

# Advance Australia unfair

by Emma Larking

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Australia is pouring money into a system that targets the vulnerable in our region, and it is doing so with considerable secrecy and scant regard for the costs.

Recent evidence of its profligacy came in a report from the Australian National Audit Office claiming **the immigration department spent \$2.2 billion** on offshore detention programs without going through adequate processes to ensure value for money, and without appropriate oversight of contracts for services.

The **report found** contracts had been entered into in haste to give effect to government policy decisions, and **the result** was higher than necessary expense for taxpayers and significant reputational risks for the Australian Government and the department.

Australia's offshore detention camps are **now notorious**, but less is known about other attempts to curb irregular migration. Yet Australia invests heavily throughout the Asia-Pacific to ensure that irregular migrants – including asylum seekers – never arrive on its shores.

The Australian public has a right to know how the Government is spending public monies, to what ends and with what results. The public also deserves an explanation of how spending on border controls fits with other regional policy initiatives. These include justice programs designed to promote the rule of law, strengthen judicial independence, support national human rights institutions and counter violence against women and children.

In countries throughout the Asia-Pacific region, Australia provides funding and infrastructure to establish border controls, and personnel to draft new migration laws and policy frameworks. Members of the Australian Federal Police, defence force personnel and immigration department employees collaborate closely with their

regional counterparts, often working in-country. The Australian Navy and Secret Intelligence Service are engaged in operations to intercept asylum seekers and stop people smuggling.

As well as the detention centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea (PNG), Australia also **funds detention centres in Indonesia**. It funded the Nauruan and PNG Government's defence in cases challenging the constitutionality of the detention centres. It also funds international agencies to process and oversee irregular migrants and refugees living in the community in Indonesia, Nauru, PNG, and until recently, Cambodia. Frequently, aid funding is linked to agreements to enhance border controls, repatriate nationals who have fled the country, or establish detention centres or refugee resettlement programs.

It is impossible to obtain clear financial costings, but a **conservative accounting suggests** Australia has spent well over a billion dollars annually since 2012 on these efforts to prevent irregular migration. With no boats known to have made landfall on Australian territory since late 2013, this might be considered money well spent – albeit a large pot of it. But what are the other costs associated with this secretive regime? There is the suffering of individuals trapped in countries where they are persecuted or **live in limbo** without rights. But there are also broader implications for Australia and the region.

In its collaborations with Cambodia, Iran, Nauru, PNG, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, Australia has aligned itself with authoritarian regimes implicated in serious human rights abuses. The funding it provides in exchange for support on irregular migration strengthens and entrenches these regimes. Australia is promoting the securitisation of irregular migration in the Asia-Pacific, putting it on what Josiah **Heyman calls** 'a war footing'. In the process, the power of executive governments is enhanced, along with their immunity from public scrutiny and control. Throughout the region, rights activists have expressed dismay over these developments.

Australia's refusal to open its borders to displaced people is also viewed with disdain by communities that are poorer and less well equipped to assist. Deni ToKunai, a political commentator in PNG, **says the 2013 agreement** to establish an Australian-funded detention centre contributed to "a boiling resentment [among many in PNG] against Australia and the Australian people never before seen by this generation".

This resentment is unlikely to evaporate. PNG's Supreme Court may have ruled the detention arrangements unconstitutional, but there are still hundreds of people living in the centre, and building work is underway on **a new 'transfer' centre** funded by Australia.

## DEVPOLICYBLOG

How Australia's irregular migration policies interact with other forms of regional policy engagement has not been publicly explained or defended, but the former are inconsistent with other goals, including advancing the rule of law. Regional justice programs are unlikely to gain traction while Australia continues to fund detention and control regimes that perpetuate violence and operate outside the purview of the law. Instead, they may well contribute to regional perceptions of Australia as a nation of selfish and self-serving hypocrites.

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