

# Asylum seekers despair in Australia

Government suspends processing Sri Lankan and Afghan refugees

By SHAR ADAMS  
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SYDNEY—The Australian government has announced that it will suspend processing new Sri Lankan and Afghan asylum seekers, a move that has shocked refugees and refugee advocates.

The news that processing will be suspended immediately for asylum seekers from war-torn Afghanistan and devastated Sri Lanka have brought an air of despair to Christmas Island, a territory of Australia that is closer to Indonesia than it is to Australia and home to the country's refugee detention centre.

Curtin University professor Linda Briskman has been on the island for a week and was there when the announcement was made.

"There was quite a degree of shock here," she told The Epoch Times. "No one was expecting this particular announcement—it seemed to come from nowhere."

Professor Briskman is worried about the "mental health impact" on future refugees who would be stuck on Christmas Island or in detention in Indonesia indefinitely.

She and her colleagues on the island are already seeing signs of despair, and there are children and families in detention as well. "It is just not the place they should be," she said.

Concerns about the government's new ruling have been raised by a number of rights and refugee groups, including the Australian Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International.

The federal government, however, is sticking to its position. In a joint press conference, Foreign Minister Stephen Smith and Immigration Minister Chris Evans said they believed Sri Lanka was stabilizing after two decades of conflict and Afghanistan was seeing "durable security."

"What the pause says is that we think conditions are improving, that the advice from the UNHCR [U.N. High Commission for Refugees] is they're reviewing their advice and their advice is one of many that we use," Evans said.



A young girl looks out as Sri Lankan asylum seekers engage in a hunger strike after their boat broke down on the way to Australia's Christmas Island, at Cilegon on October 16, 2009 in Merak, Java, Indonesia. OSCAR SIAGIAN/GETTY IMAGES

## UNHCR NOT HAPPY

However, UNHCR regional head Richard Towle said he thought that by suspending asylum claims from Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, the Rudd government stands alone in the developed world.

"UNHCR is currently examining the detail and implications of the Australian government's announcement of a suspension of asylum claims from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka," he told News Limited.

"I am not aware of any other countries in the industrialized world that have suspensions in place for asylum claims for people from these countries."

## HAZARAS STILL AT RISK

Dr. William Maley, director of the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy at the Australian National University, said that for Hazara Afghans, who make up the majority of refugees coming to Australia, conditions have become more dangerous as the

Karzai government attempts to integrate the Taliban into the Afghan community.

Hazaras are distinctive in two respects, he said, one being their East Asian appearance, as opposed to more common southern European features. The second is that they are Shi'ite Muslims, making them a target for the majority Sunni Muslims, particularly the Taliban.

"[Hazaras] are not going to wait until mass slaughter occurs before they make some type of move to protect their livelihoods and their lives," Maley told the ABC.

Briskman said the message she continually receives from the refugees she talks to on Christmas Island is that none of them wanted to leave their countries.

"There are enough reports around to show that Afghanistan and Sri Lanka are far from stable, so people are still very much at risk if there was any question of return," she said.

Briskman said she has no idea why the government would make such a decision, but she suspected it was political.

## VALUES IMPORTANT

Thirty years ago, in very similar circumstances, the government under Malcolm Fraser implemented a plan to deal with the influx of refugees following the Vietnam War. It involved process centers in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and guarantees from the United States, Canada, as well as Australia to take the asylum seekers.

"We took over 180,000 Vietnamese in under that scheme," professor of Public Law Mary Crock at the University of Sydney told ABC's Rear Vision.

"We did not introduce temporary protection visas, detention centers in Australia. All of these things were canvassed with the then-Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, but he said 'no.'"

# WHO faces questions over response to H1N1

By STEPHEN JONES  
Epoch Times Staff

A frank and critical investigation will be carried out by an independent group to assess the response of the World Health Organization to the H1N1 swine flu virus, WHO director-general Margaret Chan said Monday.

