



U.S.-Australia Refugee Resettlement Deal Is Underway

Did Trump conclude it wasn't such a "dumb deal" after all?

By Nayla Rush

***Summary:** The deal to resettle Australia's unwanted refugees in the United States, made between the outgoing Obama administration and Malcolm Turnbull's government over six months ago, is being carried out by the Trump administration. The process is well underway for refugees being detained at Australia's offshore detention centers on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea and on Nauru. There are currently a total of some 1,250 asylum seekers (mainly men from Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan) detained on the islands. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) referred for resettlement in the United States over 850 detainees who were granted refugee status. Those could be admitted by the end of October, after undergoing "extreme vetting". But, no matter how "extreme" or dependable the vetting (and the data U.S. officials use to screen these refugees is transmitted from a private refugee-resettlement contractor), the question remains: Why resettle Australia's unwanted refugees in the United States? They are, for the most part, nationals from countries from which the Trump administration is trying to ban travel. Most also suffer from serious mental health issues, are not keen on coming to the United States to begin with (Australia was and still is their preferred destination), and are likely to have nothing but disdain for President Trump.*

* * *

Before leaving office, President Obama offered to welcome Australia's unwanted refugees into the United States. Soon after taking office, President Trump promised to study the "dumb deal": "Do you believe it? The Obama administration agreed to take thousands of illegal immigrants from Australia. Why? I will study this dumb deal!" he tweeted.¹

He must have quickly concluded the deal was not so dumb after all. The Trump administration publicly announced on February 1 it will honor the agreement, pledging the refugees will undergo "extreme vetting".²

At a meeting in New York on May 4 to mark the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea during World War II, both President Trump and Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull downplayed the reportedly tense phone exchange they had in January about this refugee deal. Mr. Turnbull told reporters: "We can put the refugee deal behind you and move on."³ President Trump added: "It's all worked out. It's been worked out for a long time."

Indeed it has.

A quick recap: Under Australia's tough border security laws, asylum seekers who are intercepted trying to reach the country by boat illegally are automatically sent to offshore processing centers on the small island nation of Nauru and on Manus Island, part of the nation of Papua New Guinea.⁴ The Australian government further toughened its immigration policy in July 2013 and announced that no detainees would ever be settled in Australia, even if they were granted refugee status.

Faced with increased pressure from the opposition and human rights activists to shut down these offshore detention centers (not to mention the billions of dollars they are costing Australian taxpayers), Prime Minister Turnbull had to look for a third country to accept its unwanted refugees.

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This issue is pressing and needs to be resolved before October 2017 because, “[t]he company contracted to provide services in the Manus Island and Nauru centres, Ferrovial, said it would not renew its contract with the Australian government beyond October.”⁵

Furthermore, the demolition of the Manus detention center is to begin in May and every detainee is to be removed (by force if need be) by October 31, according to Papua New Guinea immigration officials.⁶

The Process Is Well Underway

The resettlement process began soon after President Trump took office. As early as February, refugees on both islands who were given refugee status by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) were interviewed by the Bangkok Resettlement Support Center (RSC) staff.

The following excerpts are from the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) page explaining the resettlement process in general terms:⁷

1. Registration and Data Collection

... Usually, refugees are referred by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), which collects initial documentation and biographical information.

*This information is transferred to a Department of State funded Resettlement Support Center (RSC). **The RSC conducts an in-depth interview with the applicant, enters the applicant’s documentation into the Department of State’s Worldwide Refugee Admission Processing System (WRAPS), cross references and verifies the data, and sends the information necessary to conduct a background check to other U.S. agencies.***

...

3. DHS Interview

... Specially trained DHS officers review initial screening results, conduct in-person interviews in the host country, and collect biometric data from the applicants.

The DHS interview confirms the information collected from the previous interviews conducted by the State Department’s RSCs. Additional interviews are conducted as new information arises. (Emphasis added.)

