



Australian immigration and asylum

Morrison government paid corrupt businessman millions for offshore processing on Nauru

Mozammil Gulamabbas Bhojani was convicted of bribing two Nauruan officials with more than \$120,000

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The former Australian government continued to pay millions of taxpayer dollars to a businessman convicted of corruption to provide offshore processing services on [Nauru](#), even after he had pleaded guilty to bribing Nauruan government officials.

In August 2020 Mozammil Gulamabbas Bhojani was [convicted of paying more than \\$120,000 in bribes](#) to two Nauru government officials, including an MP and government minister, for favourable deals on phosphate mining contracts for his Radiance International group of companies.

But, at the same time, the Radiance International group owned an accommodation block - the Budapest Hotel - in Anabar, in Nauru's north, which Bhojani's company

was leasing to the Australian government for its offshore processing regime on Nauru.

The Radiance International contract for refugee “accommodation services” - worth \$17.5m - continued to be paid until May 2022, nearly two years after Bhojani was convicted and handed a suspended jail sentence for the foreign bribery offences in the same country.

Senate [estimates this week investigated](#) why Bhojani continued to win contract extensions on Nauru after it was known he was under investigation by police for bribery in that country, and why those contract extensions were not declared by the Australian government.

“Bribery has a real human impact,” the AFP assistant commissioner Lesa Gale said when Bhojani was convicted. “Livelihoods are exploited, institutions corrupted and it undermines public confidence.”

In [sentencing Bhojani](#) to a two-and-a-half-year prison term, to be served by way of intensive correction order, the judge, Penelope Hock, said Bhojani’s motivation for bribing the officials was “financial gain ... a business advantage” but that he had demonstrated remorse and shame for his offending.

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The court heard Bhojani had bribed two Nauruan officials - Trevor Bernicke, chairman of the Republic of Nauru Phosphate Corporation, and Aaron Cook, a member of parliament and minister responsible for the phosphate corporation - paying more than \$124,500 to secure two phosphate shipments in 2015 and 2017.

His company made a profit of \$3.2m from the illegitimate transactions that his bribes secured.

The AFP investigation into Bhojani’s corruption - codenamed Operation Regatta - began in 2015.

Bhojani and his brother controlled a number of companies based across Australia, Nauru, India and the UAE, collectively known as the Radiance International group of companies. His brother was not accused of any wrongdoing.

One of the group’s companies, Radiance Minerals, won preferential treatment on two phosphate exports, after Bhojani bribed Bernicke and Cook in 2015 and 2017.

In 2016 another of the group’s companies, Radiance International, was awarded a contract - for \$2.5m - by Australia’s Department of Home Affairs to provide “refugee

accommodation” at the Budapest Hotel. This contract was [reported publicly](#) on the government’s Austender website.

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Mozammil Bhojani was the sole shareholder and director of Radiance International, which has since been wound up.

In 2017 the Department of Home Affairs extended Radiance International’s accommodation contract, paying Bhojani’s company an additional \$17.5m until May 2022.

This was not publicly reported by the government. In Senate estimates this week the department [could not explain why](#) it published details of the first contract but not of the subsequent contract extension, despite it being for similar accommodation services.

[Senate questions have confirmed](#) that the government continued to pay Radiance International for its accommodation services until May 2022, nearly two years after Bhojani was charged and ultimately convicted of foreign bribery over the phosphate exports.

“The department continued to pay Mr Bhojani’s company millions of dollars after ... November 2018, despite him being charged by the AFP with foreign bribery,” Raff Ciccone, a Labor senator [said in estimates](#). “Why would that be the case: knowing that someone’s been charged with foreign bribery and the department continuing to pay a contract?”

The department’s first assistant secretary, Michael Thomas, took the question on notice: “I would have to check the details of what the department was aware of at the time of that.”

Ciccone continued his line of questioning with the [secretary of the home affairs department, Mike Pezzullo](#).

“While the AFP was investigating and charging and ultimately securing the conviction of a man that was engaging in foreign bribery, the department was paying this individual millions of dollars. And I guess what I want to understand is why was that the case? Was there no process in place to stop such payments from being provided?”

Pezzullo told the committee: “It would depend on whether the criminal charges had any material relationship ... [and] on whether the charges in question had any relationship or bearing on the ability of the commonwealth to procure relevant services.”

As the then home affairs minister, Peter Dutton had jurisdiction over both the AFP and the Department of Home Affairs during the period of the AFP investigation into Bhojani, his being charged, and convicted.

The department did not answer a series of questions from Guardian Australia about the Radiance contracts. A spokesperson for the department said responses to questions taken on notice at Senate estimates were due to be answered by mid-July.

Dutton, now leader of the opposition, has been approached for comment. The Guardian has also sought comment from Bhojani.

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