

# Australian government increasingly desperate to remove Tampa refugees

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With more than 400 refugees now into their seventh day trapped aboard a Norwegian container cargo ship in the most inhuman conditions offshore an Australian island, Prime Minister John Howard has become frantic in his efforts to end the standoff over the ship's plight.

His government is facing mounting condemnation, internationally and domestically, for its continuing refusal to allow the asylum seekers to land on Christmas Island and exercise their fundamental legal and democratic rights to apply for refugee status. Worldwide and within Australia, its dispatch of heavily-armed troops to board the *Tampa*, threatening the captain, crew and refugees, has provoked disgust.

Having vowed publicly that the *Tampa* would "NEVER land in our waters—NEVER," Howard now finds himself in a no-win situation. If he backs down and permits the refugees to come ashore, his entire bid to boost his electoral standing by appealing to nationalism and the demonising of Middle Eastern and Asian asylum seekers will collapse ignominiously. If he orders the Australian navy and Special Air Service (SAS) to physically force the ship back into international waters, he will further blacken Australia's reputation.

Over the past two days, Howard has anxiously asked the United Nations—a body he has denounced in the past for criticising Australia's treatment of Aborigines and refugees—and the governments of Indonesia, New Zealand, East Timor and Norway to politically rescue his administration by offering to take some of the people huddled under tarpaulins on the decks of the *Tampa*.

The blatant purpose of Howard's manoeuvres is to find a means of preventing the *Tampa* refugees from applying for asylum in Australia, without being seen to cast them adrift on the high seas.

Perhaps the government's most obscene request has been for the UN to process the asylum seekers in East Timor, the former Portuguese and Indonesian half island currently under UN rule. East Timor is one of the poorest territories in the world, still devastated as a result of Indonesian military and militia rampages and with tens of thousands of refugees of its own in West Timorese camps.

Moreover, at the height of the Indonesian onslaught against East Timor in September 1999, the Howard government refused to allow Timorese people to escape to Australia—with the exception of 1,400 who were trapped in a UN compound, and who were shipped back to Timor within three months.

While New Zealand's Labour Party Prime Minister Helen Clark has responded sympathetically to Howard's predicament, offering to take some of the refugees off his hands, the reaction in Indonesian ruling circles has been less forthcoming. Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri has bluntly refused to return Howard's phone call and members of her government have threatened to match Australia's brutality by deploying the Indonesian navy to stop the *Tampa* entering Indonesian waters.

UN chiefs appear equally disinclined to save Howard's bacon. No details have been released of a telephone conversation between Howard

and UN secretary general Kofi Annan but UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson has insisted publicly that the asylum seekers are Australia's responsibility under international refugee law and urged Australians to force the government to relent.

Howard has not ruled out resorting to naked military violence. According to Rupert Murdoch's *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, the Royal Australian Navy frigate *HMAS Arunta*, which arrived at Christmas Island yesterday, has orders to take over the *Tampa*, whose captain has steadfastly defied Canberra's order to move out of Australian waters. Meanwhile, at least 130 army personnel have been airlifted to Christmas Island, a remote outpost in the Indian Ocean, ready for use in any military action against the ship or refugees.

For the past three days, the government has ordered the island's port to remain closed, preventing the media, local residents, doctors or anyone else from making contact with the asylum seekers and possibly rendering them assistance. It fears that, despite being closely guarded by SAS paratroopers, refugees will find their way ashore to apply for asylum. Equally, it fears the prospect of the refugees speaking to the world via the media.

The government is so determined to block the refugees, mostly Afghani, from applying for asylum that it has instructed the SAS troops not to speak to their prisoners at all, lest they indicate their desire to apply for refugee status.

On Thursday, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock suddenly advanced a new argument to deny that the refugees are within Australian jurisdiction, even though the *Tampa* has been under Australian occupation and well within its territorial waters for more than three days. Ruddock claimed that Australia has no obligations under the International Refugee Convention until the *Tampa* crosses an unspecified "low water mark" off Christmas Island.

At the same time, he ludicrously attempted to present a humanitarian face by emphasising that military helicopters have dropped food parcels, portable toilets and "comfort packs" of toiletries onto the *Tampa*'s deck.

## Media criticism

Internationally, the media coverage of the government's stand has been scathing, with the *Tampa* widely referred to as the "Ship of Despair" and its fate as the "Voyage of the Damned"—evoking comparisons with the shutting of American and Cuban ports to the Jews fleeing Nazi Germany in 1939.

The Norwegian national daily *Aftenposten* labelled Australia as an "international hooligan," which was scared of people from other countries. "Australians should be ashamed," declared London's *Independent* newspaper, calling the government's response "disgraceful" and "a gross over-reaction". A *Financial Times* editorial observed that Howard had backed himself into an "impossible" corner. "Sometimes talking tough makes a weak position even less tenable."

Several media outlets commented that the affair would undermine Australia's image of international openness, cultivated so assiduously

during last year's Sydney Olympic Games. Berlin's daily *Tagesspiegel* stated: "Australia runs the risk of gambling with the worldwide image it won through the Olympics".

