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Jump in air arrivals by asylum seekers

EXCLUSIVE

David Crowe
Chief political correspondent

Australia is on track for an annual record in asylum seekers who arrive by air after official figures confirmed more than 95,000 arrivals over the past five years amid fears of corruption and exploitation.

About 80 people every day since the start of July have claimed protection after landing at an Australian airport, highlighting a huge change in people-smuggling operations since the government's crackdown on boat arrivals.

The trend appears likely to push the annual arrivals to a new high while adding to claims of "slavery" by smugglers who recruit workers who arrive as tourists, seek asylum and stay in Australia while their cases go through the courts.

Labor home affairs spokeswoman Kristina Keneally, who received the figures in answer to questions in the Senate, said Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton was responsible for a "crisis" greater than the boat arrivals under Labor.

"There's nothing wrong with claiming asylum - it's an important right," Senator Keneally said. "However, in 90 per cent of these particular cases the individuals are not legitimate refugees and are often being trafficked to Australia for the explicit purpose of being exploited."

"This is a crisis that Peter Dutton is responsible for and it's past time for the government to take
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action. Mr Dutton is obsessed with blaming Labor but he cannot run from his failure to control Australia's borders which is leading to widespread exploitation, slavery and even sexual servitude across the country."

The *Herald* has previously revealed the high numbers of asylum seekers arriving by air, but the government has insisted it will keep a cap on refugee applications and turn away those who do not deserve asylum.

About 51,000 asylum seekers arrived by boat from 2009 to 2013 under the last Labor government, according to the Parliamentary Library. This fell to zero in subsequent years under the Coalition.

In answer to Senator Keneally's question, the government said 167 people had applied for protection visas since July 2014 after arriving at a seaport including by cruise ship, container ship or yacht.

The number of asylum seekers who arrived by air climbed from 8562 in the 2015 fiscal year to 12,673 in 2016, 18,267 in 2017 and 27,884 in 2018. It fell to 24,520 in

the year to June 2019. The rate of applications since July suggests more than 29,000 claims for asylum could be made this financial year unless the arrivals slow.

The government said 62,732 of the applications from July 1, 2014, to August 19 this year had been rejected, a refusal rate of 84.2 per cent. Tens of thousands of rejected asylum seekers have taken their cases to the Administrative Appeal Tribunal, which had a caseload of more than 60,000 matters at the end of September.

Abul Rizvi, a former deputy secretary in the Department of Immigration, said 23,063 of these cases were onshore asylum applications. Of these, 10,753 were from Malaysia, 5158 were from China and 982 from Vietnam. While some of the arrivals are found to be refugees, others are suspected of working in Australia while waiting for their cases to be decided.

Mr Rizvi said the Malaysian and Chinese governments were unlikely to have a great interest in stopping the flow.

"The government is a long way from getting on top of this," he said. "It is really up to the Australian government to identify and deal with the offshore and onshore organisers of these scams."

The Morrison government says it is focusing resources on preventing unmeritorious claims for asylum, through intelligence systems, operational activity and messaging to overseas applicants.

Immigration Minister David Coleman said: "Less than 0.25 per cent of people who arrive lawfully in Australia apply for protection,