In this particular case, the Refugee Resettlement Support Center in Bangkok, called an “overseas processing entity”, is not part of the State Department, but instead is managed by a U.S.-based non-governmental organization, the International Rescue Committee.⁸ IRC is funded by the State Department.⁹ David Miliband, a former foreign secretary of the United Kingdom, is the current president and CEO of New York-based IRC.

One of IRC’s activities is to “[a]ssist persons seeking admission the United States as refugees by preparing and completing refugee applications, and to assist the U.S. Government in the processing of applications (Southeast Asia Resettlement Support Center, RSC).”¹⁰ IRC collaborates with PRM by helping “refugees and their families prepare their cases to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), compiling personal data and background information for security clearance.”¹¹

In March, a spokesperson from the Department of Homeland Security explained parts of the refugee resettlement process taking place in Nauru and Papua New Guinea to reporters from the *Daily Mail Australia*:

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and the State Department are continuing the process to consider refugee applicants from Nauru and Papua New Guinea/Manus Island for resettlement to the United States. Under normal processing, this involves several steps, including interviews by staff of the Resettlement Support Center [IRC in this instance], which operates under the auspices of the State Department, followed by interviews by USCIS staff.¹²

In March and April, U.S. DHS officials fingerprinted and photographed refugees already interviewed by IRC staff on Nauru and Manus Island. They were handed documents outlining the resettlement process and the various types of assistance provided if accepted, such as housing, job search, etc. They were also informed about family reunification opportunities once in the United States: “Your resettlement agency can assist you with family reunification efforts after you are resettled.”¹³ Family members include children, spouses, parents and, possibly other relatives.

One asylum seeker on Manus Island, Behrouz Boochani, remains skeptical. Boochani is a Kurd who fled Iran in May 2013. He was arrested and transferred to the Manus Island Detention Centre in August 2013 as he was trying to reach Australia by boat from Indonesia. He writes from his detention and collaborates with journalists, human rights activists, and refugee advocates. Boochani is very active on social media, giving a voice to all detainees who do not have his exposure.

On the issue of family reunification, Boochani asked on his Facebook page:

The situation for the refugees who have wives and families is more difficult than others, because they are scared to go to America. Their main question is whether, if Trump accepts them, will they be allowed to bring their families to America in future if they are from “banned countries”?¹⁴

Good question. Will they? Especially now, after President Trump’s recent appeal to the Supreme court to uphold his “travel ban” executive order for nationals from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.¹⁵

Boochani has been very critical of Trump. He wrote on February 4, 2017, in a Sydney, Australia, newspaper:

Many people this week are shocked and outraged by Donald Trump’s actions [the executive order]. They are right to be outraged. ...

When I watched the recent women’s march in Sydney against Donald Trump I was so proud that the feminist movement is powerful enough to bring so many people onto the streets. ...

The Australian government is refusing to criticise Donald Trump and his administration even as so many world leaders express their opposition to his actions. At the same time, these two governments that are so comfortable with bigotry have been making secret deals about our future. No one has been watching the events in the US more closely than us. ...

At this historical moment when Donald Trump and populist politicians are trying to destroy social and democratic values around the world, it is our duty to be united and consolidate around justice, democracy and compassion.¹⁶

Abbreviated Vetting

Meanwhile, the resettlement process that started in February and should end by October is presented as an example of “extreme vetting” even though it will last only eight months, rather than the regular 18-24 months. Refugee agency sources told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that they believed a number of refugees will be resettled in the United States by late September.¹⁷

In May, DHS officials started their “extreme vetting” interviews at Australia’s offshore detention centers. Reuters reported that “interviews began with an oath to God to tell the truth and then proceeded for as long as six hours, with in-depth questions on associates, family, friends, and any interactions with the Islamic State militant group. A decision on the fate of the first 70 people interviewed is expected to be reached within the next month.”¹⁸

But with highly publicized “extreme vetting” comes extreme caution: On February 14, 2017, Boochani wrote on Facebook:

