

Australian Labor government cancelling visas of refugees fleeing Gaza genocide

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18 March 2024

Over the past week a series of disturbing reports have emerged of Palestinians who have fled the Israeli genocide in Gaza suddenly having their visas to enter Australia cancelled, despite prior approval. Having escaped the worst warzone in the world, at great expense and danger, the vulnerable refugees have faced the prospect of being stranded in countries they were only permitted to pass through.

In the past two days, some, but not all, of the visas have reportedly been reinstated. The difficult circumstances confronting the refugees, including limited communication access, means that the exact situation is hazy.

However, even if all the canceled visas were to be reinstated, the incident is another expression of the arbitrary brutality of Australia's "border protection" program, as well as the complicity of the federal Labor government in the US-Israeli led assault on the fundamental rights of the Palestinians.

A report by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) last Thursday recounted the case of an Australian woman, who had successfully applied for temporary visas on behalf of her two sisters and nieces in Gaza. The visas were approved in November, but due to the closed border, it took months for the woman's relatives to be able to leave.

One of the sisters had her Australian visa canceled while in Cairo. Another was able to go to a transit country with her children. But immediately before they were due to board a flight bound for Australia, that woman was informed that her visa was canceled. She had been barred from Australia, she was told, but her children were permitted to travel. As a consequence, the family was trapped in a foreign airport with nowhere to go.

Samah Sabawi, a Palestinian playwright and academic, who had assisted them, told the ABC: "They've paid so much money to make it out of Gaza... They've all witnessed horrific things, lived through terrible losses. But they come [to Egypt], and they breathe and then they say... I've got my visa in hand, and I can go somewhere safe and secure... And then they find that they can't. I don't know what to tell

them."

The ABC, as well as Nine Media publications, reported that they were aware of other Palestinians who had similarly suffered a sudden visa cancellation.

The Labor government has, throughout the onslaught on Gaza, proclaimed Israel's "right to defend itself," and collaborated with the Zionist regime as it ethnically-cleanses the Palestinians. To cover up this basic reality, Labor, like the US and other governments complicit in the mass murder, has occasionally shed crocodile tears over the suffering and instated miserly "humanitarian" measures.

One of those was to announce, amid some fanfare, that Gazans with relatives in Australia would be eligible for entry into the country. Aside from the difficulties of getting out of Gaza, however, the Palestinians were only permitted to apply for temporary visitor visas. This would block them from accessing government-funded healthcare and other basic necessities and from seeking any employment. The subclass 600 visa, which they were directed to, is limited to 12 months or less, effectively mandating an entirely uncertain future for the refugees.

According to figures from the Department of Home Affairs, responsible for migration, 2,273 such visas were granted to Gazans between October and February 6. Over that period, however, only 334 of those Palestinians had arrived in Australia.

A typical visa cancellation, cited by Nine Media, stated: "As part of the visa application process, you were required to meet section 600.211 which states the visa applicant genuinely intends to stay temporarily in Australia. The delegate considered the situation in your home country, including the current conflict, the internal displacement of persons and the difficult circumstances facing ordinary citizens there. The delegate considered you never intended a genuine stay temporarily in Australia and therefore the visa was granted based on circumstances that never existed."

It would be no exaggeration to describe this as a Kafkaesque nightmare. When the government announced that a small layer of Gazans would be permitted temporary

visas, there was never a suggestion that it was because the Palestinians were seeking a holiday in Australia.

Within days of the October 7 Hamas military operation, it was clear that Israel was intent on rendering Gaza uninhabitable and of expelling its population. Now, having carpet-bombed most of the strip, Israel is systematically demolishing residential and civil structures. The bulk of the population has been herded into the southernmost city of Rafah, which Israel declares it will attack as a preliminary to forcing the Palestinians into the Sinai Desert.

In other words, the Gazan refugees have nowhere to return to. Even if they tried, entering Gaza from an external border is impossible.

In response to the revelations, the Labor government combined phony sympathy with a defence of the brutality. In a statement to the media, a representative of Labor's Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil declared that "The Australian government recognises that this is an incredibly distressing time for Australians with extended family members in Gaza."

But, it added: "All visa applicants undergo security checks and are subject to ongoing security assessments. The Australian government reserves the right to cancel any issued visas if circumstances change." That statement expressed contempt for the stranded Palestinians, and slandered them, because there was no indication in the communication they received that the visa cancellations had anything to do with adverse security assessments.

The treatment is of a piece with the broader bipartisan assault on asylum-seekers and refugees. For decades, Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have violated the internationally-enshrined right to seek asylum, including by imprisoning refugees in detention camps in Papua New Guinea and Pacific Islands.

Last December, the High Court found that the indefinite detention of asylum-seekers was unlawful. The Labor government responded by rushing "preventative detention" laws through parliament, to effectively retain the policy. The refugees freed as a result of the High Court ruling have been subjected to a highly-intrusive monitoring and surveillance regime, along with continuous government and media vilification. In some instances, they have been arrested on fresh charges that smack of police frame-ups.

In the case of the Gazan refugees, this broader anti-democratic framework intersects with the government's hostility to the aspirations of the Palestinians and support for the Israeli onslaught against them.

Zionist groups, which function as the chief cheerleaders of the criminal Israeli regime, have repeatedly declared that nobody from Gaza should be allowed into the country. Aping the genocidal rhetoric of Israeli government leaders,

they have branded all Gazans as potential terrorists. Notably, O'Neil's statement, referencing "security assessments," dovetails with that racist line.

Australian-Palestinian leaders have welcomed the reinstatement of some of the visas, but noted the manifest inadequacy and unfairness of Gazans being permitted to enter the country only on temporary visas limited to twelve months.

While presented as a humanitarian measure, this regime aligns with Israel's perspective of transforming the Palestinians into a people of stateless refugees, condemned to danger and uncertainty for the foreseeable future.

In another development underscoring the Labor government's brutality, last Friday Foreign Minister Penny Wong announced a reinstatement of funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Together with the US and its allies, Australia froze all funding to the agency, which is responsible for providing aid to the Palestinians. It did so on the basis of threadbare Israeli lies that some UNRWA employees were involved in the October 7 Hamas operation.

Those assertions have been completely discredited. There are now credible allegations that the Israeli state tortured UNRWA staff, i.e., United Nations employees, to obtain false confessions. Having withheld money to the agency for more than 50 days, Wong blandly declared the reinstatement, without a hint of apology or acknowledgement that the initial pretext for the freeze had been a fraud.

Over the period of the funding freeze, reports indicate that hunger reached new levels in Gaza, with children and infants filmed starving to death before the eyes of the world. The affected Australian funding was just \$6 million, enough to buy four or five houses in Sydney or Melbourne, in another demonstration of Labor's criminal hostility to the Palestinians.



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