

Australian government unveils brutal refugee deal with the US

By Max Newman
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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull yesterday announced a one-off “resettlement” deal with the United States that will forcibly remove to the US some of the 2,200 refugees who have rotted since 2013 in Australia’s prison camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

At a media conference in the government’s Maritime Border Command headquarters, Turnbull declared that Australia’s naval “Operation Sovereign Borders,” which organises the interception and turn back of refugee boats, would be boosted to its highest-ever level.

In return for taking a limited number of heavily-vetted asylum seekers, the Obama administration will deport to Australia some Central American refugees currently languishing in camps in Costa Rica, having been denied entry to the US. On both sides of the Pacific, some of the world’s most vulnerable people will be denied the basic right to seek protection, while many will face permanent separation from their families.

Far from alleviating the horrors produced by Australia’s “offshore” detention regime, the new deal will see hundreds of families split up forever, with many detainees, especially single men, unable to reunite with their spouses and children in Australia. It represents an escalation of the anti-asylum seeker policies being enforced worldwide in the face of the greatest refugee crisis since World War II, and further undermines the 1951 Refugee Convention, which recognised a right to seek asylum without being punished, or deported, for doing so.

Globally, more than 60 million refugees have fled their countries, mostly because of the criminal wars launched by the US and its allies, including Australia, in the Middle East.

At the media conference, where Turnbull and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton were flanked by four military, naval, “border protection” and police chiefs, the prime minister boasted that his Liberal-National Coalition government had “put in place the largest and most capable maritime surveillance and response fleet Australia has ever deployed.”

No details of the US agreement were disclosed, but Turnbull emphasised that it would apply only to detainees who were classified as refugees under the narrow official test, and to those currently held in the camps. All those excluded—either arbitrarily denied refugee status or already “resettled” in Nauru or Papua New Guinea—will remain indefinitely in limbo.

On Manus Island there have been 675 “positive refugee determinations” out of 1,015 single male detainees; on Nauru there have been 941 out of 1,195 men, women and children. More than 800 of the officially-designated refugees have been supposedly “resettled” in Nauru or PNG. Most of them are from Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Iraq, while others are stateless.

Not one extra asylum seeker will receive protection as a result of the swap deal. Turnbull stressed that the arrangement would result in no increase in the annual US refugee quota. Nor will there be any increase in Australia’s intake as a result of the Costa Rica plan, which Turnbull initially revealed in September.

No timeframe has been placed on when the transfers will occur. Turnbull declared they would be conducted in an “orderly” fashion. This could last many months. US Homeland Security officials will screen the refugees, with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) providing a fig leaf of legitimacy to the process by selecting those to be “considered” by

the US.

Some of the media commentary has focussed on whether the incoming Trump administration will honour the pact. The forced removal of refugees from Costa Rica to Australia, however, is in line with Washington's own anti-refugee policy, under which the Obama administration has deported more than 800,000 people, including more than 40,000 children.

"Australia's border protection policy has not changed," Turnbull emphasised. "It is resolute, it is unequivocal." He insisted that an essential component of the arrangement was the proposed lifetime ban on all refugees who attempted to come to Australia by boat. The government is intent on pushing that legislation through parliament by making it a precondition for the refugee swap.

To underscore the coercive nature of the plan, Dutton insisted that the Nauru detention camp would remain open "forever" and that detainees who refused to go to the US, or return to the countries they fled, would instead be handed a 20-year Nauruan visa, leaving them stranded on the tiny Pacific island without any support or aid whatsoever.

These comments come after multiple revelations of extreme abuse inflicted on those inside Australia's refugee camps. In the past four months alone, there has been a leaked cache of over 2,000 incident reports from Nauru revealing the abuses inside; an Amnesty International report indicting the Australian government for torture of refugees; and a United Nations committee report detailing the profound mental health effects on those inside the camps, particularly children.

Despite the reactionary precedent set by the deal, numbers of refugee organisations have applauded it, claiming it will end offshore detention. Likewise, Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten embraced the agreement and reiterated that Labor was on a "unity ticket" with the government in relation to refugee policy. Shorten even chided the Coalition for blocking a similar plan, concocted by the Gillard Labor government in 2011, to dump asylum seekers in Malaysia.

The Greens, who posture as defenders of refugees, also welcomed the swap deal, only complaining of the lack of details. The party's immigration spokesman, Senator Nick McKim, said: "After three years, the

government has finally admitted that offshore detention is a dead-end." This is totally false. In the course of their press conference Turnbull and Dutton made unambiguously clear that their Liberal-National government would maintain the detention regime, which was reinstated by the former Greens-backed minority Labor government in 2013.

The plan will conveniently elevate Australia's military presence in the region, just as Washington pushes for a more frontline role by Canberra in the US "pivot" to Asia and its confrontation with China.

No information was provided at the media conference about the scale of the "border protection" military escalation, only that Australia would have more "assets" at sea and aerial surveillance than during any "peacetime" in history. The military and police chiefs warned of the "large threat" to Australia that would be caused by small leaky boats filled with people fleeing for their lives, and said the armed forces were ready for "any contingency."

Turnbull repeated the hypocritical claim, echoed by Labor, that permanently shutting the borders to refugees was aimed at preventing asylum seekers from dying on perilous journeys at sea. The truth is that thousands of desperate refugees are dying around the world, precisely because of the refusal of Western governments to provide them with safe passage. No doubt, this toll is continuing in the waters to Australia's north, but being shrouded by a government-mandated blanket of military secrecy.

Successive Australia governments have used fraudulent "concerns" about "deaths at sea" as a central plank in their criminal policies aimed at deterring refugees. The most notorious example was the October 2001 SIEV X tragedy in which 353 refugees drowned in Australian-surveilled waters. Both the Howard Coalition government and the Labor opposition of the day cynically seized upon their deaths to warn other intending asylum seekers of a similar fate.

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