

Australian government reactivates ‘Pacific Solution’ anti-refugee regime

Mike Head
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Under an ongoing veil of secrecy, the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has recommenced one of the most barbaric features of the country’s anti-refugee policy—the incarceration of asylum-seekers on remote Pacific islands.

The government re-opened the previously mothballed detention camp on the tiny remote island of Nauru last September, imprisoning people there for the first time in nine months. It has since begun deporting the detainees, including a woman and child, to the countries they fled, while refusing to disclose their fate on return.

The Labor government has reactivated the foul “Pacific Solution” launched by the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government in 2001 and expanded by the Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison Coalition governments of 2013 to 2022.

Scarce information has emerged. Some comes from answers to questions on notice from a Senate estimates committee hearing in October. This was followed by an Operation Sovereign Borders public update in November, the latest available from the military operation to repel refugee boats.

Like the Coalition, the Labor government has declared that all details must be kept secret, as “operationally sensitive.” In the name of protecting “border security” and sensitive relations with neighbouring governments, the Labor leaders are keeping the public in the dark as much as possible.

It has been officially confirmed that, as of November 3, eight of the 11 asylum seekers forcibly transported to Nauru in September had been sent back to the countries they fled. But the government has refused to provide any details about them, including where they were deported.

Supposedly the detainees chose to return “voluntarily.” That was after spending weeks locked up in an Australian-financed prison camp, located in a desolate former phosphate minefield on the tiny 21 square-kilometre island of Nauru, halfway between Australia and Hawaii.

Home Affairs Department officials revealed that a further 12 people who were found on the Western Australian coast in November had been transported to Nauru. At least nine

refugee boats have been turned back to sea since Labor took office in May 2022.

The officials said that, as of August 31, 250 people from nine boats had been returned to their country of origin or departure, Sri Lanka or Indonesia, under the Labor government. They said 238 of the people had been subjected to “on-water/enhanced screening assessment” to reject their refugee claims.

In the answers to the Senate legal and constitutional affairs committee, the department said September’s “unauthorised maritime arrivals” had been transferred to Nauru, “in line with long standing policy ...

“The Department conducts entry screening to ensure it does not refole [deport] asylum seekers with legitimate protection claims, in breach of Australia’s international obligations.”

In reality, this arbitrary “screening” denies refugees the right to have their asylum applications properly assessed as required by the international Refugees Convention. It further violates the convention by punishing them for trying to flee persecution or oppression.

Almost 60 asylum seekers are also still trapped in Papua New Guinea (PNG) after being detained for years in another “offshore” Australian detention camp on PNG’s Manus Island. The Labor government has refused to bring them to Australia despite them being denied government social and housing support, a situation made worse by the widespread social unrest in PNG.

Significantly, when he was in opposition, Albanese, a leader of the so-called Labor “Left,” once professed to oppose the worst abuses of the anti-refugee policy. Now he leads a government that is reinforcing it.

Most of the current victims appear to be fleeing the economic and social crisis in Sri Lanka and the repressive response of its government and police-military forces under President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Rear Admiral Justin Jones, the Operation Sovereign Borders commander, told the Senate committee his force had intercepted and returned “224 Sri Lankan nationals on seven

different ventures” in 2022 and 2023.

Jones made clear that he operated with the Labor government’s political approval. He said: “On my recent visit to Sri Lanka in July, I relayed the Australian government’s thanks for the Sri Lankan government’s efforts and cooperation to suppress the people-smuggling trade during this challenging period.”

This cooperation included disrupting “attempted ventures in-country” and facilitating the return of “Sri Lankan nationals intercepted at sea by Australian authorities.” In other words, the Albanese government is working closely with the Wickresesinghe regime as it seeks to crush opposition to its International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures.

Labor’s anti-refugee crackdown continues the role played by successive Australian governments, Labor and Coalition alike, in setting precedents for other Western governments to shut their doors, block boats, detain asylum seekers and either return them or transport them to bleak locations.

Internationally, as witnessed by the recent protests against anti-immigrant proposals in Germany and France, there is intense popular opposition to governments scapegoating immigrants and refugees and adopting fascistic measures against them.

There is a worsening global refugee crisis. According to the latest United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees *Global Trends* report, at the end of 2022, 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, including 35.3 million officially-recognised refugees and 5.4 million asylum seekers. That was a staggering increase of 19 million forcibly displaced people compared with the end of 2021.

During 2023, these figures would have undoubtedly risen, fuelled by the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza and attacks throughout the Middle East, and the deteriorating social and political conditions in Latin and South America.

Yet, despite claiming a “generous humanitarian program,” the Labor government’s refugee and humanitarian visa intake for 2022-23 was less than 18,000.

Reopening the Nauru camp gives the Labor government an extra option to evade the outcome of November’s High Court decision that partially outlawed the indefinite domestic detention of asylum seekers. The Nauru operation sits outside that ruling because of a legal fiction that detainees in Nauru are being held by the Nauru government, not its Australian paymaster.

The government vehemently opposed the High Court verdict. Home Affairs Minister Clare O’Neil publicly accused the judges of setting free supposed criminals. Labor joined the Coalition in ramming through parliament new laws to impose ankle bracelets, curfews and other police-

state restrictions on released detainees, or re-imprison them via “preventative detention” provisions.

This was accompanied by a bipartisan and media witch-hunt demonising the detainees as murderers and rapists. Many are traumatised refugees, and all have served any prison sentences they received for earlier convictions.

The reactivation of the Nauru camp also has a clear geo-strategic element. It is in line with the Albanese government’s efforts to step up the operations of Australian imperialism in the Pacific to counter the influence of China and support the US Biden administration’s preparations for war with Beijing.

Nauru, once colonised by Germany and then by Britain, Australia and New Zealand from World War 1 until nominal independence in 1968, is an impoverished state of less than 13,000 people. It has been ravaged by decades of colonial phosphate mining for agricultural fertilisers, leaving much of the island an arid, Moon-like landscape.

Nauru is strategically located and was one of territories occupied by Japan during World War II. This month, alarm bells sounded in Canberra and Washington after Nauru’s government ended its diplomatic recognition of Taiwan in favour of China, following similar decisions by Solomon Islands and Kiribati.

Concerns have been expressed in Australian and US strategic thinktanks that anxiety in Nauru over the possible termination of its lucrative detention centre contract—worth at least \$350 million a year—may have spurred its government into seeking a new source of aid from China. At its peak, the Nauru detention facility, financed by Australia, had more than 1,200 inmates and was the island’s biggest employer.

These developments are a warning of the connection between the three major prongs of the Labor government’s increasingly right-wing and reactionary program—pro-US militarism, internal austerity measures and attacks on basic democratic rights, including those of refugees.

Amid deteriorating social conditions, asylum seekers and other immigration detainees are among the first targets. Repressive detention and other mechanisms being put in place—by a Labor government—will be used to combat the growing development of opposition by workers and youth to war, the cost-of-living crisis and ever-widening social inequality.



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