

Australian government ban on citizens returning from India claims lives

Oscar Grenfell
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An anti-democratic and racist ban imposed by the Australian government, blocking its own citizens seeking to return from the coronavirus catastrophe in India, is claiming victims with a Sydney man dying in a Delhi hospital last Sunday.

The tragic news came as Prime Minister Scott Morrison admitted this week, for the first time, that there are more than 11,000 Australian citizens stranded in India who want to leave. His Liberal-National Coalition government had previously given hazy estimates of around 9,000 in that dire plight. Those earlier figures were accompanied by assertions that 900 of the citizens were classified as “vulnerable,” meaning they would be at significant risk of succumbing to COVID-19 infection.

The new total figure of citizens trapped in India means it is likely that there are more than a thousand in the vulnerable cohort. The government has given no indication of how many of them have been infected or hospitalised, and it is not even clear that such tallies are being kept. The 2,000 or so people who were not previously included in the official figures have presumably been given no assistance, even of a token character, by the Australian authorities.

Hundreds, or even thousands, may already have contracted a potentially-deadly disease, under conditions in which their ability to access any treatment, amid the breakdown of India’s hospital system, is in doubt.

The death of the Sydney man, Govind Kant, was announced by his family and reported in the press earlier this week. Kant’s passing has provoked substantial anger on social media, especially from Australia’s large Indian community. Thus far, however, not a single corporate publication has published an editorial or prominent comment on the significance of his death. Labor and the other opposition parties have not made any great issue of the tragic fatality.

The muted reaction from the political and media establishment is aimed at covering for the Morrison government.

Kant’s death was not an accident or the result solely of the

lethal characteristics of COVID-19. He was the victim of an Australian government policy that was all but guaranteed to result in death. The callous government blockade on citizens returning from India amounts to criminal negligence of an almost homicidal character. If the actions of a private citizen so blatantly resulted in a fatality, the question under discussion would be whether they should be charged with murder or manslaughter.

Kant’s death followed increasingly urgent demands from medical experts for the government to lift the blockade. Two days before his passing, 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.”

On the same day, Sunny Joura, another Australian citizen stranded in India, bluntly declared: “If I die, the Australian government will be responsible.”

The government has flatly rejected all of the warnings, declaring that its blockade is “proportional” and “appropriate.”

In comments dripping with cynicism and contempt for the disastrous consequences of his government’s policies, Morrison responded to Kant’s death by stating that India “is a dangerous place... it’s a tragedy when we lose an Australian anywhere, and sadly that happens all around the world when people are in dangerous places. So I feel for the family, but it is not a safe place.”

The ban was imposed on April 30, when Health Minister Greg Hunt activated draconian provisions in the Biosecurity Act. Hunt explicitly threatened anyone who sought to circumvent the blockade with criminal prosecution, resulting in fines of up to \$66,000, and five years’ imprisonment.

The ban formally elapsed on May 15, but the government has merely continued it in another form. Only one repatriation flight has so far transported citizens from India to Australia’s Northern Territory. The flight had been allocated 150 passenger capacity. But it travelled with only 77 after 42 tested COVID-19 positive, and another 31 were deemed close contacts and blocked from the plane.

It has since emerged that the testing entity that Australian airline Qantas is using recently failed a certification test. Some of those who tested positive and were barred from the flight later returned a negative result.

In any event, the government has insisted that no citizens who test positive will be repatriated. Australian High Commissioner to India Barry O'Farrell stated last weekend that those stricken with the disease would have to "deal with the COVID that they have or continue to isolate to prove that they don't have COVID." Such was Kant's fate.

He was a 47-year-old businessman, whose story appears to be common among many of the stranded citizens. Kant travelled to India in early April, to attend the funeral of his mother. He sought to leave the country in mid-April but was unable to get a flight. He reportedly succeeded in booking an April 24 flight, but by then had contracted the virus and been admitted to a Delhi hospital. Kant died several weeks later on May 16.

The government travel ban has claimed other victims. Sydney woman Sonali Ralhan has told SBS news that her 59-year-old father, an Australian permanent resident, died on 5 May in a private New Delhi hospital after contracting COVID-19.

Ralhan stated that both of her parents had been seeking to leave India since late last year but had been unable to book a flight. She wrote on Facebook that she was "highly disappointed" to be an Australian citizen, and highlighted the plight of her mother, who remains trapped in India. "Now all I have left is my mother, who has been abandoned by her own government of Australia," Ralhan wrote.

Another 51-year-old Australian citizen Sunil Khanna perished late last month after contracting COVID in India. He reportedly died on April 29, a day before the travel ban was imposed. If Australian authorities were aware of his passing, it means they responded to the tragedy by implementing a blockade that condemns thousands more to the possibility of the same fate.

The brutal blockade has highlighted the criminally-negligent and profit-driven response of the Australian ruling elite to the pandemic. While the country has recorded fewer infections and deaths than many other parts of the world, the health and safety of ordinary people, has repeatedly been subordinated to the interests of the corporate elite.

One of the factors leading to the imposition of the ban was the shambolic character of Australia's hotel quarantine. Except for one centre in the Northern Territory, all returnees are still being sent to private hotels in the major cities, which are incapable of preventing airborne transmission and lack medical facilities. The hotels, which have been the source of a spate of outbreaks, continue to be staffed by untrained, low-paid, casual staff who are often compelled to work multiple

jobs because of the poverty-level wages.

While nothing is being done to resolve the quarantine problems, and the de facto Indian travel ban remains in place, prominent politicians and corporate executives have initiated a campaign for a hasty resumption of international travel. Jayne Hrdlicka, the CEO of Virgin, one of Australia's two largest airlines, sparked public outrage this week when she insisted that border restrictions would need to be lifted immediately, even if "people may die."

Those who are spearheading the campaign for the resumption of travel are flying the false flag of "opening Australia's borders." But to a man, they have supported the ban on Australian citizens returning from India. In other words, they want an end to border restrictions for the wealthy political and business elite, and an end to any impediment on profit-making activities, but are happy to erect a barrier to citizens requiring evacuation and urgent medical care.

The situation again demonstrates that the pandemic cannot be tackled within the framework of the capitalist profit-system. Governments around the world are providing only a pittance to India and other historically-oppressed countries that are being battered by the resurgence of COVID-19. At the same time, the ruling elites are rushing to lift the few safety restrictions and lockdown measures that remain, creating the conditions for a further spread of the coronavirus, and ever-greater levels of illness and death.



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