A number of government officials and scientists have accused WHO of overplaying the potential danger of the virus. Others claim that the decision to label the spread of the virus a pandemic was influenced by commercial interests.

The review will be carried out by a team of 29 scientists working independently. On Monday, they met with Chan to begin their investigation.

"We want a frank, critical, transparent, credible, and independent review of our performance," Chan told the assembled scientists at the beginning of the three-day meeting in Geneva.

"We want to know what worked well. We want to know what went wrong and, ideally, why. We want to know what can be done better and, ideally, how," she added.

Following the swine flu virus being declared a pandemic,

governments bought millions of dollars worth of expensive antivirals. Much of the unused stock is now approaching expiry.

Swine flu, also known as H1N1, has affected 213 countries in the last year. Some 17,700 people have died, despite millions being infected.

WHO's top flu official, Keiji Fukuda, said that it was easy to criticize in hindsight—but at the time there was a possibility that the swine flu could have been even more dangerous than its forerunner virus, the bird flu.

"We have a great deal of speculation, we have a great deal of criticism. The reality is a huge amount of uncertainty," Fukuda told the meeting.

"In many ways it is more unforgiving out there," he said. "The expectations are higher."

He added that bird flu, which killed half of those infected, set the "emotional tone" for the response to the swine flu virus once it began to spread.

The problem is also based on WHO's sixfold international alert system for grading new viruses. The most severe alert—pandemic—is based largely on the geographical spread of the virus rather than its severity.



JAB: A woman has her H1N1 swine flu vaccination at a community clinic in Washington, D.C., on January 13. The World Health Organization is under investigation for its handling of the spread of the swine flu virus. JEWEL SAMAD/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

# French government to destroy houses of storm survivors

Some threaten to defend their homes with guns

By AURELIEN GIRARD  
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PARIS—The French government is remaining firm on its decision to destroy more than 1,500 houses in areas of "extreme danger" along the Atlantic coast. The decision follows the deaths of 53 people from Xynthia, the violent winter storm that battered Europe's west coast on Feb. 28.

Hope had risen among residents that they could save their homes following a statement made by Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux on April 11, in which he said, "There could be individual, precise, and discrete situations that could need a deepened analysis."

On April 12, state secretary and president of local the general council Dominique Bussereau announced he would bring to President Nicolas Sarkozy a motion that asks for all homes, especially those said to be in "extreme danger," to be evaluated first, with a view to protecting them, before finalizing a decision to destroy them.

On April 13 however, following a special Cabinet meeting Prime Minister Francois Fillon declared that the criteria used by the French state to define the dangerous zone are "objective criteria, based on concrete, precise, observations. They are not to be challenged, at least not at the current stage."

Fillon further announced that owners of houses to be destroyed would be compensated within one to three months for a price equivalent to the value of the homes before they were damaged by the storm.

"This has no precedent in our country," said Fillon, adding that



STORM EFFECTS: An aerial view taken on March 3 shows flooded fields in the Vendée region of western France, three days after the storm dubbed "Xynthia" unleashed gale force winds and torrential rains, destroying roads and houses along France's Atlantic coast and left 53 dead. BERTRAND GUAY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

support teams would meet with storm victims to offer individualized support.

Xynthia victims, however, perceive the planned destruction to be heavy handed and unfair. Several hundred have protested in the streets of the main cities that were damaged, holding banners saying, "Please note we are not cattle."

In Le Monde newspaper and other media, many have said that there is no need to destroy the homes.

"This is the world upside down," said an owner who had to climb onto the roof of his flooded home during the storm. Another said

there was no water damage to his home, but he is to be relocated.

"I did not have any damage, insurance did not even come," complained a woman from L'Aiguillon city, who will also have to leave.

"There are cases that must be revised. In some districts things do not make sense," said Jean-Francois Faget, mayor of Charron, in an interview on Europe 1 radio. Faget emphasized the tense emotional situation for victims, some of whom have threatened to defend their homes with guns.

"Actions of despair" could occur, said Faget. "I'm afraid it could happen, I'm really afraid it could."