Reflecting fears among Australian business leaders of the impact of such commentary, the *Australian Financial Review* on Friday urged the government to "cut its losses before it embarks on even higher-risk gambits—like trying to tow the Norwegian freighter into the open sea". It criticised the government for being "particularly ill-prepared" in its "dramatic assertion of national sovereignty".

One of the newspaper's columnists went further. He warned that coverage in the Asian press was giving comfort to Australia's critics in the region who pointed to the country's wealth and small population compared to neighbouring states. "Put simply, we risk surrendering perhaps our most valuable asset as a nation: our moral authority." This is a thinly-veiled reference to the government's capacity to intervene throughout the region economically and militarily—as in East Timor in 1999—on the pretext of having humanitarian motives.

Having urged on the government's callous actions all week, the *Daily Telegraph* performed an apparent about-face on Friday. Its editorial proclaimed: "There is no achievement in simply moving them [the refugees] out to sea and hoping the tides or someone else's charity will look after them."

The editorial praised Labor Party leader Kim Beazley for sharing its view. Beazley has been just as duplicitous as the newspaper, vehemently defending the government's use of SAS troops and its determination to stop the *Tampa* landing but suggesting, in recent days, that places must be found for the unwanted refugees.

#### Shifting public sentiment

While newspapers such as the *Daily Telegraph* are continuing to peddle the line that popular opinion overwhelmingly backs the government's tough measures—citing their own skewed telephone "votelines" or calls to notoriously right-wing radio talkback hosts, there are distinct signs of growing concern among working and professional people.

Even among talkback callers the level of support for the government's conduct dropped from near 80 percent to just over 50 percent by Thursday, according to Rehame, a monitoring agency. Rehame's spokesman said the turning point came when the government sent in the SAS.

Letters to the editor, including those to the *Daily Telegraph*, suggest a different picture to the media polls. Moreover, the letters indicate that working class people are beginning to identify with the plight of the refugees. One correspondent to the *Telegraph* wrote: "The unfortunate souls on the *Tampa* are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for their children. Their desperate attempt to provide a standard of living we have become accustomed to should be applauded."

Another pointed to the class divide in immigration policy, suggesting a common thread with the country's founding White Australia policy that for most of the 20th century prohibited the entry of non-Europeans. "It seems that the White Australia Policy has been changed to the rich-and-educated-only policy. If I were wealthy and educated and came from a free country, I would duck down to the local immigration office, obtain my passport and official papers and be welcomed at the airport as I arrived."

A *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent wrote: "My wife and I agreed this morning to offer our 2,700-acre farm in the Central West of NSW to house some of the refugees should it be necessary. We make this offer in disgust. Disgust at the methods, language and motives for the treatment of these poor people on that ship."

Another warned the government: "If the Prime Minister thinks that talkback radio is the voice of real Australia, he is in for a real shock."

One letter writer to the *Herald* referred to the Australian government's refusal to accept Jewish refugees from Germany in the 1930s. He reported

that he had discovered a letter in Washington DC's Holocaust Museum recording the advice given to the government of the day by a team it had sent to Europe to determine whether to offer sanctuary to Jewish victims of the Nazis. The letter advised that it "was not in Australia's interest to take any refugees".

On Christmas Island itself, residents, many of whom depend on the now-closed port for their livelihoods from tourism and fishing, have become more vocal in demanding that the refugees be allowed ashore. Most of the Christmas Islanders are of Chinese and Malay descent, having come to the island in the 1960s and 1970s to toil in the now-closed phosphate mine. More than 300 people—a quarter of the island's population—attended a demonstration yesterday accusing the government of racism and demanding that the *Tampa* refugees be allowed to land. One European man held a sign that read: "SOS not SAS".

In academic, legal and professional circles as well, the government has come under mounting fire. Yesterday civil liberties lawyers in Melbourne successfully obtained an interim injunction preventing the government from removing the *Tampa* from Australian waters until the Federal Court hears an application for a writ of *habeas corpus* to free the refugees from their illegal detention by the SAS. Thursday's defeat in the Senate of the government's proposed legislation to legalise and prevent court challenges to its military operation against the *Tampa* has left it exposed to such litigation.

Many legal experts, in Australia and overseas, have stated that the government has breached the 1951 International Refugee Convention, the Law of the Sea and possibly the Australian Constitution by denying the refugees the right to apply for asylum, seizing the ship militarily and ordering the hopelessly overcrowded freighter to put to sea.

By adopting, in effect, the policy of the extreme right-wing and racist Pauline Hanson's One Nation party—which is to turn around all refugee boats and leave them to the perils of the open seas—the Howard government has displayed the vicious logic of barring the world's poor from crossing national borders.

It has also based itself on a narrow right-wing constituency, whose votes it is courting for this year's federal election, and sought to use nationalist and xenophobic scapegoating of asylum seekers to divert popular hostility over deteriorating living standards and social facilities.

But these efforts have begun to backfire, leading to the government's ever more desperate attempts to end the *Tampa* impasse without losing political face.



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