

Australian government summarily deports more Sri Lankan refugees

By Max Newman
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Under the cover of darkness, the Australian government forcibly deported six Sri Lankan asylum seekers back to Colombo on a chartered plane from Christmas Island on June 26, even though they could face imprisonment and torture.

The removals from Australia's Indian Ocean outpost were only made public after local residents on Christmas Island reported this latest crime, committed as part of the Liberal-National government's militarised "Operation Sovereign Borders" policy of repelling all refugees.

Because of the secrecy shrouding the use of naval and Border Patrol vessels to intercept and block all refugee boats trying to reach Australia, little is known about the latest six victims, including their ethnicity or background.

Such deportations violate the 1951 Refugees Convention, which prohibits the removal of asylum seekers to face a risk of death, harm or persecution. Once the removals were confirmed publicly, however, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull personally backed them.

In fact, Turnbull seized on the event to boast of the ruthlessness of Australia's anti-refugee regime. He told the *Australian*: "Our message is very clear—if you try and come to Australia on a boat you will not be allowed in."

In Sri Lanka, President Maithripala Sirisena's government has continued the repressive policies of his predecessor Mahinda Rajapakse, including torture and state terror directed against government opponents and Tamils.

After Sirisena was elected in 2015 via a Washington-backed regime change operation, the local and Western media hailed him as a more democratic and peaceful leader. In reality, his government has

continued police frame-ups and brutality, as well as the military occupation of the island's north and south.

In a similar case in May last year, the Australian government handed over 12 Sri Lankan asylum seekers to the notorious Criminal Investigation Department (CID), which immediately imprisoned them. The CID has a documented record of psychological, physical and sexual torture of government opponents.

The Australian Labor government, in 2012, pioneered the policy of deporting refugees back to Sri Lanka, without allowing them to even apply for asylum, working in close partnership with the Rajapakse regime. In order to strengthen relations with the Sri Lankan police-state apparatus, it went further, forcibly returning 650 asylum seekers who had been previously imprisoned in Australian detention centres.

Despite the claim of the current government to have "stopped the boats," the latest Sri Lankan deportations show that asylum seeker boats are still setting sail for Australia, as part of the worsening worldwide refugee crisis.

According to statistics belatedly released by the Immigration Department last month, since Operation Sovereign Borders began in December 2013, the Australian Navy has captured 31 boats, repelling 771 people. Of these, 14 boats were turned back and six made "assisted" returns, while the victims on board the other 11 vessels were removed by plane.

These figures may only be the tip of the iceberg. Other military "turnbacks" could be going unreported, and an unknown number of boats may have sunk at sea while trying to avoid detection.

Both the "assisted" returns and the direct turnbacks create perilous conditions for those on board. In one instance 16 asylum seekers were captured by the Australian Navy, offloaded onto wooden boats and sent

back in the direction of Indonesia without enough fuel to make it ashore. They were found adrift off West Timor and rescued by local people.

There is also clear evidence that removing refugees involves bribing “people smugglers” to cart them away from Australia in small boats. An Amnesty International report last year said the modus operandi of the so-called border protection regime involved paying incentives to boat crews, who are often desperate fishermen. This included an incident in May 2015 when the Australian government reportedly paid six crewmen \$US32,000.

The department refuses to divulge the nationalities of those forcibly returned, except for those fleeing Sri Lanka and Vietnam. By its statistics, 153 Sri Lankan and 92 Vietnamese asylum seekers have been forced back since December 2013. Among them was a boatload of 46 Vietnamese men, women and children intercepted in April 2015, who faced between 2 and 15 years’ jail in Vietnam for seeking asylum.

There are signs that the Turnbull government is intensifying these brutal practices. Border Protection officials seized on last month’s incident to claim that “people smugglers” were using “micro-ventures”—smaller boats with less than eight passengers—to break through navel defences.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said the incident “should serve again as a very important reminder that these boats haven’t gone away.” He declared that “if the government of the day doesn’t have the resolve, I promise you these boats will start up in huge numbers.”

In other words, Dutton is claiming that tiny boats carrying desperate asylum seekers represent an attempt by so-called people smugglers to threaten the country’s defences. Rather, the “border protection” policy has forced those seeking asylum to find more dangerous ways to get to Australia, sailing smaller vessels through treacherous waters.

This regime is the result of decades of anti-refugee measures by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments. As with the deportation of Sri Lankans, the current government has built on the procedures adopted by the previous Greens-backed Labor government to repel or remove asylum seekers or incarcerate them in camps on remote Pacific islands.

Neither Labor nor the Greens has condemned the deportation of the Sri Lankan asylum seekers,

underscoring their complicity in this criminal practice. The removals have received virtually no coverage by the mainstream media, signifying the support of the ruling class as a whole.

This line up has placed Australia in the forefront of measures being taken by governments around the world to repulse asylum seekers amid the greatest refugee crisis since World War II. Over two decades, the global population of forcibly displaced people has nearly doubled, from 33.9 million in 1997 to 65.6 million in 2016. Most are fleeing starvation, state violence or the wars unleashed by the US and its allies, including Australia.

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