

Australian navy opens fire on refugee boat

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Australian Prime Minister Howard's determination to keep anti-refugee demagoguery at centre stage in the campaign for the November 10 federal election plumbed new depths this week when the government ordered a naval warship to open fire on an asylum seekers' boat floundering in the Indian Ocean.

According to Defence Minister Peter Reith, the *HMAS Adelaide*, a frigate, fired shots across the bow of the small vessel at about 7am last Sunday, demanding that it turn back from Australia's nearby Christmas Island and return to Indonesia. Other reports indicated that a volley of some 40 rounds was directed across the water toward the boat, an act of aggression calculated to terrify its 233 passengers, who included 54 children and 42 women, thought to be fleeing from Iraq.

The warship's unprecedented actions were based upon new laws, introduced with the support of the Labor Party opposition just before parliament was dissolved for the election. They allow the military to use force to turn back or seize boats, and block any legal challenges.

News of the shots being fired was suppressed for three days. From Sunday to Wednesday, the mass media published lurid reports sensationalising the government's unsubstantiated claims that 14 people, including children, had jumped off the unnamed boat in a supposed bid to force the navy to rescue them and take them to Australia.

Prime Minister John Howard and his senior ministers accused parents of throwing their children overboard and declared that he did not want "people like that in Australia". "Genuine refugees don't do that," he insisted, making it crystal clear that the government would block the passengers' appeals for asylum, determining in advance that they had no entitlement to refugee status.

Ruddock feigned outrage, thundering that people arriving without permission would not be permitted to "intimidate" the government. On the basis that the asylum seekers were wearing life jackets, Ruddock insisted they had a "pre-meditated" plan to "put us under duress". Right-wing columnists chimed in, with the *Daily Telegraph's* Piers Ackerman accusing parents of "tossing little children into shark-infested waters" as a "publicity-seeking stunt".

Not to be outflanked, Labor Party leader Kim Beazley threw his weight behind the government, declaring that the asylum seekers had committed an "outrageous act." "I absolutely condemn the throwing of children overboard whatever point is attempted to be made by that course of action," he said.

The story began to unravel when journalists and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees asked the government for proof that children had been thrown into the sea. Caught off-guard, Ruddock initially denied the existence of, and then belatedly produced, two naval photographs of people in the water. The hazy pictures, splashed all over the front pages of newspapers on Thursday, proved nothing. They showed six people, including two children, all with their faces blocked out, swimming in water, wearing life jackets. Who were these people? When and where were they photographed? Why were they in the water? What happened before they got there?

Defence Minister Reith then entered the fray, declaring that the navy had a video showing a parent pushing a child into the sea. But he refused to release the video, initially citing "operational security" problems and later claiming that it was an infra-red video, and the navy was "just testing the quality for reproduction". He could not explain what prevented the navy from editing the video to overcome any security concerns, nor why an infra-red video would have been used during daytime. His spokesman lamely told journalists that the minister was not a video expert.

The media were barred from interviewing the asylum seekers, preventing them from answering the government's allegations. Even naval personnel from the *Adelaide* were forbidden to speak to reporters, including a naval publicity officer who witnessed the incident.

In the midst of questioning, Reith and Ruddock eventually admitted that the *Adelaide* had fired shots at the boat before the alleged incident. This raised the obvious question: did the refugees indeed jump overboard, but in an effort to protect themselves from the navy's guns? Were they reacting out of fear of being shot? In reply, Ruddock claimed, without evidence, that the incident happened some two hours after the *Adelaide* fired its shots.

Whatever the actual course of events, full responsibility for any refugees throwing themselves or their children off the boat lies squarely at the government's feet. Having set sail from Indonesia, the asylum seekers had been at sea for two days before being intercepted by the *Adelaide* last Saturday, some 150 kilometres from Christmas Island. Acting on explicit instructions from the government, a naval party boarded the vessel and ordered it to turn back to Indonesia—in the full knowledge that the Indonesian government had refused to accept them. The desperate refugees, crammed aboard the tiny boat in the middle of the ocean, were in a hopeless situation. Where were they supposed to go?

The next day the boat was fired upon. It again failed to turn back and another boarding party tried to force it in the direction of Indonesia. According to the government, this was when the refugees allegedly threw themselves into the water. The boat then broke down and began to founder, forcing the *Adelaide* to take it under tow and head for the safety of nearby Christmas Island.

The government's response was furious. Howard immediately ordered the *Adelaide's* captain to cease towing the ship and await instructions from the cabinet. Without any evidence whatsoever, government ministers accused the refugees of deliberately sabotaging the vessel. "One can only assume that they did sink the boat deliberately," Foreign Minister Alexander Downer declared, because "these people have behaved abominably from the start."

Eventually, faced with the only alternative—that the refugees be allowed to drown—Howard and his associates ordered the navy to load them onto the *Adelaide's* deck. There they languished for more than a day while the government searched for somewhere to dump them.

Finally, the government of Papua New Guinea, an impoverished former Australian colony, agreed to incarcerate the asylum seekers in a hastily-built detention centre, in return for an initial payment of \$1 million, to be followed by more cash "as required". It now seems that the boat's passengers will find themselves imprisoned for six months or more in a former military barracks on remote Manus Island, near the equator, some 400 kilometres north of PNG's main island.

In the meantime, they have been off-loaded onto Christmas Island, locked up in a corrugated iron hall, under intense security and isolated from local residents, as well as reporters. Last month, Christmas Island residents, the majority of whom are former Malay phosphate miners and their families, expressed solidarity with the 433 rescued Afghan refugees aboard the Norwegian freighter, the *Tampa*, who were not permitted to set foot on the island. Under the government's new laws, Christmas Island and other

offshore territories have since become "excision zones," removed from Australia's migration zone.

PNG is the third Pacific country in a month to be bribed or bullied into becoming a holding pen for the Howard government's unwanted asylum seekers. From the Indian Ocean to the South Pacific, the region is rapidly becoming Australia's gulag, with neighbouring governments imprisoning thousands of refugees at Canberra's behest.

The government of the tiny Pacific Island of Nauru, with a population of 11,000, has already committed itself to taking 900 asylum seekers from the *Tampa* and three refugee boats, all intercepted by Australian warships in recent weeks. With Nauru's tent facilities at the point of overflowing, the Howard cabinet is negotiating with the government of Kiribati, another small, poverty-stricken Pacific state, to build a holding camp at a disused military base. Nearly 200 Sri Lankan refugees remain in detention on Cocos Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean.

In just over a month, the Howard government has transformed the navy into a refugee herding service, ordering warships to seize one boat after another, load their passengers onto troopships and force their prisoners onto isolated islands. Since the *Tampa* crisis, six more boats have arrived, carrying more than 1,000 people. The latest, thought to hold more than 230 Iraqi and Iranian passengers, has been boarded by the *HMAS Warramunga* near Ashmore Reef, off Australia's north-west coast.

Throughout the course of the year, the Howard government's electoral fortunes had received one blow after another, with major losses in a number of state elections. The prime minister has seized upon the "boat people" as convenient scapegoats for the growing crisis in education, public health, housing and job security and to divert attention away from the government's own record. Having seen its opinion poll rating jump during the *Tampa* affair, the government has cynically engineered each confrontation, with the assistance of the media, and cranked up its national chauvinist rhetoric.

For its part, the Labor Party opposition has lined up with the entire sordid affair, continuing its bipartisan support for virtually every attack on living standards, public facilities and democratic rights launched by the Howard government since the last election in 1998.



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