

Thousands of Australian asylum seekers face deportation

By Max Newman
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The Australian government is threatening to cut as many as 30,000 asylum seekers, currently living in the country on insecure bridging visas, off their limited work and welfare rights unless they complete a 60-page complex legal application for a new visa within 60 days.

This could be the first step toward mass deportations. The Liberal-National Coalition's decision to send out "fast track assessment" letters to the refugees marks a further escalation of the violation of the basic democratic and legal rights of asylum seekers by one government after another.

As a result of the anti-refugee measures of the previous Labor government, some 24,000 asylum seekers who reached Australia by boat between August 2012 and January 2014 have been living ever since on temporary bridging visas, with no right to family reunion.

They are part of what the federal government's para-military Border Force agency this month referred to as a "legacy of 30,000 IMAs [illegal maritime arrivals] whose claims for protection had not been progressed." This reference to "illegal" flies in the face of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which enshrines the right to flee persecution, and not be punished or discriminated against for doing so.

Under legislation introduced by the current government in late 2014, some of these refugees can apply for two types of short-term visas: Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEV). However, as one of the restrictive conditions on these visas, they have been forced to wait for government invitations to even apply for them.

Now, many have been issued letters by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, given them 60 days, or in succeeding letters 30 or 14

days, to complete application forms that require detailed answers to over 100 questions, including specifying each address they lived at in the past 30 years.

If asylum seekers do not complete their applications in time they could be cut off their bridging visas, making them liable to indefinite detention or removal back to their countries of origin to face possible mistreatment, torture or death.

The Fast Track Assessment program was established by the 2014 legislation, which also expanded ministerial powers and stripped asylum seekers of the right to challenge visa refusals via tribunal hearings. Instead, appeals are conducted "on the papers" by an Immigration Assessment Authority (IAA) panel, without the applicants having the right to produce new evidence or appear in person.

Since the IAA commenced operation, the asylum application success rate has dropped from 90 percent to 70 percent. The 2014 legislation effectively cut all funding to the Immigration Advice and Application Scheme, a legal service for asylum seekers. This forced many refugees, who struggle to read and write in English, to rely on non-government legal services, often staffed by volunteers, which have long waiting lists.

Kon Karapanagiotidis, CEO of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, which has 1,150 people on its waiting list, told the *Huffington Post* that the government was "trying to create such terror and panic in people that they lodge without legal assistance" to "make it easier to reject and remove people."

The visas for which asylum seekers can apply also violate basic right and international refugee law. They deny permanent protection from persecution, instead leaving refugees in legal limbo.

TPVs must be reviewed every three years, so that refugees are in constant fear of deportation and find it difficult to secure work and accommodation. Many are living in dire conditions, relying on charities, welfare payments set at 89 percent of poverty line unemployment benefits, and minuscule rental assistance payments.

TPV holders are legally barred from ever applying for any kind of permanent visa to live in Australia. Also, they cannot bring families to Australia, or leave the country without permission. The only purpose of these restrictions is to coerce them into leaving Australia.

SHEVs are even more oppressive. They were conceived as a means of turning asylum seekers into cheap labour, forced to seek work in rural or regional areas without any guarantee of minimum wage or conditions. If refugees work or study in designated zones in “regional Australia” for three and a half years without seeking welfare support, they will be eligible to apply for other visas, including permanent ones, “where they satisfy the relevant criteria.” That is, they must have nominated skills, employer-sponsorship or close family ties.

The plight of the 30,000 “legacy” refugees is the direct responsibility of the previous Labor government, which was kept in office by the Greens from 2010 to 2013, as well as of the current Coalition government.

These asylum seekers were the last to land in Australia before the Labor government reopened the refugee prison camps on Nauru and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea in 2012, and declared that all future arrivals would be sent there. In July 2013, the Labor government then shut the border permanently, saying no refugees who arrived by boat would ever to be permitted to settle in Australia.

The levels of stress on asylum seekers forced to live on bridging visas, constantly watched and hounded by immigration officials, have driven a number to suicide, including a 21-year-old Rohingya man who had fled Burma as an unaccompanied teenager and set himself on fire on the floor of a bank in Melbourne.

The Turnbull Coalition government is now preparing to take that inhumane policy to its ultimate conclusion of removing tens of thousands of refugees from the country. Like the governments in the US, across Europe and around the world, Australia is victimising

some of the world’s most desperate and vulnerable people often driven to seek asylum as a result of criminal US-led interventions and wars.

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