Price of resettling refugees should not be our silence on Cambodia

In recent weeks, Abbott government ministers have been spruiking a plan for Cambodia to resettle some or all asylum seekers on Nauru who are found to be genuine refugees.

While the Australian and Cambodian governments are yet to finalise an agreement, it may just be a matter of time. Cambodia is “very keen”, as foreign minister Julie Bishop pointed out repeatedly in an interview, to be a part of a “regional solution” to the asylum seeker dilemma. Australia, too, is keen.

For the Australian government, the Cambodian offer would address an obvious downside of the Nauruan “solution”. Nauru may be able to accommodate a limited number of asylum seekers in camps, and administer a refugee status determination process for them, but it is not in a position to provide permanent resettlement for all those found to be refugees.

Nauru is simply too small to be able to cope with a significant number of new settlers, particularly if they are culturally, ethnically and linguistically very different from Nauruans.

For the Cambodian government, the proposed deal could have three advantages. First, they may be looking for “people who are able bodied [and] would be able to contribute to Cambodian society”, as Bishop suggested.

Second, the Australian government has made no bones about its intention to provide a generous financial incentive to the Cambodians. Currently, Cambodia receives close to A$80 million per year in aid from Australia. But expect that amount to rise, and Australia’s foreign aid program – which was slashed in the recent federal budget – to be put under further strain on account of the additional funding made available to the Cambodian government.

I can only speculate about the third reason for Phnom Penh’s enthusiasm because neither government is likely to mention it. The Hun Sen government in Cambodia is notoriously corrupt. Transparency International ranks Cambodia 160th (out of 177) on its Corruption Perceptions Index.

Hun Sen and his Cambodia People’s Party have also regularly been accused of rigging elections and paying scant attention to human rights. Freedom House assessed Cambodia to be “not free”. A recent report by the US State Department drew attention to three key human rights issues:

- a politicised and ineffective judiciary,
- constraints on freedom of press and assembly,
- abuse of prison detainees.

Expect Australia not to criticise the Hun Sen government for corruption and human rights abuses in return for agreeing to an Australian-funded resettlement program.

Incidentally, Papua New Guinea ranks only 16 places above Cambodia on Transparency International’s index. The US State Department has expressed serious concerns about PNG’s human rights record, too, listing “severe police abuse of detainees and police and military abuse of citizens; violence and discrimination against women; and vigilante killings and abuses” in a report published last year.

Unlike Cambodia or Nauru, the PNG government is no longer in desperate need of foreign aid. But it too would much appreciate it if its Australian counterpart overlooked allegations of corrupt practices, particularly when they involve prime minister Peter O’Neill and his ministers, and didn’t ask its closest neighbour too loudly to observe international human rights norms.
Expect the amount of foreign aid Australia gives to Cambodia to rise if a resettlement arrangement between the countries is struck. EPA/Mak Remissa

Cambodia received bad press amid speculation about the resettlement arrangement. “Life in Cambodia...is not as pleasant, and certainly nowhere near as materially abundant, as life in Australia,” The Australian’s foreign editor Greg Sheridan observed last week. Radio host John Laws told immigration minister Scott Morrison that Cambodia “is a dreadful place”.

As has happened previously in the debate over the processing arrangements in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, commentators are quick to pass judgements not just on foreign governments but also on entire countries and those who live there.

The government’s critics have also drawn particular attention to the fact that Cambodia is one of the poorest countries on earth. In response, Morrison argued that:

| Resettlement is freedom from persecution, it’s not a ticket to a first-class economy. |

However, notwithstanding the government’s willingness to underwrite Cambodia’s resettlement program, it is not clear whether Cambodia will have the resources to deal adequately with the challenges posed by refugees who have no family to support them and who cannot draw on the experiences and assistance of members of the same ethnic community who have been resettled before them.

The key issues, however, are whether or not refugees will in fact be as safe as Morrison and Bishop claim, and whether they can have, to quote Morrison:

| …freedom of movement … can work, [and] their children can go to school. |

Cambodia’s track record suggests otherwise. Vietnamese currently comprise Cambodia’s largest ethnic minority group. According to a study prepared by a local minority rights group and reported on in March, Vietnamese Cambodians are:

| …deprived of citizenship, trapped in poverty, lack access to education, live under deplorable conditions, and are shut out from economic, social, and political life. |

Is that the life awaiting Iranian, Afghani and Tamil refugees currently in limbo in Nauru?

In the end, these well-hatched plans may of course come to nothing. After all, it’s not the first time that a rich country has tried to offload refugees. As historian Michael Marrus writes in The Unwanted, even after 1945 the British hoped that European Jews could be shipped to Madagascar. When Idi Amin expelled Uganda’s Asians in 1972, Britain considered resettling them all in the Solomon Islands. And remember Julia Gillard’s East Timor solution?