

China reacts to PM's visa fast track for HK nationals fleeing strife

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China has hit out at Scott Morrison's offer of safe haven to Hong Kong nationals fleeing the mainland's security crackdown, warning Australia not to go down the "wrong path."

The Australian revealed on Friday that Hong Kong nationals wanting to flee China's security crackdown in the territory would have a fast track to resettlement in Australia through the skilled visa program, under an option cabinet will consider next week.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said overnight that Australia should look at the Hong Kong laws — which threaten pro-democracy activity with life jail sentences — in an "objective light" and told the federal government to stop interfering in China's affairs.

"We advise the Australian side to look at the national security legislation in Hong Kong in a correct and objective light," he said in Beijing. "Stop interfering in China's internal affairs with Hong Kong as a pretext, and refrain from going further down the wrong path."

As Hong Kong police arrested hundreds of protesters under a draconian new law that outlaws acts of subversion, secession, terrorism and colluding with foreign forces, Scott Morrison said Australia was prepared to "step up and provide support" to the territory's residents who faced difficulties.

A safe haven visa has not been ruled out for fleeing Hong Kong residents but The Australian understands the skilled migrant visa class, which has ground to a halt under coronavirus lockdowns, is the most likely pathway for them to come to Australia.

Cabinet is also set to consider what options might be open for Hong Kong Chinese nationals currently in Australia on tourist or other visas.

“We are considering very actively the proposals that I asked to be brought forward several weeks ago,” the Prime Minister said.

Mr Morrison's British counterpart, Boris Johnson, pledged on Wednesday to provide a path to citizenship for more than three million Hongkongers — holders of British Overseas Nationals passports and their dependants — if they wanted to leave the former British colony.

Britain said the new security law breached China's “one country, two systems” promise to grant residents key liberties — as well as judicial and legislative autonomy — until 2047.

Britain's move prompted threats of retaliation by China, which accused it of renegeing on a promise ahead of the 1997 handover not to grant full citizenship rights to Hongkongers.

“If the British side makes unilateral changes to the relevant practice, it will breach its own position and pledges as well as international law and basic norms governing international relations,” China's embassy in London said on Thursday. “We firmly oppose this and reserve the right to take corresponding measures.”

Mr Morrison said the Australian resettlement package would provide “similar opportunities” to those being offered by the British government.

“We think that's important and very consistent with who we are as a people and very consistent practically with the views that we have expressed,” he said.

The departments of Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs and Trade have prepared options to be presented to cabinet on Wednesday. Government lawyers are also looking at the risks to Australians in the territory from the law, which applies to “offences ... against the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region from outside the region by a person who is not a permanent resident of the region”.

There are about 100,000 Australians living and working in Hong Kong, which is the second-largest diaspora for Australians.

Mr Morrison said Australia had consistently argued that safeguards put in place at the British handover of Hong Kong to China should be upheld. “I think that's a very reasonable position and a very consistent position for the government,” he said.

A senior government source said the skilled migrant visa, which allows family members to be included, had been discussed as a mechanism for Hong Kong Chinese wanting to leave after the Prime Minister asked two weeks ago for submissions on the issue to be brought before the cabinet. It's understood a special humanitarian intake, like that extended to 12,000 Syrian refugees under the Abbott government in 2015, is less likely. However, refugee places could be offered within the humanitarian program to some Hong Kong Chinese who have a well-founded fear of persecution under the laws.

The government has been considering how to help Hongkongers since the law was mooted, amid strong backbench support for the move. Liberal MP Tim Wilson, who marched on the streets of Hong Kong with protesters last year, said consideration of the safe haven plan was "extremely welcome".

"Australia shares strong values and aspirations with Hong Kong liberal democrats and would provide a safer, freer existence than under the Chinese Communist Party," Mr Wilson said.

Fellow Liberal James Paterson said it was "hard to think of a more attractive group of potential -migrants for Australia" than Hongkongers. "The people of Hong Kong are creative, industrious, entrepreneurial and overwhelmingly share our values on issues like free speech and the rule of law. We would be lucky to have them," he said.

The Lowy Institute's Southeast Asia program director, Ben Bland, said Australia would be an attractive option for Hongkongers seeking to leave the territory because of the economic opportunities, quality of life and the sizeable Hong Kong community already in Australia. "But many Hongkongers want to stay and struggle for the future of their city," he said. "To flee your home, friends and family, potentially forever, is not an easy decision."

The new security law greatly increases Chinese control over the region, giving it a means of cracking down on pro-democracy protests by criminalising acts of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign countries. Thousands of Hong Kong residents defied a protest ban on Wednesday — the anniversary of Hong Kong's return to China — blocking roads and voicing opposition to the bill.

Police responded with water cannon, pepper spray and tear gas, arresting nearly 400 people, including 10 under the new law.

Most of those arrested were carrying flags or leaflets advocating Hong Kong independence.

Australia's planned migration pathway for Hongkongers is likely to inflame tensions with China, which hit out on Wednesday at Foreign Minister Marise Payne after she criticised the laws as a threat to Hong Kong's judicial independence and the rights and freedoms of its people.

"We strongly deplore the Australian Foreign Minister's statement," said the Chinese embassy in Canberra. "Hong Kong affairs are China's internal affairs. We hope the Australian side take an objective and rational view on the legislation, abide by international law and basic norms of international relations, and stop meddling in Hong Kong affairs and China's internal affairs."

Additional reporting: Ben Packham, AFP