[P]eople [on Manus] are very concerned about the US deal. We have not read any positive news in the media, and the American gov has not said anything positive about the deal. Also in America the new gov is deporting people to Mexico. It’s a strange situation that at the same time they are in Manus and have started to process the refugees.¹⁹

His post received numerous comments advising Manus detainees to protect themselves and “clean” their social media accounts. Some examples:

- “Behrouz word up everyone to delete any Facebook posts that could be misconstrued — misunderstood or negative — they will be poking around people’s social media stuff like the staff were at the airports in the States on the two days the ban was in place.”
- “Absolutely social media has already been flagged as an area that will be examined.”
- “About Facebook. Guys can delete their pages, but still keep a backup copy on a USB drive. Or better still ask a friend who is not in Manus to download a copy. ... I agree it is better to not have anything in your phone or on Facebook or Messenger or anywhere else.”

But added scrutiny of social media for purposes of vetting refugees only works when it comes as a surprise.²⁰ Most asylum seekers today expect it and cover their tracks accordingly.

This is not to say that the Refugee Processing and Screening System is not thorough: “U.S. national security agencies, including the National Counterterrorism Center, FBI, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Defense, and the Department of State, as well as the intelligence community, begin screening the applicant” — so far, so good. But the sentence concludes: “*using the data transmitted from the RSCs.*” (Emphasis added.)²¹

IRC: A Conflict of Interest

Since we are promised “extreme vetting”, let’s have a closer look at IRC, the non-governmental, U.S.-taxpayer-funded organization responsible for the initial screening of refugees on Manus and Nauru. As noted, information collected by IRC staff is used by DHS officers to conduct their own interviews and background checks. IRC here has a huge responsibility. But is it disinterested?

IRC is also one of the nine domestic resettlement agencies (voluntary agencies or “volags”) that work with and are funded by the Department of State to resettle refugees inside the United States. The Migration Policy Institute explains the role of the volags:

*The major non-governmental organizations involved in the U.S. refugee resettlement program, called “Voluntary Agencies” or “Volags,” are mostly religious or community-based organizations that see the care of resettling refugees as part of their core mandate... The Reception and Placement (R&P) Grant ... is given by the State Department to the various agencies according to the number of refugees for which they are responsible during the given time period. Though the funding pattern for these grants was changed as a result of the sharp decline in admissions in FY 2002-2003, it was re-established on a per-capita level in FY 2004. In return for the grant ... the Volags are expected to provide the following services to refugees approved for resettlement: sponsorship; pre-arrival resettlement planning (including placement); reception upon arrival; basic needs support for at least 30 days, including housing, furnishings, food, and clothing; community orientation; referral to social service providers (including health care, employment, etc.); and case management and tracking for 90-180 days.*²²

So, the same IRC that screens refugees abroad and helps them build a case to submit to U.S. officials for resettlement gets paid per capita to receive and place them inside the United States. There is a clear conflict of interest here.

IRC’s strong advocacy for refugees is no secret. It openly criticized President Trump’s executive order that would have paused the refugee resettlement program for assessment. IRC called on voters to, “Oppose President’s Trump’s ban on refugees” because “[t]hese changes fly in the face of our country’s best values of freedom, fairness and compassion. ... Slam the door on hate. Oppose President Trump’s unjust refugee Executive Order. ... Take Action. Call your members of Congress.”²³

IRC further issued a press release on May 25 applauding the Fourth Circuit ruling on the travel ban:

We are very pleased that the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals refused to reinstate the Trump Administration's harmful order banning Muslims — including refugees — from seeking entry and protection in America, because it is blatantly unconstitutional. The courts have been key to preventing the enforcement of President Trump's hasty and harmful executive order, which resulted in chaos and confusion across the country and has also left thousands of refugees in harm's way.

