

Malaysia crucial to asylum solution, says panel
National Times
August 18, 2012
By Lenore Taylor

THE three experts whose report triggered the federal government's backdown over asylum processing on Nauru say they are dismayed that its recommendations are being misrepresented, cherry-picked and second-guessed in the furious political debate that has followed.

The Coalition claims the expert panel report "red-lighted" the government's plan for offshore processing in Malaysia and insists that instead of adopting its recommendations for a regional processing system, the government should turn to two more Howard government policies: turning back boats and temporary protection visas.

Yesterday, as the 10th asylum-seeker boat this week arrived, the Coalition insisted the boats would keep coming because the government had adopted "less than half of the Howard government measures".

Some commentators claimed the recommendations in favour of regional processing had been included in the report to give "cover" to Labor and one of the experts, the refugee advocate Paris Aristotle, even though the other two experts privately understood there was no chance regional processing could ever be implemented.

But all three experts insist their recommendation for processing in Malaysia and other regional centres is the most important in their report and, if it is ignored or sidelined, their package of measures won't work.

"Regional processing in Malaysia and elsewhere is not some sort of cover for the other recommendations in the report. This is absolutely, 100 per cent what we have to do if we want to stop the boats in the long term," Angus Houston, a former Defence Force chief and chairman of the expert panel, said.

The report said the Malaysia deal proposed by the federal government needed some extra protections but Mr Houston said the preconditions set out by the panel for a revised deal were feasible and "absolutely possible" with some skilled negotiation.

The panel member and former head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Michael L'Estrange said it was wrong and unfair to suggest the panel had made recommendations it knew were unrealistic or that it privately thought could not be implemented.

"We stand by every recommendation. It is a package and it needs all of its parts. Long-term regional agreements are the most important thing we recommended, some done bilaterally and some multilaterally, and it might take some time, but it is not a figleaf. That is not fair and not true," he said.

"Regional processing is very achievable ... and this report will not achieve its intentions if its recommendations are selectively picked off."

Mr Aristotle said he was angry at the "terrible misrepresentation" of the report by the Coalition and the Greens.

The Greens leader, Christine Milne, claimed the report would pave the way for "a network of detention centres", but Mr Aristotle said the report specifically ruled out arbitrary detention.

"I am very concerned about the way our work is being misrepresented," he said. "We did not red light Malaysia. We did not green light turning boats back.

"If our recommendations are broken up, the aim of the report will fall apart. We only ever envisaged Nauru as a short-term measure while the longer term solutions were put in place. If they aren't, then Nauru will fill up and no other country will take those people, so ... we will be back to square one."

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