Bizarre Australia-US refugee swap

by David Holdcroft

In April Australian Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews announced that, in a deal brokered with the US, Australia would 'swap' up to 200 refugees every year.

Under the scheme, asylum seekers presently on the island of Nauru will be considered for resettlement in the US, if recognised as refugees. At the same time Cubans and Haitian refugees currently held in Guantanamo Bay will be resettled in Australia. The US is the first government to undertake to resettle a significant number of refugees from Nauru. Kevin Andrews described the move as a deterrent, arguing that "potential resettlement in the US will be a disincentive to those who seek to come to Australia illegally because they have friends here."

Under Australia's 'Pacific solution', asylum seekers who travel by sea but do not reach the Australian mainland are processed in detention centres run by the International Organization for Migration – under contract to the Australian government – on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Designed to discourage asylum seekers from making onshore applications, the centres deny refugees access to the Australian legal system. While the Australian government has repeatedly stated that this group would not be permitted access to Australia, approximately 96% of refugees processed through this scheme have ended up in Australia or New Zealand. Clearly, this is a circuitous, potentially damaging and extremely expensive method of processing refugee claimants.

It is hard to understand the logic of the US-Australian announcement from any point of view. The prime driver of refugee policy seems to be border control rather than any concern for the protection of undocumented arrivals. If this is at the cost of due process and human rights it will be ultimately self-defeating.

The refugee protection system can, and must, accommodate unregulated movements of people across borders seeking asylum. To take such extraordinary measures in response to a small group of asylum seekers is undignified and wholly unnecessary. One cannot help but think that the policy is also designed to 'wedge' the refugee lobby in Australia by putting up the US as an acceptable location for resettlement: nevertheless it is the process by which Australia arrives at this conclusion which is so damaging. We must begin to look for more sensible and humane options.

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