Despite the courts' repeated rejection of the administration's executive orders, refugee admissions have slowed at a time when refugee numbers around the world are at record levels. There are approximately 60,000 people who have been cleared for entry to the United States and are in limbo; we call on the administration to reconsider its policy and allow this most vetted and most vulnerable population to find their path from harm to home.²⁴

Is this the organization the Trump administration wants to rely on for part of the “extreme vetting” process?

Who Are Australia's Unwanted Asylum Seekers?

According to recent Australian detention statistics, there are 1,241 people in detention on Nauru and Manus Island (PNG): 380 on Nauru and 861 on Manus Island. Most (1,147) are men.²⁵ Of the 380 in Nauru, 286 are men, 49 are women, and 45 are children. All 861 detained on Manus Island are men.

Australia's immigration Department head, Michael Pezzullo, dismissed the possibility that the United States could end up taking no refugees:²⁶ “I don't agree it could be zero ... the agreement was for in the ballpark of 1,250.” UNHCR referred at least 850 refugees from Manus Island and Nauru for resettlement in the United States.²⁷

Most of the asylum seekers are Muslims from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, according to the Associated Press.²⁸ Official Australian data are more specific: “the vast majority of asylum seekers at both Processing Centres [Nauru and Manus] come from Iran.”²⁹ Other applicants are from Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Some of these are included in the list of countries of “security concern” the Trump administration has included in the proposed travel ban.³⁰ The Turnbull government confirmed that “the agreement wouldn't be affected by Donald trump's travel ban.”³¹

Refugees who are not selected by the United States could settle in PNG, Nauru, Cambodia, or go back home.³² Those denied refugee status will be asked to return to their home countries. They are to apply for voluntary repatriation by August 31 and will be given financial support of over \$25,000. If they choose not to, they face deportation.³³

Those on Nauru with refugee status, but not resettled in the United States, and those found by the UNHCR not to be refugees and whose home countries refuse to take them back, will be given 20-year visas to stay in Nauru. Another option is settlement in Cambodia. Some 200 asylum seekers detained on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island were denied refugee status. Many wrote New Zealand's Prime Minister, Bill English, to request asylum.³⁴

Australia's Minister for Immigration, Peter Dutton, reiterated to the press that no asylum seeker on Manus Island and Nauru will ever come to Australia:

The centre [on Manus Island] will be dismantled. There is a facility at East Lorengau close by where some people are currently residing, those people that have been found to be refugees who are transitioning into PNG society, so there are facilities available and there'll be resources available to provide people with settlement options, but we've been very clear, clear from Day One that they are not coming to Australia.³⁵

The difficulty comes when asylum seekers refuse to go back home. If they're Iranian, for example, they cannot be deported because Iran will not issue travel documents for its nationals who refuse to go back home.

With regard to this, Dutton said, “Where you’ve got a situation where people won’t volunteer to return, then that’s the difficulty, and we offer settlement packages, we pay for return flights. ... Ultimately it’s cheaper for the Australian taxpayer to do that.”

Cheaper for the Australian taxpayer, surely, but not for the American one.

Riots, Mental Illness, Sexual Assault Allegations

Following an inspection of the Manus and Nauru detention camps, United Nations experts concluded that the level of mental illness on both islands was alarming.³⁶ During UNHCR’s April 2016 visit to Manus Island, medical experts found that 88 percent of asylum seekers and refugees surveyed “were suffering from a depressive or anxiety disorder and/or post-traumatic stress disorder. ... Furthermore, a number of very severe psychiatric disorders were identified, including gross psychopathology consistent with psychosis as well as psychotic dissociation.” Experts concluded that “[t]he prevalence and severity of mental disorders presented by the asylum-seeker and refugee population on Manus Island is extreme.” Eighty-three percent of asylum seekers and refugees surveyed on Nauru “suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and/or depression.”

Riots, fights with security guards and local residents, incidents of self-harm, and suicide attempts (including swallowing poison and self-immolation) were on the rise.

