

Australian minister dispatched to Sri Lanka to demand a halt to refugees fleeing destitution

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Australia's Labor government sent Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil to Sri Lanka last weekend to insist that President Gotabaya Rajapakse's hated regime stop desperate asylum seekers leaving the poverty-stricken country.

On Monday, O'Neil met with Rajapakse, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and Foreign Minister GL Peiris, demanding assurances they would continue to block boat departures and accept the forced return of passengers pushed back or detained by the Australian Border Force or Australia's navy.

While O'Neil claimed her sudden visit was about assisting a country "facing very difficult times," the Labor government's purpose had nothing whatever to do with helping the masses of the island's population. They face intolerable living conditions, including food and petrol shortages, skyrocketing prices and austerity measures imposed by the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government to satisfy the dictates of the International Monetary Fund.

On the contrary, the focus of O'Neil's mission was to block people from trying to escape the social catastrophe to seek refuge in Australia. She reiterated the Labor government's continuation of Operation Sovereign Borders, the militarised policy introduced by Australia's previous Liberal-National Coalition government of forcibly turning back refugee boats or immediately deporting their passengers to face persecution or impoverishment in the countries they fled.

A statement issued by Rajapakse's office said O'Neil told him that the Labor government was committed to Operation Sovereign Borders and would continue its "Zero Chance" advertising campaign in Sri Lanka to dissuade so-called illegal migration to Australia.

In the past few weeks, the Australian navy has

intercepted at least four asylum seeker vessels from Sri Lanka. Some passengers have been taken to the notorious immigration prison on Christmas Island, an Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean, before being swiftly flown back to Sri Lanka, denying them the legal right to apply for asylum.

According to media reports, 23 Sri Lankans arrived back in the country on Monday after being flown out of Christmas Island on the weekend and were being interrogated at the airport. All were believed to be from the west coast towns of Negombo, Chilaw and Muttur.

During the same weeks, the Sri Lankan navy reportedly captured more than 400 asylum seekers.

Mass protests are continuing in Sri Lanka over sky-high food and fuel prices, shortages and power blackouts. In May, inflation reached 38 percent and food inflation 57 percent. Protestors are demanding the resignation of Rajapakse and his government.

Far from being concerned about the conditions of the workers and poor in Sri Lanka, the Australian government fears that the eruption of working-class struggle could trigger similar uprisings across the Indo-Pacific. Foreign Minister Penny Wong stated: "Not only do we want to help the people of Sri Lanka in its time of need, there are also deeper consequences for the region if this crisis continues."

O'Neil announced a paltry \$50 million in aid to the country, \$22 million of which is to be given to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), and \$5 million to other UN agencies. No details were provided about the remaining \$23 million.

This is barely a drop in the ocean for a country with \$US51 billion in foreign debt. Predictions are that by the end of the year 3 million people will rely on the WFP to survive. According to UN reports, at least 70 percent of

the population are already reducing meals.

While making this announcement, O'Neil underlined the true thrust of her visit. "I want to convey Australia's willingness to deepen our assistance through additional law enforcement cooperation, border protection capabilities and intelligence sharing measures," she said.

On Tuesday, O'Neil and Sri Lankan Fisheries Minister Douglas Devananda opened a new \$5 million Fisheries Monitoring Centre in Colombo. It is designed to monitor vessels by installing 4,200 GPS trackers, provided by the Australian government, on fishing boats.

When the system is fully operational, the centre can monitor all fishing ships. O'Neil said it would "assist us with the crucial task of combating transnational crime and people-smuggling operations."

Combating "people smugglers" has been the pretext for the anti-refugee policy pioneered by the Australian government. Many reports highlight that most refugee boats are not owned by crime syndicates but by fishing families, who are themselves fleeing as they face destitution due to fuel shortages and rising prices.

Another Australian government concern is that the Sri Lankan navy will be unable to carry out the required boat intercepts due to fuel shortages. Across Sri Lanka, people are queuing for days for fuel and petrol bowsers are running dry, but the navy has been given priority status for "national security" reasons.

Seeking to reassure Australia, Sri Lanka Navy spokesman Captain Indika De Silva told the Australian media that while the shortage "does have an impact," the navy's fuel priority ensured that "so far we have been able to carry out our duties at an appropriate level to counter the threats emanating from the maritime domain, including those illicit migration attempts."

Some 50 Sri Lankan navy personnel are in Australia already on a "specialist training program." Rajapakse's regime also uses two retired Australian patrol boats and the two governments share intelligence information on refugee boats.

O'Neil's visit is part of a frenetic series of trips by Albanese and other senior ministers across the region and internationally to reinforce the interests of Australian imperialism and help ramp up the Biden administration's war preparations against China.

Rajapakse, who is also under ongoing US pressure over his turn to China for investment and aid, said he understood "Australia is on high alert for security in the Indian Ocean." His official statement added that "the Sri Lankan government would extend its fullest support to

maintain the Indian Ocean as a security zone.

O'Neil's trip highlights the cynicism on display last week when Albanese posed for photos with the Nadesalingam Tamil refugee family.

The family had been imprisoned by the previous Coalition government since March 2018, after being arrested in a pre-dawn raid on their home in the central Queensland town of Biloela. The town's residents launched a tireless campaign for their freedom, including nationwide protests.

The Albanese government granted the family a bridging visa, but not permanent residency, in a PR operation to gloss over the reactionary bipartisan anti-refugee policy.

In fact, the family's persecution resulted from policies imposed by the previous Labor governments, those of prime ministers Rudd and Gillard. They reinstated the "Pacific solution" of locking up asylum seekers on the remote Nauru and Manus islands and declared that refugees arriving by boat would never be permitted to live in Australia.

In 2012, the Gillard government went further in violating the rights of refugees under international law. It struck an agreement with then-President Mahinda Rajapakse to immediately return all Sri Lankan asylum seekers who reached Australia by boat, preventing them from applying for refugee status.

O'Neil's visit continues Labor's filthy record, amid even more devastating conditions in Sri Lanka than during the 30-year communal war against Tamil separatists.

The intensifying persecution of asylum seekers is a warning to the working class. The rising costs of living and deteriorating social conditions in Sri Lanka are part of a global capitalist crisis, which is also battering working-class living conditions and fuelling strikes and protests in Australia.

There is not one rule for refugees and another for workers at home. Domestically as well, the ruling class and its governments, Labor and Coalition alike, will not hesitate to use similarly repressive military and police-state measures against working-class unrest.



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