



AFGHANISTAN IS NOT SAFE: NO DEPORTATIONS TO DANGER

The Australian government is planning to deport hundreds of Afghan asylum seekers back to danger. On January 17 last year, Immigration Minister Chris Bowen finalised a “Memorandum of understanding” with the Afghan Government and the UN High Commission for Refugees to allow deportations to Afghanistan for the first time.

This is something not even the Howard government accomplished—as Chris Bowen has shamefully boasted.

Ten years of war have not brought democracy or human rights to Afghanistan. The Karzai government, which the West is supporting, only remains in power through rigging elections. Karzai’s Vice President Mohammad Qasim Fahim is described by Human Rights Watch as, “one of the most notorious warlords in the country, with the blood of many Afghans on his hands from the civil war.”

The UNICEF 2010 Humanitarian Action Report states that 235,000 people have been displaced and a further 2.6 million Afghans have registered in neighbouring countries as refugees. One third of the population is food insecure, over two thirds do not have access to safe drinking water, and 90 per cent have no access to sanitary toilets.

Hazara persecution

Most Afghan asylum seekers in Australia are ethnic Hazaras, a vulnerable ethnic group persecuted by the Taliban that the Karzai government and Western forces have failed to protect.

Hazaras make up just under 20 per cent of Afghanistan’s population but their overwhelming status as Shia Muslims, unlike the rest of Afghanistan’s population which is Sunni Muslim, as well as their obvious Asian features have caused them to be singled out for persecution. As many as 8000 Hazaras were killed during Taliban rule before 2001.¹

In late June 2010, 11 Hazara men were violently beheaded in southern Afghanistan for their Shia religion. In early December 2011, 60 people were killed after twin bomb attacks on Shiites during a religious festival.

Even Hazaras who flee to Pakistan are persecuted, with over 400 killed there in the last two years.



Above: Hazaras protesting in Melbourne against ongoing killings and persecution in Afghanistan

Afghanistan expert Professor William Maley says it would be “extremely dangerous” to send Hazaras back to Afghanistan.

There were 1205 Afghans in detention centres at 30 November 2011 according to Immigration Department statistics, the second highest of any nationality.

Conditions in Afghanistan

So how does the government justify sending asylum seekers back to Afghanistan? On April 9, 2010 the Australian Government imposed a freeze on the processing of new Afghan asylum claims for six months. Justifying the visa freeze, lifted in October 2010, the Immigration Minister insisted, “we think conditions [in Afghanistan] are improving”.

Yet over 3000 civilians were killed in Afghanistan last year, the fifth year in a row the number has risen, according to the UN.² Responding to the government’s claims about conditions in the country, Professor Maley told *The Australian* “the consensus among experts on Afghanistan is that the security environment has been deteriorating.”³

The Australian government’s own official travel advice for Afghanistan warns people not to go there due to “the extremely dangerous security situation”.⁴ Even as the Australian Government continues its involvement in the Afghanistan war, it locks up refugees escaping the violence and conflict there.



Ismail Mirza Jan, the Afghan asylum seeker the government wants to deport

Deportations to danger

The Gillard government risks repeating the disastrous record of the Howard government—which deported Afghans back to danger and death. There was a similar freeze on Afghan asylum seekers imposed by the Howard government in late 2001 when the US invaded Afghanistan. Following the invasion, Afghan asylum seekers were deported from Nauru.

Last year the *Sydney Morning Herald* investigated the fate of refugees from the Tampa, who were turned away from Australia by the navy in 2001. Mostly Hazaras, 179 of them were sent back to Afghanistan. Ten years on, “Up to 20 have been reported killed, dozens more have disappeared.” Of those that have survived, “most live on the fringes, in refugee camps or separated from family in unfamiliar cities.”⁵

One, Sawar, had been home in his village in Ghazni province just a week when a group of men, “took him from his house... dragged him outside and choked him to death with barbed wire.”⁶

Abdul Azmin Rajabi saw his nine and six year old daughters Yalda and Rowena killed as a consequence of his being targeted four months after he was returned.⁷

Ismail’s case

In November the government began moves to deport a 27 year-old Hazara Afghan asylum seeker, Ismail Mirza Jan, from Villawood detention centre to Kabul, Afghanistan. This would be the first forced deportation since the Memorandum of Understanding signed last year.

Ismail fled Afghanistan in 2001, after his father was killed. His province, Wardak, remains notoriously dangerous for Hazaras. Like so many other Hazaras, Ismail has been told he can return to Kabul, but Ismail is not from Kabul. Besides the danger, Ismail has no family, no community ties, no social support and no hope.

Currently Ismail’s deportation is being prevented

by last minute court action. Neither Ismail nor any other asylum seeker should be returned to Afghanistan.

Further information

Deported to Danger reports produced by the Edmund Rice Centre (ERC)

The ERC has produced two detailed reports investigating the fate of asylum seekers deported by the Howard government, including many to Afghanistan. They are available online at <http://x.co/gMst> or visit www.erc.org.au

A Well Founded Fear

A documentary film has also been produced based on the work of the ERC, which screened on SBS in 2008

www.awellfoundedfear.com.au

The Tampa: ten years on

The *Sydney Morning Herald* investigation ten years after on the Tampa is online at www.smh.com.au/national/tampa-affair

References

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- 2 “Afghan civilian casualties rise in 2011”, *ABC News online*, February 4 2012,
- 3 “Ministers contradicted on asylum applications freeze”, *The Australian*, April 13 2010
- 4 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Travel advice: Afghanistan” <http://www.smartraveller.gov.au/zw-cgi/view/Advice/afghanistan>
- 5 Ben Doherty, “A journey that ended where it started—in despair” *Sydney Morning Herald* August 20, 2011
- 6 Ben Doherty and Kate Geraghty, “Bonds of hope and hardship” *Sydney Morning Herald* August 20, 2011
- 7 Cynthia Banham “It’s hell for Afghans we rejected” *Sydney Morning Herald* October 27 2008

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