The latest violent incident took place on Manus Island detention center in April. Dutton, the immigration minister, said the incident was the result of allegations of sexual assault against a five-year-old local boy who was led into the center.³⁷ Manus Island locals got angry and violence broke out between them, camp security guards, and the detainees. Shots were fired inside the camp, but no one was hurt. Detainees refuted these allegations, claiming the fight was the result of a football field dispute. They said that the boy was led inside the camp a few days before the incident because he was asking for food.³⁸

Friction between asylum seekers and locals intensified after detention at the Manus camp was deemed unconstitutional by the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court in April 2016. Detainees (now called “residents”) were since allowed outside the camp.

David Yapu, Manus Province commander, spoke to Fairfax Media:

*We have been warning the refugees to respect the laws of the locals, of Papua New Guinea. ... You are free to walk around, but please make sure that you respect the locals. If you come in conflict with the law, police will not hesitate to deal with you. I want the message to be delivered to them. The bulk of them are okay but there are a few [troublemakers]. Ignorance of the law is not an excuse.*³⁹

In January, an asylum seeker was charged with raping a young local woman on Manus Island. This incident raises, according to the victim’s aunt, a serious problem as to how detainees are relating to local people on the island: “They don’t know our cultures and they don’t respect the women here, they do anything they want. ... They are roaming here, looking for women and getting these small girls [young women] to have sex is not something the people of Manus would like to see.”⁴⁰

Another asylum seeker was arrested and charged with the rape of a 10-year-old girl. As reported in January 2017: “Police on the island said at least seven men had been arrested in recent weeks for offences such as public drunkenness and possession of drugs.”⁴¹

Incidents like these have led to increased tension between the asylum seekers and the local people. Asylum seekers have been attacked outside the center and two Iranian men were beaten by police. But police and local representatives accuse the asylum seekers of “committing crimes and aggressively pursuing local women.”⁴²

What's in It for the United States?

We might get an idea as to why president Obama agreed to the deal by listening to Anne Richard, the architect of this agreement. Richard is the former assistant secretary of state for population, refugees, and migration (PRM). She was appointed to this post by President Obama in 2012 and left PRM right before President Trump took office. Previously, Richard was vice president of government relations and advocacy for the International Rescue Committee, the group discussed above that is paid by the State Department both to start the screening of refugees and to resettle them in the United States.

Richard told reporters she was approached by the Australian embassy in Washington, D.C.: “When the Australians first came to us my motivation was let’s do this, let’s make this happen, we have got to get these individuals to a better place.”⁴³

For Australia, the deal encompassed increasing the intake of refugees from Africa, accepting U.S.-bound illegal aliens in Costa Rica, and focusing on family reunification, especially for refugees in Australia whose family members are in transit countries such as Indonesia. The news report said “The agreement ... was loosely contingent on Australia considering resettling people from Central America and Africa in exchange, although not in a one-for-one swap.”⁴⁴ If the deal is not a swap per se, Ann Richard admits to these elements being “informally linked”.

The Australian government, to date, says it will not honor its part of the deal before the United States does so.

Under the deal, “between 20 and 50 people could be resettled from a ‘Protection Transfer Arrangement’ in Costa Rica set up to resettle refugees from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.”⁴⁵ They, for the most part, claim to be fleeing gang-violence. But according to the Migration Policy Institute, “being forced to join a gang or experiencing violence do not generally qualify as a basis for refugee status or fall readily into one of the refugee definition categories.”⁴⁶ And as I wrote last year, most Central Americans do not even meet the refugee status requirements by UNHCR’s own appraisal.⁴⁷ But that’s beside the point.

