

Australian Labor government supplies more fuel to Sri Lankan navy for anti-refugee operations

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The Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is supplying the Sri Lankan navy with tens of millions of dollars' worth of fuel to bolster the island's repressive military-backed regime and ensure its patrol boats remain deployed, detaining refugees and forcing them back to Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan workers face intolerable living conditions, food and fuel shortages, and skyrocketing prices because of the austerity measures imposed by the Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe governments to satisfy the dictates of the International Monetary Fund.

The country's three main patrol boats, and an undisclosed number of smaller craft, are being regularly refuelled in India, paid for by the Australian government.

According to the *Australian*, the fuel deal was organised after Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil visited Colombo in late June. Due to the secrecy maintained by the Labor government on the militarised Operation Sovereign Borders—the bipartisan policy to seize and turn back all asylum seeker vessels—O'Neil has refused to comment on the deal.

The *Tamil Guardian* reported that this agreement comes on top of 450 metric tons of fuel given by the Labor government to the Sri Lankan navy in early August, together with 27,000 litres of fuel to the air force.

While the country's workers and poor are starving or skipping meals, the Australian government is funding the military that is suppressing resistance to the undemocratically-installed Wickremesinghe regime.

When questioned by the WSWs, the Department of Home Affairs confirmed that the Labor government was supplying fuel to the Sri Lankan navy but would

not confirm the amount of fuel or costs associated. The department refused to confirm that fuel was provided to the air force.

These latest revelations confirm that O'Neil's visit to Colombo had nothing to do with helping the masses of workers and rural poor. Instead, the funnelling of fuel to the Sri Lankan military directly aids the violent crackdown on mass protests that have continued since April.

After the protests forced the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapakse, the equally hated Ranil Wickremesinghe was installed as president to use the military and police to attack protesters.

The Labor government is continuing Operation Sovereign Borders, introduced by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government. In an interview with Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio on July 20, O'Neil said: "The most important thing for me to do in my position is... to continue to reiterate to people that Operation Sovereign Borders is Australian government policy. Don't get on a boat and think that you are going to be able to make a life in Australia. You will be turned back."

The Australian Border Force (ABF) announced that in June it captured the highest number of boats in a single month—four vessels carrying 125 Sri Lankans. Including a boat returned in late May, a total of 137 people had been forced back since Labor took office.

Additionally, in the past few months the Sri Lankan navy has captured 17 vessels.

In early August an ABF vessel docked in Colombo to forcibly hand over 46 asylum seekers who had been captured on July 21. The Sri Lankan press reported that this was the first time refugees had been transported

back to the country by an ABF vessel, rather than being flown back or handed to the Sri Lankan navy.

The secrecy of Operation Sovereign Borders means more up-to-date data is unavailable. It is clear, however, that in its first few months in office, the Labor government has overseen a ruthless attack on refugees.

These revelations highlight the cynicism on display when the Albanese government granted permanent visas to the Nadesalingam Tamil refugee family from the rural town of Biloela. While the government allowed this family to stay in Australia, it was militarily repelling hundreds more.

The family had been imprisoned by the previous Coalition government in March 2018, after a pre-dawn raid led by the paramilitary ABF. For most of their detention they were held in the notorious offshore facility on Christmas Island, a remote Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean.

Thanks to the determined efforts of the residents of Biloela, the family's plight shot to media prominence. A national campaign for their release, entitled "Home to Bilo," won mass support, with demonstrations across the country.

The Albanese government's PR operation sought to place a phony image of "compassion" over the continued persecution of refugees, which began with the mandatory detention of all asylum seekers who arrived by boat, a regime introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1992.

In 2012, the Gillard Labor government set up a close partnership with the autocratic Sri Lankan government to intercept refugees and return them to Sri Lanka. This resulted in the forced return of at least 650 asylum seekers, in open violation of international refugee law.

The inhumane treatment of Sri Lankan refugees, who are fleeing social misery, must be opposed by workers. As the pandemic, economic and social crisis deepens in Australia, similar police-state measures will be used against the working class at home.



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