

Australia to send newest asylum seekers offshore

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The latest boatload of suspected asylum seekers to arrive in Australia will be sent to another country for processing, the government said today as it implements its controversial new policy.

Immigration Minister Chris Bowen would not say where the 32 newest arrivals who landed in Australian waters late Friday would be sent, but acknowledged Australia had struck a deal with Malaysia on taking boatpeople.

"They will be removed to a third country in line with the regional arrangements we are entering into across our region," Bowen told reporters.

A week ago Australia announced changes to its immigration policy designed to break people-smuggling and stem the wave of boats carrying asylum seekers to its shores.

Under the changes, Australia will send 800 asylum seekers to Malaysia for processing and in return Canberra will accept 4,000 people already assessed to be refugees from Malaysia for resettlement over four years.

Australia is also in negotiations with its impoverished northern neighbour Papua New Guinea on opening an immigration processing centre, but no deal has yet been finalised.

Bowen warned that anyone arriving by boat in Australia could no longer assume they would be processed in Australia.

"We will not be accepting and processing people for asylum claims who arrive in Australia by boat," he said.

"We will assess asylum claims offshore and we will do our bit to resettle refugees who have been processed in other countries."

Packed off to remote Christmas Island

The latest arrivals will be taken to the remote Indian Ocean territory of Christmas Island, where boatpeople are normally detained until their claims can be assessed, and given basic biometric assessments before being taken to another country.

Bowen said Australia, which has had more than 7,800 boatpeople arriving in its waters since the beginning of 2010, was seeking to build a regional solution to the problem of people smuggling.

"My message to people smugglers and asylum seekers is very clear - do not come by boat," he said.

"There is no way around these arrangements. It doesn't matter whether you come from Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iran, Iraq or anywhere else.

"Australia will not be processing boat arrivals in Australia. There is no guarantee of resettlement in Australia."

Australia has been criticised for its new policy, with Amnesty International on Friday saying it failed legal, humane and economic tests.

"People have a legal right to seek asylum and the numbers coming into Australia are incredibly low," spokeswoman Claire Mallinson said.

- AFP

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