What is quite telling, is that by Ann Richard’s own admission, “The U.S. was willing to look at taking hundreds and hundreds that were sort of under the protection of Australia, if you will, in return for Australia doing more — taking more refugees from this facility [Cost Rica].”⁴⁸

Even UNHCR’s regional representative for the United States and the Caribbean at the time, Shelly Pitterman, admitted the humanitarian community was surprised when the deal was announced. But the fact that the United States was prepared to share Australia’s “burden” was quite welcome:

*Fundamentally what motivated the U.S. in accepting to work with another country of asylum, another relatively well-off industrialised resettlement country to take people who should normally be in Canberra or Sydney, was motivated by a burden sharing and humanitarian imperative that these are people who are living in dire circumstances that have had no option to go to Australia under current policy and that in the interests of burden sharing that the United States accepted to receive some of them.*⁴⁹

We can understand why the Obama administration agreed to this resettlement. After all, the announcement was made in September 2016 at the Leaders’ Summit on Refugees hosted by President Obama in New York.⁵⁰ Obama was determined to get world leaders to commit to more resettlement during his refugee summit. The success of this summit was personally important to him as he prepared to leave office and set up his legacy.

Manus asylum seeker Boochani explained how they all (detainees on Manus Island) were hoping President Obama would come to their aid:

I remember that about three years ago we wrote a letter to Obama asking him to take us from this prison or put pressure on Australia to free us, and a lot of us signed it. We did not get any answer but after that we wrote to him several more times. We always felt that Obama would help us one day.

*In September 2016 there was a big meeting on the margins of the United Nations general assembly where Obama invited political leaders like the Australian Prime Minister to discuss solutions to the migrant crisis. It was a good opportunity for us to ask for help again.*⁵¹

And a good opportunity for Obama to agree to help.

What is hard to comprehend is President Trump's agreement to move ahead with this deal. Especially when he is trying to get a travel ban in place to halt the entry of nationals from some of the very countries Australia's unwanted refugees come from.

And at a time when terrorism is raging across the world. One of the latest terrorist acts for which the Islamic State claimed responsibility was committed in Melbourne by Yacqub Khayre, an Australian citizen with a long criminal record who came to Australia from Somalia as a child refugee.⁵²

Maybe we're missing something. Could the United States be getting something out of that deal — beyond Australia's acceptance of the 50 "refugees" from Costa Rica — that is being kept secret from us? Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) has repeatedly and unsuccessfully called for the secret refugee deal with Australia to be declassified.⁵³

The United States and Australia are close allies. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis reaffirmed those strong ties during a recent visit to Australia to participate in the 2017 Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations.⁵⁴ The two countries share strategic interests in numerous fields such as the economy, intelligence, security cooperation, defense industry, etc.

This "secret" deal could be (and hopefully is) to America's advantage. If not, President Trump's initial appraisal was spot on: It sure is a dumb deal for the United States.

On February 2, Boochani asked: "I wonder how Australian politicians do not see that Trump cannot accept the deal because it would hurt himself politically. He cannot because of ideological reasons. He is building a wall, how can he take the refugees from Australia?"⁵⁵

The wall seems to be on hold while refugees from Australia's offshore detention centers are being processed for resettlement in the United States.

End Notes

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⁴ See Nayla Rush, [“Australia’s Unwanted Asylum Seekers \(Mostly Iranians\) to Be Resettled in the US”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, February 2017.

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¹⁹ Behrouz Boochani, [Facebook Page](#), February 14, 2017.

²⁰ See Nayla Rush, [“Attention Syrian Refugees: U.S. Is Looking into Your Facebook Accounts”](#), Center for Immigration Studies blog, February 12, 2016.

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⁵³ Charles E. Grassley, [“Grassley Renews Call for Declassification of Covert Australia Refugee Deal”](#), Chuck Grassley website, February 2, 2017.

⁵⁴ [“AUSMIN 2017 Fact Sheet on the U.S. - Australia Relationship”](#), U.S. Department of State Fact Sheet, June 4, 2017.

⁵⁵ Katherine Murphy and Ben Doherty, [“Australia struggles to save refugee agreement after Trump’s fury at ‘dumb deal’”](#), *The Guardian*, February 2, 2017.