

NO WAY OUT: THE INHUMANE REALITY OF AUSTRALIA'S MIGRATION EXTERNALIZATION

AUSTRALIA'S MIGRATION TRENDS IN RECENT YEARS

Being a migration country itself, Australia has long been a destination for migrants, with a significant portion arriving through both legal and irregular channels. According to the OECD's International Migration Outlook 2024, Australia received over 190,000 permanent migrants in 2022-2023, primarily through skilled migration and family reunification programs. However, the country has also taken an increasingly hardline stance against asylum seekers arriving by boat.

Since the early 2000s, Australia has implemented strict deterrence policies to prevent maritime arrivals. Between 2013 and 2023, the government reported intercepting and turning back over 800 boats under its controversial Operation Sovereign Borders policy, which consists in systematically rejecting migration coming from maritime routes. These measures have drastically reduced boat arrivals according to Australian authorities but have come at a severe humanitarian cost.



Wreck of a migrant boat that sank off the Indonesian coast, while traveling towards Australia in September 2013. Credit: Photographer Beawiharta

EXTERNALIZATION OF MIGRATION: OFFSHORE DETENTION AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

While some European leaders are looking towards Australia's migration policies, we have to address its strategy which in itself promotes human rights abuses. In recent years, Australia's migration policies are characterized by externalization — shifting responsibility for asylum seekers to third countries. Here, two key policies define this approach.

First, the Pacific Solution in place between 2001 and 2007 and then reinstated in 2012 involved transferring asylum seekers to offshore processing centers in the Republic of Nauru and Manus island,

belonging to Papua New Guinea's. The goal was to deter irregular maritime arrivals by constantly denying resettlement in Australia.

Then, the Operation Sovereign Borders initiated in 2013 and still in place to this day is a military-led initiative that enforces boat turnbacks, mandatory detention, and offshore processing. Under this policy, intercepted asylum seekers are sent to detention centers in Nauru and Manus island, where conditions of detention of migrants have largely been denounced and condemned by NGOs and international organizations.

Indeed, these territories offer facilities that have been described as inhumane, with reports of overcrowding, inadequate medical care, and psychological harm. A report by Amnesty International highlights that detainees, including children, have faced prolonged detention without trial, as well as forms of violence such as sexual abuse. While Indonesia and Nauru are facing difficulties of their own preventing them from prioritizing the respect of human rights of migrants on their lands, we should not think better of the Christmas islands, a remote Australian territory used for migrations detention which deals with the same human rights violation issue.

Despite Australia's violation of international law, notably the violation of the principle of *non-refoulement* issued by the 1951 Geneva Convention,

the country funds detention centers and provides patrol boats to Indonesia in order to intercept migrants before they can sail in Australian waters. Furthermore, Australia has signed agreements to resettle migrants not only in Nauru but also in Cambodia, even though very few have been successfully relocated.



Map of Australia's external detention centers
Credit: SBS News

THE HUMAN COST: ABUSE, NEGLECT, AND THE SCANDAL OF CHILD DETENTION

The externalization of migration has led to severe human rights violations, particularly against vulnerable groups such as children. A 2014 Australian Human Rights Commission report found that children in detention suffered from trauma, self-harm, and sexual abuse. Some were held for over a year in offshore centers, with little access to education or proper healthcare.

The Human Rights Watch 2015 World Report documented cases of physical and sexual abuse against detainees, including children in Nauru. Despite international condemnation, Australia has maintained its policies, arguing they are necessary to prevent deaths at sea, even though this affirmation is highly questionable.

A MODEL TO AVOID

Australia's migration externalization policies have set a dangerous precedent, prioritizing deterrence over human rights. While they claim to have reduced boat arrivals, they have also caused immense suffering, particularly for children and vulnerable asylum seekers. As the Forum Refugees notes, these policies serve as a warning and not a model for other nations considering similar measures. Despite the circumstances, this could also be a call for NGOs and international organisations to continue to act in the best interests of the refugees. In 2018, Médecins sans frontières published a report stating that "among the 208 refugee and asylum-seeking patients in Nauru, 60% had suicidal thoughts and 30% attempted suicide". Later, the organization was ordered to leave the island by Nauru's authorities, reinforcing the need for the international community to push forward human alternatives that uphold the rights and dignity of all migrants.



Refugees protest against deplorable living conditions on Nauru, March 2nd 2015
Credit: Pacific affairs reporter Liam Fox and Sam Bolitho, ABC News

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