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EXCLUSIVE POLITICS FEDERAL ASYLUM SEEKERS

More asylum seekers arrive on planes amid trafficking fears

By [David Crowe](#)

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The number of asylum seekers arriving by air rose last month despite federal government attempts to halt the trend and respond to fears that tens of thousands of foreign workers are being "trafficked" into slavery.

An average of 77 people a day claimed protection after landing at an Australian airport during November — higher than previous averages — reigniting debate over exploitation of the visa system.



Labor's home affairs spokeswoman, Kristina Keneally, is concerned about a rise in asylum seekers arriving by plane under the watch of Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton. ALEX

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The monthly figures, revealed in government documents provided to the Senate, suggest the number of asylum seekers arriving by air has surpassed 100,000 since the Coalition took power more than five years ago.

They show 27 per cent of the latest asylum seekers came from Malaysia, 17 per cent from China, 14 per cent from India, 5 per cent from Thailand and 4 per cent from Vietnam. Most are likely to wait months or years to learn their fate, with the queue of applications swelling to 35,445 people because the number of arrivals continues to outpace decisions made each month.

Labor's home affairs spokeswoman, Kristina Keneally, has warned some of the asylum seekers are being lured to Australia to work in conditions "akin to slavery" until their applications are assessed.

But Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton has dismissed Labor's claims as "spurious" on the grounds that fewer than 1 per cent of Australia's temporary visitors claim refugee protection and most are turned down.

The government lodged the November figures with the Senate earlier this month to answer an order from the upper house, revealing 2316 protection visa applications were made onshore during the month. This was equivalent to 77 arrivals a day, up from 67 a day in July and August and through the previous year to June 30.

Only 1391 decisions on the backlog of asylum seekers were made during the same month, with just 143 of this group being granted a final protection visa.

The approval rate was only 0.74 per cent for those coming from Malaysia, 14 per cent for those from India and 4 per cent for those from China. This compared to 55 per cent for those from Pakistan, 84 per cent for those from Iraq and 65 per cent for those from Saudi Arabia, although each of these countries accounted for fewer than two dozen protection visa grants during the month.

The trend has triggered concern about the screening of visa applicants from some of the source countries, with the Department of Home Affairs airing the idea of "new methods and tools" against those engaged in criminality or exploitation.





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More asylum seekers arriving by air

Since the start of July, about 80 people a day have claimed asylum after landing at an Australian airport, revealing a shift in people smuggling operations.

Those who apply for a protection visa have the same workplace rights as Australian citizens while they await a decision.

"Too many of these people are either being trafficked to Australia or are coming here to bend the rules to access the labour market," Senator Keneally said. "To put it simply, this is a work scam that has unfolded on the third-term Liberal National government's watch and they don't have a plan to clean up the mess they've created."

"The extraordinary backlog that has grown on Peter Dutton's watch will only continue to blow out unless the Morrison government admits its failure to control Australia's borders."

Mr Dutton has labelled the claims a "red herring" to distract from Labor's record on border protection in the six years to 2013, when more than 50,000 asylum seekers arrived by boat and another 1200 are estimated to have drowned.

"There are heavy fines for airline companies who allow people onto planes without a visa," Mr Dutton said in October. "It doesn't happen, except in the rarest of circumstances."

"The other point to make is nobody drowns on a plane coming to Australia. Their identity is verified. I haven't had one person drown at sea on my watch and I'm not about to change the policy settings that would see that happen."

Asked about the new figures on Monday, a government spokeswoman pointed to a statement from Home Affairs that only 0.23 per cent of 40 million temporary visas granted over the five years to June 30 led to applications for protection visas.

The number of people claiming refugee status upon arrival by plane fell to 24,520 in the year to June 30 from 27,884 the previous year, but the latest figures suggest an increase. The government has warned against extrapolating figures from several months to forecast the result for the year, saying seasonal trends can lead to a misleading result.

Even at a slower rate, however, the number of asylum seekers arriving by air has already surpassed 100,000 under the Coalition when the figures for recent months are added to the previous five years.

Home Affairs secretary Mike Pezzullo told a Senate estimates hearing in October there could be costs to any action on the problem.

"The marginal gain that you would achieve in tapping that number down by putting onerous restrictions, in terms of students, tourist visitor visas and the like, would be completely disproportionate to the gain you'd be getting," he said.

Mr Pezzullo said the screening of the asylum seekers was a "controlled" process.

"For the additional effort of trying to get that down to zero, you'll get a vanishing return."



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