



Opinion by  
Maria O'Sullivan

## If not Manus, then where?

Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill announced on Wednesday that Australia's offshore detention centre on Manus Island is to be closed. This decision follows the PNG Supreme Court's landmark ruling that the detention of asylum seekers and recognised refugees in the processing centre is unconstitutional.

The Australian government has not yet indicated any change in policy in response. Following the court decision, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said the ruling:

*... does not alter Australia's border protection policies – they remain unchanged.*

Dutton reiterated the following day:

*... people who have attempted to come illegally by boat and are now in the Manus facility will not be settled in Australia.*

So, if not Manus Island, what are the alternatives for the processing, detention and resettlement of the 900 men held in PNG?

### What now for these men?

The solution is likely to be framed around the two different types of detainees on Manus Island. Around half are recognised refugees awaiting resettlement. The rest are asylum seekers awaiting processing.

Those who have been recognised as refugees could be taken out of detention and moved to an open facility or other community arrangement in mainland PNG. This would comply with the Supreme Court ruling. But, it would face practical difficulties and concerns.

First, there is significant evidence of hostility within the PNG community towards refugees and instances of threats and harm. There is a strong argument that Australia would be legally responsible should any such harm occur. The prospects of the successful resettlement of more than 400 refugees in PNG are therefore slim.

Second, there are no real alternatives for resettling these refugees elsewhere in the region. Only two refugees have been resettled under the troubled Cambodia deal. It is highly unlikely that any significant proportion of the approximately 450 recognised refugees on Manus Island will be able to be resettled in Cambodia. This is particularly so given the Cambodian arrangement is based on refugees voluntarily choosing to go there.

Given many countries in the region are not signatories to the Refugee Convention or are otherwise unsuitable as a resettlement country, it is unlikely that the Australian government will be able to find any other country in Southeast Asia to accept them.

The alternatives for the asylum-seeker caseload – that is, those

awaiting processing – are similarly problematic. It is doubtful the hundreds of male asylum seekers in PNG will simply be able to be transferred to Nauru. At its peak capacity, Nauru held approximately 1,233 asylum seekers (in August 2014). It currently holds 468 detainees.

Therefore the physical capacity may be available on Nauru for the Manus asylum seekers, but the current conditions mean it would be dangerous for such a transfer to take place. A refugee being held on Nauru is in a critical condition after setting himself on fire. There have been other reports of self-harm by detainees on the island.

More generally, there are tensions on Nauru and serious medical and mental health issues that provide strong arguments against such a transfer.

The best alternative available would be to transfer the 450 asylum seekers from Manus Island to Australia's Christmas Island for processing. This would still accord with the government's position that "no boat arrival will be resettled in Australia". This is because the transfer would be for processing only.

The Christmas Island centre certainly has a physical capacity to accept more detainees. However, it is also a fragile environment. Serious riots took place there in November 2015 and it appears to still be a place of significant tension. Proper measures would therefore need to be taken to prepare the facility for such an intake. This move would also leave the other 450 or so recognised refugees in PNG in limbo.

### Broader implications

The Australian government must face the uncomfortable truth that it is no longer possible to process or detain asylum seekers and refugees in other countries in the region.

In light of a looming election, neither side of politics is likely to warmly embrace this approach. But it is a reality Australian politicians must face head-on.

This reality is something the Australian electorate also appears to be gradually recognising. While a majority of the electorate supports a strict border policy, there are indications of a growing disquiet about the harshness of aspects of the Pacific Solution. This is evidenced by the groundswell of public opinion behind the #letthemstay campaign, the medical community's concerns and the offer of sanctuary by Australian churches.

Dealing with refugee flows in a fair and humane manner is part and parcel of being a democratic country in the affluent industrialised world. Sometimes there is simply no acceptable alternative to this.

***This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). [Read the original article.](#)***