

Australian government spent \$4 billion last year repelling or detaining refugees

By Max Newman
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In a world where millions of people are fleeing wars and starvation, the Australian government spent more money last year on its anti-refugee “border protection” apparatus than the entire budget of the UN refugee agency.

In 2016-17, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection’s operations to block refugee boats and imprison asylum seekers cost over \$4 billion, according to Treasury figures provided to a Senate estimates committee late last year.

That just exceeded the global budget of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which estimates that 65.6 million people are currently forcibly displaced around the planet, plus 10 million more who have been rendered stateless, that is, denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement.

Despite successive Australian governments claiming to have “stopped the boats” of desperate people seeking refuge in the country, the resources being poured into repelling or detaining asylum seekers are still at the massive levels they rose to in 2013–14. That was the year after the last Labor government reopened the country’s “offshore” detention camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island, and the year in which the current Liberal-National Coalition government stepped up military operations to block refugee boats.

A brief written answer given to the Senate committee revealed that in 2016-17 the Department of Immigration and Border Protection spent \$4.061 billion on what the government terms Outcome 1, which is entitled “protect Australia’s sovereignty, security and safety by managing its border, including through managing the stay and departure of all non-citizens.”

Previous predictions, made in every government budget since 2013, that spending would reduce once the “boats were stopped” have effectively been ditched.

The answer declared: “Notwithstanding the success of Australia’s strong border protection policies in stopping illegal maritime arrivals to Australia, the Government continues to manage persons who arrived illegally by boat in 2012 and 2013; both through offshore and onshore arrangements. These costs will continue to impact the Budget bottom line until full resolution of the onshore and offshore illegal maritime caseloads can be achieved.”

In other words, billions of dollars will continue to be spent annually, predominantly on detaining refugees and other people facing deportation, in both “onshore” and “offshore” facilities. Many of the detainees have already been incarcerated for five years or more.

The \$4.061 billion included \$1.059 billion on “border enforcement,” \$242 million on “border management,” \$1.569 billion on “onshore compliance and detention,” \$1.083 billion on “IMA [irregular maritime arrivals] offshore management,” and \$109 million on “regional cooperation arrangements.”

The \$1.569 billion for “onshore compliance and detention” is primarily used to imprison about 13,000 people, according to the latest departmental statistics, in immigration detention centres on the Australian mainland and Christmas Island, a remote territory in the Indian Ocean.

Mandatory detention for unauthorised “non-citizens” was introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1992. Tens of thousands of vulnerable asylum seekers have been forcibly imprisoned since the policy’s introduction.

While refugees remain the main victims of this

system, the prisoners include individuals, including long-time Australian residents, being deported because of criminal convictions or alleged misconduct.

In 2014, the present Coalition government, with Labor's support, passed laws allowing New Zealand citizens to be deported if they had been imprisoned for 12 months or more, even for minor offences. New Zealanders, currently numbering 175, have become the highest represented nationality in Australia's detention centres.

The oppressive conditions imposed on these detainees resulted in two deaths of New Zealanders in 2016—42-year-old Robert Peihopa and 23-year-old Junior Togatuki. There have also been tragic deaths among the tens of thousands of often-traumatised asylum seekers living in "community detention," in which they are denied basic rights and monitored constantly.

At \$1.083 billion, the next largest cost is "offshore management" of detained refugees. Officially, 339 asylum seekers are still imprisoned on Nauru and Manus Island, but the actual numbers exceed 1,000. That is because the Australian government shut down the Manus facility last November, forcibly evicting the detainees, but about 700 men remain on the island, housed in insecure and ill-equipped facilities.

The \$1.059 billion spent on "border enforcement" covers some of the costs associated with seizing asylum seeker vessels, whose passengers are pushed back to sea, typically with barely enough fuel to reach a destination.

Since 2013, when the current government launched Operation Sovereign Borders, a militarised version of the previous Labor government's measures, 31 vessels have been reported as being forcibly turned around, carrying 771 people, including 117 children. Because of the military secrecy shrouding the operation, it is not known how many other boats were intercepted, or sank on the high seas.

The \$109 million spent on "regional cooperation arrangements" may include the brutal United States refugee swap deal, in which the government agreed to take an undisclosed number of refugees imprisoned by the US in Costa Rica, in exchange for equally unspecified numbers of heavily vetted refugees imprisoned on Manus and Nauru.

By contrast to the billions spent on the cruel

treatment of refugees, just \$458,163 million was spent on humanitarian assistance programs and the Skilled and Family Migration Program.

Australia's "sovereign borders" regime, which has been emulated by other Western governments, is a damning indictment of world capitalism and its nation-state system. Millions of innocent people are being denied refuge, many of them fleeing predatory wars launched by the US and its allies, including Australia.

The \$4 billion spent on barring or punishing refugees is roughly 20 times the UNHCR budget for South East Asia, which is meant to provide for more than 200,000 officially recognised refugees, half a million internally displaced people and 1.4 million stateless individuals trapped in some of the poorest countries in the world.

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