

Australian government imprisons more refugees on Nauru

Mike Head
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Under the Albanese Labor government, Australia is again spearheading the global mistreatment and denial of basic democratic and legal rights to asylum seekers fleeing persecution, poverty and war.

Over the weekend, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese personally intervened to ensure that a group of about 40 refugees who landed on the country's northwestern shore late last week were swiftly removed, against their will.

By yesterday, the men, reportedly from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, were forcibly flown thousands of kilometres to be locked up in an Australian-financed prison camp, located in a desolate former colonial phosphate minefield on the tiny 21 square-kilometre island of Nauru, halfway between Australia and Hawaii.

Albanese, who once posed—while in opposition—as a critic of aspects of this brutal “Pacific Solution,” was anxious to take credit for this cruel operation, which was conducted behind a veil of secrecy in order to keep the public in the dark as much as possible.

Albanese confirmed at two media conferences yesterday that he had spoken at least twice to Rear Admiral Brett Sonter, the commander of Operation Sovereign Borders, the government's militarised anti-refugee regime, and told him swift action was expected to incarcerate the men.

“Our position on Operation Sovereign Borders is very clear, and people who attempt to arrive here by boat will not settle here. Our position is clear,” Albanese said. That amounts to a blanket policy of denying asylum to everyone trying to get to Australia in a refugee boat.

Labor's anti-refugee crackdown renews the role played by successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike since the 1990s, in setting precedents for other Western governments to shut their doors, block boats, detain asylum seekers and either return them or transport them to grim locations.

More than ever, tens of millions of people are fleeing their countries worldwide, only to be victimised and scapegoated. Governments are pursuing this offensive as a reactionary national diversion because working-class discontent is rising over the deteriorating living conditions, job losses, US-led barbarism in Gaza and Ukraine, and massive military spending

being enforced by capitalist governments everywhere.

The same governments, including Australia's, whose wars and regime-change operations have caused millions of people to flee from the Middle East, Ukraine and other regions, are leading the closure of borders.

US President Joe Biden has vowed to “shut the border” with Mexico to block asylum seekers in return for the US Congress approving nearly \$100 billion in new war funding, and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's anti-immigration policy centres on a pledge to deport to Rwanda those deemed to have “illegally” entered Britain.

The Australian Labor government is already carrying out such a policy amid an orchestrated witch hunting anti-refugee campaign by the political and media establishment.

This week's group of asylum seekers, who told local people they had sailed from Indonesia, is the third to be consigned to Nauru by the Labor government since September, when it reactivated the previously mothballed detention facility on the island.

There was a striking contrast between the government's response and that of local people who found the men near the small indigenous communities of Beagle Bay and Pender Bay, some 150 kilometres north of Broome in Western Australia.

For its part, the corporate media sought to whip up fears of a threat to “national security.” Labor government ministers vied with their Liberal-National counterparts to be the most frothing in mounting this scare campaign.

Yet local residents fed the men and tended to the wounds of some who had cuts and other injuries from scrambling on rocks and walking in mangroves.

Beagle Bay resident Melissa Smith was among the first to see the initial group of men arrive in her community. “Normally when you find people like that on the road, you give them a hand,” she told an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reporter.

“Especially people that don't know this country — you bring them in where they can get help. Hopefully they'll get to where they want to, but I don't think they will.”

Albanese and his ministers moved rapidly to make sure of that. At around midnight on Saturday, a chartered Nauru Airlines plane flew the men away, via two air force bases, and

unloaded them on Nauru on Sunday.

At least one of the men told the ABC he planned to apply for asylum, but the military operation prevented any of them from applying for refugee status. That violates the international Refugees Convention, which requires asylum applications to be properly assessed and prohibits the punishment of people for trying to flee persecution or oppression.

Albanese said Operation Sovereign Borders “has been operating in exactly the same way” under Labor as it did under the Coalition. He sought to outflank Peter Dutton, the opposition leader, who was in charge of the operation as home affairs minister under the previous Morrison Coalition government.

Albanese and Labor’s Home Affairs Minister Clare O’Neil accused Dutton of undermining “border security” by alleging that the government was “weak” and raising doubts about the capacity of the Australian Border Force to track and intercept refugee boats. O’Neill boasted: “Every person who has attempted to reach Australia by boat since I have been minister is back in their home country, or in Nauru.”

Rear Admiral Sonter gave a recent Senate estimates hearing a glimpse of the large scale of his command. He said it included 1,055 Australian Defence Force and Australian Border Force personnel working under Operation Sovereign Borders and the Maritime Border Command, including 646 at sea. Sonter said the operation had intercepted 11 asylum seeker boats since 2022. Australia’s maritime borders were closed “under my watch,” he declared.

Albanese rejected requests to provide any information about his government’s actions. Like Dutton and Dutton’s predecessors in the Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison Coalition governments of 2013 to 2022, Labor has kept a wall of secrecy around Operation Sovereign Borders, refusing to divulge any “on-water matters,” such as boat interceptions and turn-backs.

Most asylum-seekers are “screened out” at sea, and immediately turned away or flown back to the countries they fled. That is a blatant violation of international refugee law, continuing illegal practices begun by the previous Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

The Albanese government last June said it would spend up to \$350 million a year keeping the Nauru detention centre open even when it was empty. That was after the last detainee reportedly left the camp to get married and live in Nauru, which has a population of less than 13,000.

The Nauru facility was opened in 2001 as part of the Howard Coalition government’s globally notorious “Pacific Solution” of transporting refugees to remote islands in former Australian colonies, either Nauru or Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

In 2007, the Rudd Labor government was elected promising to end this barbarism, while still holding asylum seekers on Christmas Island, one of Australia’s far-flung outposts in the Indian Ocean. When desperate refugee voyages recommenced, primarily due to the ongoing US occupations and militarism in

Afghanistan and Iraq, Labor reintroduced the “offshore” detention on both Nauru and Manus Island.

In 2016, the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Supreme Court ruled that Australia’s operation on Manus Island was unconstitutional under PNG law. The next year, the Australian government was forced to pay more than \$70 million in compensation to those who had been illegally detained there, but the Nauru facility continued under an expensive agreement with the island’s government.

The operation on Nauru, which is strategically located in the Pacific, also has a war connection. Its reactivation is in line with the Albanese government’s efforts to step up the offensive of Australian imperialism across the Indo-Pacific to counter the influence of China and support the US Biden administration’s preparations for war with Beijing.

In addition, 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 facility sits outside that ruling because of a legal fiction that detainees there are being held by Nauru’s government, not its Australian paymaster.

The Albanese government vehemently opposed the High Court verdict. O’Neil publicly accused the judges of setting free 149 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 bipartisan and media scare-mongering, demonising the detainees as murderers and rapists. Many are traumatised refugees and all have served any prison sentences they received for earlier convictions.

Now, it has been revealed that the government is still indefinitely detaining at least another 300 people on the grounds that they are refusing to cooperate with their deportation. Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus last week asked the High Court to rule on their plight in a case involving a man who fled Iran, whose government refuses to accept involuntary returnees from Australia.

Workers and youth must take these developments as a warning of the link between the three main planks of the Labor government’s increasingly reactionary program—pro-US militarism, domestic austerity measures and attacks on basic democratic rights, including those of vulnerable refugees.



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