well over 350,000 and 4,000 officially-recorded fatalities per day.

The ban—condemned as illegal by human rights organisations and civil liberties organizations—was imposed early this month. Based on draconian provisions in the Biosecurity Act, it was accompanied by explicit threats from Health Minister Greg Hunt that the government would prosecute anyone who sought to circumvent the blockade, with fines of up to \$66,000 and as many as five years in prison.

To damp down widespread anger, the government claimed that the ban was temporary, and repatriations would begin today. Those mealy-mouthed statements have been exposed as lies. It is now clear that the government has no intention of aiding the vast majority of the 9,500 Australian citizens in India, more than 900 of whom are classified as vulnerable. Some 173 are unaccompanied children.

On the first repatriation flight today, almost half the scheduled 150 passengers were denied the right to travel. A reported 42 tested positive to the coronavirus and another 31 were classified as their close contacts. Only 80 people were repatriated, and the next flight is not scheduled until May 23, more than a week away.

The government does not intend to provide any medical assistance to Australian citizens who have COVID in

India. Australia's High Commissioner to India, Barry O'Farrell, declared merely it was "unfortunate" that so many citizens had been barred from the flight.

O'Farrell, a longstanding Liberal Party politician, said those barred would have to "deal with the COVID that they have, or continue to isolate to prove that they don't have COVID." In other words, they are on their own.

The figures from the first flight indicate that the travel ban, over the past fortnight, has contributed to a major spread of coronavirus among Australian citizens in India. In March, the positivity rate of passengers returning from India was 3.5 percent. For those scheduled to fly today, it was 26 percent.

If a similar rate of infection exists among the entire Australian population in India, then more than 2,500 citizens are afflicted with the disease. And if the rate holds for those classified as vulnerable, more than 250 of that cohort would currently be infected. That is, the Australian government has already increased the likelihood of its citizens being infected by COVID, and now is gambling with their lives.

The tragic scenes of seriously-ill people in India unable to find treatment and dying outside hospitals have been viewed with horror by the world's population. In addition to a massive shortage of beds, the country has insufficient supplies of oxygen and other basic medical infrastructure. In an indication of the criminal indifference of the Australian ruling elite to this disaster, today's repatriation flight arrived in India with just 1,056 ventilators and 60 oxygen concentrators that the Australian government had pledged in aid.

It is unclear what medical treatment, if any, the Australian citizens infected with COVID will be able to find in India. The country does not allow dual nationality. People from India who have become Australian citizens have been compelled to forgo the rights associated with Indian nationality. They are likely to be forced to seek

treatment in private facilities, if they can afford it. But those too are stretched to breaking point.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sunny Joura, one of those blocked from the flight, bluntly stated: “If I die, the Australian government will be responsible.” Joura travelled to India in May 2020, to see his terminally-ill father. Many of the Australian citizens in India who have spoken to the media similarly travelled to the country to be with elderly and ill relatives.

Like tens of thousands of other Australians, Joura has been prevented from returning, after two private flights he booked before the travel ban was imposed were cancelled.

Joura, who is at heightened risk because he is middle-aged, suspects he was infected in an Indian hotel that is part of the repatriation process. He demanded that the Australian government “get your act together please, get more quarantine facilities.”

Medical experts have called on the government to repatriate all citizens, including those who are COVID-positive, and establish purpose built quarantines. Associate Professor Adam Kamradt-Scott, a global health security expert, told the *Age*: “We should be bringing them home, full stop. The risk is that they will succumb to the illness and die.” He added: “I’m probably angrier than I have been in a decade about how our government is treating our own citizens with regards to this.”

The government has refused to improve quarantine facilities. Aside from the Howard Springs centre in the Northern Territory, which has a capacity of just 2,000, returnees are compelled to quarantine in private hotels. The hotels are not equipped to prevent airborne transmission of COVID, and have been staffed by low-paid, casual employees who are frequently forced to work several jobs to make ends meet. The hotels have been the source of some 17 “leaks” of the coronavirus in Australia over the past six months.

The government has insisted that the hotel system has “worked well.” In a tacit admission that this is not the case, it has mandated a safe infection level of just 2 percent in the hotels, citing that as a reason to deny COVID-positive citizens in India their right to return.

The Labor Party opposition has bemoaned the absence of purpose-built quarantines and issued weasel words of concern over the plight of citizens stranded in India. But throughout the pandemic, Labor has functioned as a “constructive” opposition, largely marching in lockstep with the Liberal-National government.

In his reply to the 2021–22 budget this week, Labor leader Anthony Albanese said nothing about what a Labor

government would do to increase quarantine capacity and safety. Moreover, Labor-led state administrations have played a central role in implementing the hotel quarantine system.

The plight of citizens in India underscores the erosion of basic democratic rights, including those associated with citizenship. It also exposes the fraudulent character of claims that relatively low infection rates in Australia are the result of a more humane or scientifically-minded governance than abroad.

In reality, the Australian ruling elite, like its counterparts internationally, has subordinated the health and lives of ordinary people to the dictates of corporate profit.

The crisis of citizens in India coincides with a renewed push to complete the “reopening” of the Australian economy, after virtually all safety restrictions have been abolished already. Speaking for the financial elite, a task force at the University of Sydney yesterday issued a report, demanding the opening of international borders, and government policies that will force ordinary people to “live with the virus.”

Australia’s former deputy chief medical officer Nick Coatsworth today echoed this call. He defended the Indian ban, before declaring that it was necessary to dispense with the “false idol” of eradicating coronavirus transmission. “[W]e need to come to terms with the idea that we cannot, nor do we need to, ride this one out in an eliminationist bunker,” he wrote.

Coatsworth denounced “hardcore activist doctors,” associated with the “most extreme views [which] tolerate a zero-risk approach to any COVID-19 infection in a healthcare worker and misuse the legal tenet of the ‘precautionary principle’ as a proxy for the infinite elimination of risk.”

This is the same line of letting the virus spread, to boost the profit-making activities of the corporate elite, that has led to catastrophic levels of death and disease the world over.



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