

Australian government refuses to search for missing refugees

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More than two weeks after Australia's Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock announced that two boats carrying up to 163 refugees to Australia from Indonesia may have sunk, it is still not clear how many, if any, asylum seekers perished.

Based on an intelligence briefing the previous night, Ruddock issued a media statement on December 13 that there had been reports that a Japanese tanker had picked up four survivors from one boat believed to be carrying 87 people when it went down in waters between Indonesia and Ashmore Reef, a rocky Australian outpost in the Timor Sea.

Having announced the likely deaths in or near Australian waters, Ruddock and the government refused to organise a search for the boats or a rescue mission for any survivors. Instead, Ruddock seized upon the reported deaths to highlight the dangers of seeking to enter the country illegally, blaming the asylum seekers for their own deaths. It was “a tragic reminder of the dangers” of ignoring the government's warnings to refugees not to attempt such voyages, he declared.

The Minister simply asked the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) to attempt to locate any information on the reported sinkings. When distressed relatives of the boats' occupants denounced the government for not mounting a search, Ruddock's office claimed it was AMSA's responsibility. A spokesperson for AMSA told reporters the agency had no confirmation that there were missing boats.

In the end, a single small Customs plane patrolled around the Ashmore reefs en route from Darwin to Broome. Only one plane was used because there had been no specific order to conduct a search, a Customs spokesman said. One email was sent via an international shipping service to Indonesian officials

requesting information, but not permission to search in Indonesian waters if necessary.

Ruddock's response underscores the government's basic position: that refugees, having been driven to seek asylum without official permission, have no democratic rights whatsoever, not even the fundamental right to live. Not only have they been deprived of citizenship or residency status, but they have lost the right to any protection of life or limb.

Over the past four-and-a-half years, the Howard government, like the Labor governments before it, has progressively stripped “illegal” asylum seekers of one democratic right after the other. They have been subjected to mandatory indefinite detention without trial, denied free speech and access to the media, prevented from communicating with family, friends and support agencies and cut off from sources of news and information. They have been discouraged from seeking legal advice, denied the right to appeal to the courts, deprived of privacy and decent medical treatment, forcibly deported and, in some cases, subjected to force-feeding, drug injections and other forms of degrading punishment and suppression.

Now, the government has gone one step further and denied asylum seekers the basic right to live. Family members in Australia, who had been expecting the arrival of the boats, were distraught and outraged that the government was not willing to search for their relatives. One female relative contacted a newspaper after several frustrating attempts to talk to immigration authorities. “These people are not even caring to look for these people—there are babies on this boat,” she said.

The sister of a missing man asked: “How come they don't know anything about it? It's just awful—I just read in the newspaper today—that they said there's no search

for them.” Another family member was critical of the government's policy towards illegal immigrants. “They're not spending all this money on 160 people going missing... because they don't want them here anyway.”

One missing refugee's sister contrasted the government's actions with the searches for lost yachtsmen in the past. In recent years, lone French yachtswoman Isabelle Autissier and British round-the-world yachtsman Tony Bullimore were both rescued in well-organised and costly operations involving dozens of aircraft and several naval ships.

These rescue operations were based on the correct conception that no expense should be spared in the effort to save human life. But asked on radio why the same treatment was not afforded to 163 Middle Eastern asylum seekers, Ruddock sought to blame the refugees for placing themselves at risk without lifesaving equipment and navigational tracking devices.

The government itself is responsible for the desperate and dangerous voyages that asylum seekers undertake, endeavouring to escape religious, racial or political persecution or economic hardship. By shutting the country's borders, particularly to the most oppressed from the Middle East, Africa and China, the government is inevitably driving refugees into the hands of profiteering people smugglers who load them into unseaworthy boats.

Two days after Ruddock's announcement, his department revealed that two boats were discovered on the Ashmore islands, with 208 refugees from the Middle East—including at least 32 children—and 8 crew. The Minister refused to rule out the possibility that the boats may have been those reported missing, insisting that his officials would have to interrogate the new arrivals once they had been detained.

On December 18 and 20, three further boatloads were found at Ashmore, consisting of a total of 173 refugees and 9 crew. Some had been stranded for nine days. Three refugees had reportedly died after trying to swim to nearby islands in search of fresh water.

When Ruddock called a media conference on December 22, the last day before the Christmas holidays, it was expected that he would at least inform anxious relatives, on the basis of interviews conducted with refugees, whether their family members had survived.

Instead, he cynically cited the three deaths as another “tragic reminder” of the perils of trying to enter Australia illegally and disclosed, without elaborating, that one boat was still thought to be missing.

Ruddock then issued a series of legal threats against the relatives who had spoken out against him. “My department will be investigating the extent of their complicity in the illegal arrivals,” he declared. “They should be in no doubt that they are breaking the law.”

These threats constitute yet another fundamental attack on democratic rights—aimed, as they are, at silencing criticism of the government's policy. Family members who condemned the government's refusal to search for survivors could now face prosecution, or be stripped of their visas or residency status, on the grounds that they knew their relatives were traveling illegally to Australia.

It has since emerged that this may not be the first occasion in which the government has refused to organise searches for refugees feared drowned off the Australian coast. Ruddock has conceded that an announcement he made in March this year that 350 people had drowned on three separate boats had never been confirmed. For Ruddock, those feared drowned are merely objects or statistics to be used to bolster the government's campaign to discourage further refugees.

Last year the government launched an overseas campaign to deter illegal immigrants from the Middle East, Asia and Europe, using videos, posters and other means. But it has clearly calculated that the deaths of asylum seekers at sea, and reports of brutal conditions within Australia's detention centres, are far more effective deterrents.



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