

Medivac forms already signed for 300 refugees



Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton warned that people-smugglers were already aware of the legal changes in Australia. Picture: AAP

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Up to 300 refugees and asylum-seekers on Manus Island and Nauru have obtained recommendations from treating doctors to enable them to be transferred to Australia under the new medivac legislation.

Advice to the government has warned that the paperwork for refugees and asylum-seekers in offshore facilities was prepared ahead of yesterday's passage of the medivac bill and would be "ready for lodgment" as soon as the changes became law.

The Department of Home Affairs has also warned that the government's medical contractor on Nauru, International Health and Medical Services, had received a "surge of inquiries" from Australian-based doctors seeking the medical records of detainees.

In addition, the advice warned that medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres recently set up a telehealth facility on Nauru with high-speed internet to enable consultations between refugees and doctors in Australia.

Morrison should be 'bold' and call for an early election

Sky News host Kieran Gilbert says Prime Minister Scott Morrison should be 'bold' and call for an early election. The government is ramping up its attack on Labor, claiming it undermined Australia's border security by backing the passage of the medivac bill. Mr Gilbert says Australia's economic outlook is slowing, and that the prime minister may be better served fighting an election campaign over border security.

Scott Morrison confirmed moves to reopen the Christmas Island detention facility in response to the passage of the bill and said action had already been taken to strengthen Operation Sovereign Borders.

Addressing his comments to people-smugglers, the Prime Minister said: "I'm standing between people-smugglers and bringing a boat to Australia. "Last time I did that, you didn't get here. "Bill Shorten has done what he has done out of manifest weakness, an inability to stand up to the left wing of his own party, the Greens and others who have applied pressure. "He has no strength on this issue and he cannot be trusted to follow through on any of the border protection measures that our government has put in place".

But Labor frontbencher Brendan O'Connor, a former immigration minister, accused Mr Morrison of seeking to restart the boats in a "treacherous act" by talking down Australia's border protection regime. "It is sending a message — he is advertising like the ad-man he is — to people-smugglers that business is open. And that is an outrageous act," Mr O'Connor said. "That is a treacherous act.

Sky News host Laura Jayes says Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack 'got his facts wrong' regarding the Medivac bill during an interview with Sky News on Thursday. Mr McCormack claimed the legislation will allow 'spivs, and rapists and murderers' to be transferred to Australia for medical treatment. The Medivac bill is designed to give doctors a greater say over whether asylum seekers in offshore detention centres can be flown to Australia for medical treatment, though still allows the Home Affairs minister to reject transfers on security grounds.

"It is an act that should not be conducted by a prime minister, but clearly under pressure he has gone the low road."

The Opposition Leader also denied that the passage of the medivac bill would act as a pull factor for those seeking entry to Australia, arguing that it would only apply to the current cohort of asylum-seekers and refugees on Manus Island and Nauru. “I just say to people trying to put out the welcome mat for people-smugglers, the medivac legislation applies for people who are already there. It does not apply to anyone new,” Mr Shorten said. “So if you think that by buying a ticket on an unsafe boat, paying a people-smuggler, a criminal syndicate, you’ll get a better deal to come to Australia, you’re wrong.”

But one Labor MP in the Right faction said the political fallout for the party was “awful”. Opposition defence spokesman Richard Marles could not rule out the possibility that the medivac bill would restart the boats, declaring “the government can’t guarantee anything in relation to boats”. He sought yesterday to distance Labor from the bill, while suggesting it would do little as “it essentially codifies what the government has been doing”. “Over the last two years the government have transferred hundreds of people from Nauru to Australia under the guise of a medical transfer,” he told Melbourne radio station 3AW. “We negotiated it to make it better. What surprises me is that the government didn’t support it.”

The refugee medivac bill passed the Senate yesterday by 36 votes to 34, with crossbencher Derryn Hinch — whose vote was vital — backing the move, saying it was the “right decision” and a “humanitarian position”.

As the government sought to ram home the consequences of the bill, Attorney-General Christian Porter released new figures showing the spike in people-smuggling convictions under Labor, which peaked at 134 in 2011 and fell to just two in 2018.

The Australian has also confirmed that more than 500 of the 895 asylum-seekers, refugees and accompanying family members who have been transferred to Australia for treatment since 2013 have taken legal action, tying the government up in the court system in a bid to overturn negative refugee determinations or prevent their return to offshore facilities.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton warned that people-smugglers were already aware of the legal changes in Australia. Mr Dutton, who met with cabinet’s national security committee after a briefing from security agencies, said it was well known that would-be asylum-seekers and people-smugglers followed Australian parliamentary debates.

“How they react now, how they’d market that to the 14,000 people in Indonesia for example who are ready to hop on the boats, or Sri Lanka or Vietnam or India or wherever it might be, time will tell,” he told Sky News.

While the bill would not apply to new arrivals, this was unlikely to be understood by would-be boatpeople. Mr Dutton said the Christmas Island processing centre had been placed on “hot contingency” alert to take arrivals, and suggested it could be used to treat sick refugees.