

CANBERRA AND LONDON

The Federal Government yesterday refused to take further action over alleged Nazi war criminal Konrad Kalejs as pressure mounted on Britain to stop him fleeing to Australia to avoid possible prosecution.

The Immigration Minister, Mr Philip Ruddock, and the Justice Minister, Senator Amanda Vanstone, defended Mr Kalejs' right to enter and leave Australia at will and challenged Nazi-hunters to come forward with evidence of atrocities.

In London, Home Office officials said they had no power to detain Mr Kalejs, 86, an Australian citizen, unless police issued an arrest warrant.

Scotland Yard is investigating whether Mr Kalejs, who claims to have been "hounded" for past 15 years, took part in the wartime slaughter of 30,000 people, including Jews, in his native Latvia while a lieutenant in the notorious Arajs Kommando unit.

British police refused to say whether they would seek to detain Mr Kalejs, whose six-month British visa is believed to expire later this week.

In Adelaide, Senator Vanstone ruled out a further investigation without fresh evidence. Australia, she said, was not the "sort of country that engages in show trials for the benefit of one person in the community or a group of people in the community".

Asked if Mr Kalejs would be welcome in Australia, Senator Vanstone said: "Would you expect a situation where any Australian citizen would not be?"

Mr Ruddock said all he had heard so far on Mr Kalejs was assertion and not evidence.

"People should not be dealt with or judged by allegation and assertion," Mr Ruddock said. "In seeking out the perpetrators you cannot persecute the innocent."

Mr Ruddock said Australia would be criticised internationally for ignoring the rule of law that a person was innocent until proven guilty or for stripping Mr Kalejs of his citizenship without due process.

Canadian and American authorities had deported Mr Kalejs for breaching immigration rules when he did not reveal his membership of the Arajs Kommando unit, he said, not because they had evidence of war crimes.

Mr Ruddock said he would not change the citizenship law to remove retrospectively Mr Kalejs' right to citizenship.

Pressure is mounting on British authorities to stop Mr Kalejs from returning to Australia to avoid prosecution.

Mr Kalejs, at present living in a retirement home in Leicestershire, reportedly intends to return to Australia to be reunited with his wife.

Anti-war crimes campaigners are urging the British Government to detain him because they say he will not be prosecuted in Australia, where investigators have already decided against court action because of the difficulty in getting elderly witnesses to Australia.

Mr Kalejs, who fled Germany after the war, was accepted by Australia as a refugee in 1948 and granted citizenship 10 years later. He turned up in the US in 1959, was tracked down in the early 1980s by the Jerusalem-based Nazi hunters of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, and deported nine years later. He resurfaced in Canada and was again deported.

The director of the Wiesenthal centre, Dr Efraim Zuroff, yesterday urged Britain to seize Mr Kalejs. "Arrest him now. This is a great opportunity for the British Government to make up for years of inaction," he said.

Mr Zuroff was responding to comments in a British newspaper attributed to Mr Kalejs and claiming that he was the victim of "liars and story-tellers". Mr Kalejs told the Mail on Sunday: "Once again, I am looking for a place where I can be with my wife away from these people who are hounding me. There's no peace for me here now."

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