# Tweets, cookies, and wall posts

TWEETS CONTINUED FROM P1

However, the fact that the cynical and mocking adverts have gained popularity after being circulated by Liberal activists on Facebook, speaks of a wider issue.

A large number of voters have become increasingly disillusioned with politics following one of the country's worst political scandals last year in which scores of politicians were found to have claimed thousands of pounds in parliamentary expenses for frivolous purchases.

In a bid to overcome prejudices against politicians, parties are increasingly exploiting "word-of-mouth" campaigning through social media such as Facebook.

Even in online advertising, parties are using new means to target the message to particular interest groups. The Conservatives are currently planning a multi-level advertising campaign on the U.K. dating site Match.com, after a staff member discovered that users post personal details such as personal income on their profiles.

Twitter too, has become an important tool for communication. After the fallout from cookie-gate for instance, Gordon Brown used his Twitter account to tell anyone

who was interested that he preferred chocolate biscuits.

But how have voters responded to the use of social media by politicians?

A recent survey for New Media Age found that 46 percent of 18-21-year-olds were more interested in this year's election as a result of the increased political campaigning through social networks like Facebook.

In addition, some 60 percent of 18-25-year-olds are likely to think favourably of parties that use these channels for communication.

In a bid to harness the interest in campaigning through social networks, Facebook has launched a website called Democracy U.K. which so far has attracted well over 36,000 fans.

Ironically however, just 5 percent of survey respondents trust the statements politicians make through Facebook, and just 1 percent reported trusting promises that politicians make through Twitter.

Part of the reason for the skepticism is that the relaxed social standards of networks can allow individuals to make sometimes glib comments—something they could not do in televised debates.

Indeed, Labour candidate Stuart MacLennan became the first casualty of Twitter after he was sacked for making jokes about slavery on his profile, as well as referring to pensioners as "coffin dodgers."

Separate polls have found that most voters expect to base their political decisions on information that comes from televised debates rather than from e-mail or Facebook.

In the eyes of some academics, the role of the Internet has been overplayed. The majority of voters are still more likely to be canvassed by local politicians in traditional ways, rather than through the Internet.

In a recent survey of its members, the Conservative Party found that 89 percent had received material through the mailbox, compared to 18 percent by e-mail.

Professor Philip Cowley, who teaches politics at Nottingham University, believes that the novelty of Internet campaigning has skewed the perception of its importance.

"There is an inverse relationship between the importance of any election campaign technique and the amount of media coverage devoted to it," he wrote in a recent blog posting.

# DJs face threat of death in Somali music ban

MUSIC CONTINUED FROM P1

"Hizbul Islam officials telephoned some of the stations to remind them of the deadline and warning them of dire consequence should they fail to comply," the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSJ) said in a statement.

The ban covers all kinds of music, even commercial jingles, causing the stations to introduce their programs using alternative means, such as the sound of firing gunshots, the noise of a car engine, or animal sounds.

"Journalists working in these stations have in the past witnessed broad daylight assassination of their

colleagues and have now been signaled that they would follow the same fate if they do not obey these oppressive orders," said the NUSJ's representative Omar Faruk Osman.

The people in Mogadishu can still listen to music on two stations: government radio, protected by African Union peacekeepers, and a U.N.-funded station based in Kenya.

Practising journalism is a very risky undertaking in Somalia. Last year was the deadliest period for journalists in the country. Nine reporters were killed and 12 more wounded, and four media houses closed down. Many journalists have received death

threats, some on a daily basis.

The rival insurgent group in Somalia, al-Shabaab, closed down five BBC relay stations in southern Somalia last week and forbade local stations to retransmit programs produced by the British broadcaster or Voice of America. The militants accused the BBC of "making propaganda for the enemy of Muslims and the Christian agents."

Somalia has not had a stable government for almost 20 years. Islamic insurgents are trying to topple the current U.N.-backed government, which controls only a small part of the Mogadishu capital.