
CSS STRATEGIC BACKGROUND PAPER – 02 / 2013

AUSTRALIA'S BOAT PEOPLE PROBLEM: IS THE PACIFIC SOLUTION REALLY A SOLUTION?

The arrival by boat on Australian shores of asylum seekers is not a new phenomenon. The first wave came ashore in 1976, a by-product of the Vietnam War. In the following decade more refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia {but also from southern China} arrived, at a rate of about 300 people a year. More recently numbers have swelled and the countries of origin are now much further afield. Asylum seekers are now predominately from the Middle East and Sri Lanka.

In 2008/09 there were 1033 asylum seekers on 23 boats in 2008/09. This figure grew to 7,983 on 110 boats in 2011/12 and rocketed in 2012 to 11,896 on 205 boats. This year more than 15,000 had arrived by late July. These figures may include those known to have been lost at sea. It is estimated that more than 90% of the boat people are genuine refugees. The tempo of arrivals illustrates the enormity of the problem facing the Australian Government.

Back in 2001 the Howard Government signed agreements with Nauru and Papua New Guinea to accommodate asylum seekers for the duration of the processing of their applications. The so-called Pacific solution came to an end in early 2008 with the announcement by the then Rudd Government that the Centres on Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea would no longer be used, with future unauthorised arrivals being processed on Christmas Island. On February 2008 Senator Evans, then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, said “that the Rudd Government pledged to dismantle the Pacific solution and we have moved quickly on that front”.

Overwhelmed, however, by the rapid increase in asylum seekers the Gillard Government recently re-opened both Centres. On 19 July Prime Minister Rudd, faced with a further surge of boat people and with elections looming, firmly re-embraced the Pacific solution. During a visit to Port Moresby Prime Minister Rudd and his Papua New Guinea counterpart, Peter O'Neill, signed an agreement that, Rudd said, would transfer all irregular maritime arrivals to Papua New Guinea and deny them any chance of settling in Australia as refugees.

Prime Minister Rudd confirmed that regional processing arrangements in Papua New Guinea would be significantly expanded and local officials would assess refugee claims on Manus Island. He added that there is “no cap on the number of people who can be transferred to Papua New Guinea.” Subsequently, Immigration Minister Tony Burke, noted that capacity could be increased in existing Papua New Guinea facilities “by using tents and marquees” if necessary.

What does Papua New Guinea receive in return for taking on this burden? Australia has agreed to re-establish an Australian Federal Police presence in key centres; focus more support on the Papua New Guinea government priorities of health, education, infrastructure and law and justice, and to a slight relaxation in tough visa requirements. Prime Minister O’Neill hailed the agreement for allowing his country to set its own priorities for Australian aid. He also indicated that the agreement reached with Australia would be a practical way in which PNG could assist Australia with a significant humanitarian problem.

In a subsequent interview with an ABC journalist Prime Minister O’Neill gave rather vague answers to questions about how the re-settlement policy would work in practice. He would not give an upper limit on the numbers Papua New Guinea could accept and in response to a question as to where those boat people who were assessed as genuine refugees might be settled, he said “we’ll get there when we start processing them”. He did not accept that Papua New Guinea would be the only re-settlement option, saying “we will speak to other countries in the region as to how many genuine refugees they can accept”. Papua New Guinea already has its own refugee problem as it is home to about 8,000 refugees who have crossed the border from Indonesian Papua.

What has been the reaction within Papua New Guinea? The agreement has not been well received. There has been widespread criticism in local social media. Many critics worry that it will further strain their country’s rather fragile social fabric. Some question how a country can provide new settlers with homes, education, health care and jobs when many of its own citizens lack access to even basic facilities. PNG is currently ranked 157th out of 187 countries for human development by the United Nations Development Programme. Only 15% of a population of nearly seven million are estimated to have access to adequate public services. A further complicating factor for a largely Christian country is the fact that the majority of asylum seekers are Muslim.

Dr Ray Anere of the National Research Institute in Port Moresby has commented that the “challenges are numerous including the ability to observe the basic human rights of the asylum seekers by providing proper medical, accommodation and other basic services”. Dr Anere suggested that issues around a legal framework for asylum seekers and the necessary administrative mechanisms would be key challenges.

The large-scale riot in Nauru following Prime Minister Rudd's 19 July statement, which resulted in the almost complete destruction of boat people detention facilities there at an estimated cost of \$A60 million has added to these concerns. Police had to seek the help of about 150 members of the local community to suppress the riot. Papua New Guineans worry about the possibility of a similar problem emerging on Manus.

For its part the United Nations High Commission for Refugees has again criticised the processing centre on Manus Island, which it states does still not meet required international protection standards.

Are there any signs the new policy is stemming the flow of boat people? It is estimated that of the thirteen boats carrying more than 800 people that have arrived at Christmas Island in the last few days, all but one departed Indonesia for Australia after the new policy was announced. Christmas Island now has more boat people than can currently be accommodated at Manus and it is hard to see how Nauru can be even a temporary option until facilities there are re-built.

What does this mean for New Zealand? Earlier this year the Prime Minister announced that New Zealand would take 150 refugees from Australia annually. At the time Prime Minister Key noted that it was New Zealand's approach to paying its way for use of Australia's more sophisticated intelligence gathering on illegal migration which is shared with New Zealand. He added, "we get a huge amount of support from Australia. It's less resource that we have to put in". The announcement was heavily criticised by the Refugee Council of New Zealand on the grounds it supported Australian policies that were not in accord with accepted international practice.

That criticism does not address the magnitude of Australia's boat people problem. A good case could be mounted to increase the annual quota of such refugees agreed to by the Prime Minister. New Zealand is after all far better placed than PNG to support genuine refugees and that is not a criticism of PNG's well meaning approach. There is also another dimension to these recent developments. Will they bring the day closer when the first boat people arrive on our own shore? It may now be not so much a question of if but of when.

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26 July 2013