

Australian government moves to deport Tamil refugees despite mass opposition

By Oscar Grenfell
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The federal Coalition government has pressed ahead with its plans to deport a Tamil refugee family to Sri Lanka, where they face state persecution, despite an outpouring of mass opposition from workers, students and young people around the country.

Last Thursday night, the family was taken from the Melbourne detention centre where they have been incarcerated for 18 months and put on a flight to Sri Lanka. The deportation was only halted by a last-minute federal court injunction.

A further injunction, secured on Friday, prevented the youngest of the family's two children from being dispatched to Sri Lanka prior to 4:00 p.m. on September 4. The family's fate is set to be decided at court hearings today and on Wednesday.

In a deliberately punitive move, immigration authorities transported the family from Darwin, where the flight bound for Sri Lanka had landed, to the offshore Christmas Island detention centre in the Indian Ocean, north of the Australian mainland. The facility was re-opened by the Coalition government earlier this year although there are no other refugees detained there.

Angela Fredericks, a long-time advocate for the family, told the WSWS yesterday that the family had arrived at Christmas Island at 1:00 a.m. on Saturday morning. She reported that the husband and wife, Nadesalingam and Priya, and their daughters, Kopika, aged four, and Tharunicaa, who is only two, were "traumatised" by their treatment.

Fredericks, who was present when the family was snatched on Thursday night, stated: "I spoke to Priya as she was sitting in a van having been separated from her husband and children. She was terrified. Priya has previously been diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder and I witnessed that

being activated on Thursday evening as she fought to not be put on the plane.

"Instead of being treated appropriately, she was manhandled and sustained significant bruising. Her children witnessed this. During the flight, Tharunicaa was crying and wanting her mum, and the guards would not let them be together. The whole family was traumatised from the experience, and then 24 hours later they were put on another plane and sent to Christmas Island. Absolutely barbaric."

Fredericks stated that when they arrived at Christmas Island, the family was placed in a "dusty room" that triggered the children to have allergic reactions. She explained: "Priya said the rooms are so small and the children don't have space to move around. There is inadequate food for the children and the food they have been given has not been properly cooked. On their first day they were given an expired loaf of bread. They have also had problems with mosquitoes and flies."

The conditions are part of a brutal government policy abrogating the family's right to claim asylum.

Speaking on Channel Nine's "Today Show" this morning, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton declared that the government "won't take a moral lecture" on the plight of the family. He again stated that their case was "without merit in terms of their claim to be refugees" and that they "have to return back to their country of origin."

Prime Minister Scott Morrison similarly declared that he could not "in good conscience" allow the family to remain in Australia, as this would undermine "strong borders." In a cynical attempt to whip up anti-refugee xenophobia the Department of Home Affairs claimed today that six boats carrying Sri Lankan asylum-seekers had attempted to travel to Australia since May, but that they had been intercepted by

immigration authorities.

The government claims that it is safe for the family to return to Sri Lanka are a lie. As international rights organisations have documented, Tamil workers and youth continue to face state harassment, imprisonment and “disappearance” at the hands of the military and police apparatus that waged a brutal communal civil war for over three decades.

Dutton revealed that the family had been moved to Christmas Island so that Border Force agents could deport them to Sri Lanka without being put in a “difficult position” by protesters. He branded supporters of the family as “liars.”

Dutton’s statements are a warning that the attack on the Tamil family is part of a broader crackdown on democratic rights, directed against political opposition and the working class. He made the comments after sizeable demonstrations across the country demanded that the family be recognised as refugees. The protests followed an outpouring of support on Friday, with hashtags defending the family on Twitter among four of the five most popular throughout the morning.

On Sunday, over a 1,000 people rallied in Melbourne, while hundreds more joined demonstrations in Sydney and capital cities and towns across the country.

In Melbourne, Megha, a student, said she had attended because “I’d seen about the situation of this family in the media particularly since they were sent to the Broadmeadows facility. It made me so angry seeing the two children having to go through that. I feel like the political parties are all complicit in this. Both of the major parties have policies that actively support the funding of deportations.

“I think the reason this is happening is that it’s a type of scapegoating. We are seeing it more and more. There is economic instability and less jobs, so governments seem to hold no sympathy for boat people at all.”

Emma, a student teacher, stated: “It’s a systemic problem what’s going on with refugees. It’s back to colonialism, and fear of others. They say we have to ‘Keep Australian jobs.’ This ideology has really been around a long time, it’s called White Australia.”

In a bid to divert the emerging movement behind the political establishment, the pseudo-left Solidarity group, which organised the protests through a number of front groups, provided Labor and the Greens with a

policy to fraudulently posture as defenders of refugees.

In Sydney, the keynote speaker was Kristina Keneally, a senior federal Labor parliamentarian. She appealed for Morrison to “open your heart, understand what the gospel tells us as Christians to do.” Labor leader Anthony Albanese has made similar cynical calls for “compassionate” treatment of the family.

In reality, it was the federal Labor government of Julia Gillard that in 2012 decreed that all Sri Lankan asylum-seekers who arrived by boat would be repatriated. Hundreds of Tamil refugees were handed over to the Sri Lankan military-backed regime, as it carried out mass arrests and killings of Tamil civilians and political opponents.

Morrison’s policies are a continuation of attacks initiated by Labor, which for the past two decades has spearheaded the assault on asylum-seekers. For their part, the Greens were in a de facto coalition with the minority Gillard government as it carried out the deportations.

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