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Rejected airplane asylum seekers at new high

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

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Rejected airplane asylum seekers at new high

EXCLUSIVE**David Crowe**

Chief political correspondent

Nearly 50,000 people who have had their claims for asylum rejected after arriving by plane are still in Australia awaiting deportation, raising questions over the efficiency of border controls.

A government backlog is being blamed for the slow progress in tackling the problem, with Labor warning that people smugglers are using the system to exploit illegal workers.

The number of people who have had their claims rejected after arriving by air increased to 46,391 at the end of January, according to government figures that show almost all of them remain in the country.

The long appeals process also means 37,913 of the "airplane people" are still waiting for their refugee status to be determined, an increase of more than 1000 over the past month.

Fewer than two dozen were deported last month after failing to gain protection visas from the Department of Home Affairs and losing their appeals in court, suggesting the backlog continues to grow.

While the government insisted the system was working, Labor's home affairs spokeswoman Kristina Kenally called for faster action to prevent illegal workers entering the country as tourists and staying when their claims were

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Almost all rejected plane asylum seekers still here

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rejected. "The rising number of airplane arrivals represents a work scam run by people smugglers, pure and simple," Senator Keneally said.

"There's nothing wrong with claiming asylum - it's an important right - but 90 per cent of these applications are eventually found to be without merit."

Population Minister Alan Tudge insisted the government was working with other countries, including Malaysia, to curb the number of unfounded claims for asylum.

"Australia has one of the most generous humanitarian programs in the world and we settle thousands of people in desperate need every year," he said. "Some people unfortunately seek to exploit our international obligations by lodging protection claims onshore which have no foundation - this issue is not new and is not unique to Australia.

"These individuals use our legal system to deliberately prolong their stay in Australia even when they have no prospects of success."

Those who apply for a protection visa have the same workplace rights as Australian citizens while they await a decision, but those who have been rejected are in a legal limbo until they are located and deported.

The government figures, tabled in the Senate last week, show that 1931 people sought asylum during January after arriving by air. While 255 came from India, 83 from Fiji and 61 from the Philippines, there were 546 from Malaysia - a country where tourists can arrange an Australian electronic travel authority from their travel agents. Another 309 came from China during January, down from 316 from that country in December and 386 in November, although

this is expected to fall significantly in coming months because of the coronavirus travel ban.

The figures showed that only 3.3 per cent of those who arrive from China by air and claim asylum eventually gain a protection visa.

While 1931 arrived during January, the actions taken in the same month led to fewer than five involuntary deportations and 19 voluntary deportations among those who had their claims rejected and lost their appeals.

The latest figures mean more than 100,000 asylum seekers have

arrived by air since the Coalition won power in 2013, a new peak in overall arrivals. Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton has dismissed the Labor attacks by pointing to the 50,000 asylum seekers who arrived by boat and another 1200 who are estimated to have drowned while Labor held government from 2007 to 2013.

The government said the majority of the number of people who have not yet been deported are appealing negative decisions through the Administrative Appeals Tribunal or the courts, prolonging their stay in Australia.

It also noted the number of people who arrived by air and went on to apply for protection fell by 12 per cent during the last financial year.



"Work scam": Kristina Keneally.