

Australian government turns away 400 refugees stranded at sea

Mike Head
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More than 400 asylum seekers from poor and war-ravaged countries are today marooned in the Indian Ocean, living in over-crowded, unsanitary conditions aboard a Norwegian container cargo ship. The *Tampa* remains anchored several nautical miles off Christmas Island, an Australian outpost, after the Howard government took an unprecedented, life-threatening decision yesterday to refuse to allow the refugees to land.

In a calculated move that escalates anti-refugee policy worldwide to a new level, Australian Prime Minister John Howard convened a two-hour cabinet meeting yesterday to overturn local officials, who were prepared to admit and assist the refugees. Howard and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock then ordered the captain of the Norwegian ship, who had rescued the refugees from a sinking boat, to turn away from Australian territorial waters.

As a result, 438 asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, including 26 women and 43 children, are stranded at sea, while three governments—Australian, Indonesian and Norwegian—refuse to accept them and haggle over which is responsible for their fate. After already being at sea in a leaking boat for 10 days before being picked up by the *Tampa*, four of the refugees are unconscious, others are suffering dehydration, diarrhoea and scabies, one has a suspected broken ankle and two women are pregnant.

According to the ship's captain, Arne Rinnan, all except the pregnant women and children have begun a hunger strike and others have threatened to commit suicide by jumping overboard, demanding the right to enter Australia and apply for refugee status. The Norwegian freighter has no doctor and only enough food and facilities for 27 officers and crew. Yet, the Howard government has insisted that the refugees be shipped back to an Indonesian port, 12 hours away.

Rinnan responded to requests from Australian and Indonesian search and rescue agencies on Sunday to go to

the aid of the stricken refugee vessel, which was wallowing in high seas, in immediate danger of sinking. At the request of a delegation of five refugees, he set sail for Christmas Island, just four hours away, and was initially assured by Australian authorities that the asylum seekers could be safely landed there, as has happened many times over the past decade.

By the time that the *Tampa* arrived at Christmas Island, however, the Howard government had overruled the arrangements, in direct breach of international law, which obliges governments to assist the rescue of vessels in distress. Moreover, under the Refugees Convention countries must allow people to apply for asylum once they arrive on their shores.

Speaking by satellite phone, Rinnan told a reporter that he faced a "hopeless situation". "It is very frustrating. No one is responding to our requests for medical supplies. We have sick people on board... I am afraid that the outcome will be that we have to go to Indonesia and they will jump overboard."

The Howard government is demanding that Indonesia—one of the poorest and most populous countries in the world—accept the *Tampa* refugees, a request that the Indonesian authorities have rejected. Indonesia is already being paid by the Australian government to hold some 2,000 detainees who wish to seek refuge in Australia. Canberra's latest demand is in line with international efforts by the wealthiest Western powers to shift refugees back to where they come from. Millions of people are already languishing in camps in Pakistan and other impoverished states in the Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe.

Like most refugees, those aboard the *Tampa* are the direct victims of regimes and conflicts that have been created by imperialist meddling and the processes associated with global capitalism. The people of Afghanistan, for example, suffer under crippling sanctions

imposed by the United Nations, one of the principal agencies of the Western powers. The UN does so in the name of condemning the ruthless Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which was itself spawned by the United States and its allies when they armed Islamic fundamentalist groups to overthrow the former Soviet-backed government.

Howard and Ruddock blatantly appealed to nationalist jingoism in announcing their decision. Howard declared in parliament that it would send a message around the world that Australia was not a “soft touch” for refugees. “We are not a nation whose sovereign rights in relation to who comes here are going to be trampled on.”

Not to be outdone, Labor Party leader Kim Beazley endorsed the decision on behalf of the parliamentary opposition, describing it as “appropriate”. This stance continues more than a decade of bipartisan support for increasingly cruel measures to deter asylum seekers, from mandatory indefinite detention of unwanted arrivals to the abolition of welfare benefits for accepted refugees.

The Labor Party backed the passage of so-called Border Protection legislation last year that empowers armed Australian officers to board, search, and turn back or detain refugee boats in international waters. While the Howard government is now using these powers, asserting authority over seas up to 200 kilometres from Australia’s extensive coastlines, it claims that its refugee protection obligations end 12 nautical miles offshore.

Its actions take further the inhuman logic displayed last year, when Ruddock initially refused to authorise a search in the same area of the Indian Ocean for refugee boats that were believed to be sinking. Instead, Ruddock callously issued a media release stating that the drownings should be taken as a warning to asylum seekers not to attempt the hazardous voyage to Australia. As far as the Australian government was concerned, there was no basic right to be rescued at sea.

The mass media has played a criminal role, running reports over the past few days that Australia is being “invaded” by “waves” and “tides” of “boat people” and “illegal immigrants”. In fact, the arrival of some 900 people in two weeks, with another 1,000 thought to be following (including those on the *Tampa*) is but a trickle compared to the 43 million refugees and displaced people currently officially recognised as seeking safe haven internationally. Australia, one of the handful of advanced economies in the world, accepts only 12,000 refugees a year—and the government enforces that quota by cutting the number of places for other asylum seekers every time

a “boat person” is granted a refugee visa.

One of Rupert Murdoch’s tabloids, the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, published an editorial today praising Howard’s stand, insisting that he “was left with little choice” but to protect Australian sovereignty. “To let the freighter into Australian jurisdiction would be the equivalent of an open invitation to people smugglers to increase their efforts to land their illegal cargo on Australian shores.”

Such language—“illegal cargo”, “people smugglers”—is designed to dehumanise and demonise the refugees, who are invariably ordinary working people fleeing from poverty, hunger, persecution, communal conflicts and wars in the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia. While the world’s wealthy are free to travel and live where they choose, and transnational corporations relentlessly organise their profit-making across national boundaries, the workers and peasants whose lives are devastated and uprooted by these operations are being increasingly criminalised worldwide.

Monday’s decision in Canberra sets a precedent with far-reaching international implications. Other governments, whether in South East Asia, a transit route for people fleeing oppression, or in Europe and North America, which receive far larger contingents of refugees than Australia, will take it as a signal to similarly shut their borders and leave refugee boats to sink.

Australia, Indonesia and Norway are now engaged in an obscene tug-of-war over the people trapped inside the *Tampa*. As their fate illustrates, the system of nation-states, enforced by border patrols, customs barriers and detention camps, denies millions of refugees the most basic democratic rights, even the right to live itself.



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