

Drowned refugees were victims of Australian policy

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Among the more than 350 refugees who drowned in the Indian Ocean last week trying to get to Australia, were at least five women and 13 children who perished as a direct consequence of anti-refugee laws introduced by the Howard government with the support of the Labor Party. Yet, despite the tragedy, both Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Leader Kim Beazley have vowed to maintain the laws and have stepped up their vilification of asylum seekers in the campaign for the November 10 federal election.

The husbands of the five women were already living in Australia, having arrived on previous boats and won the right to refugee status. But under measures introduced two years ago, the five Iraqi men—like all other asylum seekers arriving by boat—were granted only temporary protection visas, which deny them the right to apply for family reunion visas for their wives and children for at least three years. Last month, as part of a battery of laws rushed through parliament in the wake of the *Tampa* refugee crisis, the government, again backed by Labor, banned asylum seekers travelling in boats from ever seeking permanent residency, which includes family reunion.

As a result, the only hope of the five Iraqi men seeing their families again was to arrange for them to undertake the voyage from Indonesia's Lampung province to Australia in a hopelessly overcrowded fishing boat carrying 421 people. Under last month's legislation, the government is using the navy to hunt down, intercept and forcibly turn back such boats, increasing the risk of death.

When news of the boat's sinking came early on October 23—more than three days after the tragedy—it devastated three Iraqi men sharing a threadbare flat without furniture in the working class Sydney western suburb of Warwick Farm. Ali Madhi, who took the first phone call, lost his three daughters, Dunya, 14, Marwa, 12, and Hijran, 10, as well their mother, Zainab.

Clutching photographs of his daughters, he bitterly denounced Howard and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock, who have labelled asylum seekers as “queue-jumpers” and suggested that refugee boats might shelter

terrorists. Madhi asked reporters: “Do these beautiful children look like terrorists? These are John Howard's and Philip Ruddock's queue-jumpers. Will they be satisfied when they see my children's bodies taken from the sea?”

Madhi said his family had paid \$5,000 for their desperate voyage from Indonesia after his wife was turned away from the Australian embassy.

His flatmate, Ahmed Alzalimi, a former teacher, lost his three daughters, Aiman, 9, Fatima, 7, and Zahra, 6. He received the news via a telephone call from his wife, Sondos Ismail, who survived in the sea off the coast of Java for 19 hours before Indonesian fishermen found the boat's wreckage. Sondos Ismail also lost her sister, wife of Mohammed Al-Musawi, the third man in the Warwick Farm flat.

Al-Musawi told reporters: “We know that to come by sea is an arduous and dangerous journey ... but [the alternative] is to wait and hope and wait—hope that one day we will see our families again. But this waiting and hoping can be more painful than the journey itself, and more distressing than death... These obstacles that have been put here by Australian immigration, they are a slow death.”

The men cannot even travel to Indonesia to see the bodies of their loved ones and make funeral arrangements. Their temporary protection visas prevent them from leaving the country. If they do, they will forfeit their right to re-enter Australia. Ruddock has refused to grant an exemption on compassionate grounds and Labor's immigration spokesman Con Sciacca has endorsed his stance, declaring that a Labor government would respond in exactly the same way.

About 30 other people on the doomed boat had been recognised as genuine refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), but had been stranded in Indonesia in appalling conditions for up to two years—denied any right to work or government welfare assistance. Their deaths are also directly due to Australia's refusal to grant refugee or humanitarian visas to a single person in Indonesia for many years.

The plight of the victims and their families has provoked

considerable disgust toward the government's policies. The mass media, which has generally given uncritical coverage to the escalating anti-refugee measures, has felt compelled to publish photographs and interviews with the survivors and their families. Footage of the mounting humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan and Iran has also made it obvious that the government is denying refuge to people who are fleeing terrible conditions, now worsened by US-led bombing.

Some community leaders have begun to speak out. Addressing 200 mourning Muslims, an Islamic leader, Sheikh Taj el-Din Al Hilay, accused Howard of "closing all the legal and safe means for these people to find freedom and safety" and "opening the gates of death for these people ... the carnivorous fish of the sea are now thanking Mr Howard for his immigration policies." Howard had "blood on his hands" for trying to gain political mileage out of the asylum seekers' plight.

Refugee Council of Australia chairman William Maley said welfare agencies had warned the government in October 1999 not to deny family reunion rights to temporary protection visa holders. "Refugee advocates at the time said the effect would be to drive the immediate families, the wives and children, of refugees into the hands of people smugglers, putting them at risk. That was just ignored by the government."

In a joint statement, the Pacific Conference of Churches, the World Council of Churches and other social and religious organisations accused the Howard government of itself engaging in human trafficking by removing refugees to Australian-financed detention camps in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, two former colonies in the Pacific. "We are also concerned that accepting the Australian aid deals will make Pacific Island governments part of the process that solicits money/profits out of trade in human trafficking, and in this case the asylum seekers," the statement said.

Nevertheless, the government has refused to even allow entry to the disaster's survivors, most of whom Ruddock accused—without offering any evidence—of not being genuine refugees. Ruddock blamed the victims for their own deaths, declaring: "I'm not going to be made to feel guilty about people who put themselves in the hands of smugglers and who pay large amounts of money knowing that they're going to break our law."

In an attempt to divert attention from their role, Ruddock and Howard have seized upon allegations that armed men and Indonesian police forced the refugees aboard the unseaworthy boat. They have demanded that the Indonesian government investigate the claims. Howard claimed that the reports proved that his government could not be blamed for the refugees' deaths.

If the allegations are true, however, they simply reveal aspects of the profiteering, thuggery and bribery inevitably produced in a poor country like Indonesia when the Western powers shut their borders to millions of people fleeing persecution, hunger and war. Money-hungry businessmen and corrupt police officers are not the cause of the refugee catastrophe; they are exploiting the black-market created by the actions of the world's wealthiest governments.

Further deaths are certain. On the same day as the Java Sea tragedy, a naval warship towed an overloaded boat away from Ashmore Reef, a rocky outcrop 400 kilometres off north-western Australia, and back into Indonesian waters. This week, it was reported that the boat almost sank off West Timor, before its 243 mostly Afghani asylum seekers were brought ashore and placed in detention.

Meanwhile, another leaky hulk carrying 219 mostly Iraqi asylum seekers has arrived at Ashmore Reef, after defying orders from a navy warship to turn back. Like another 220 asylum seekers who have spent more than a week off Christmas Island, in the Indian Ocean, the government has refused to state what it will do with them. However, Ruddock has reiterated the government's determination that they will never set foot on the Australian mainland—where they would be entitled to apply for refugee status.

At Christmas Island, the navy is trying to repair the engine of the rotting Indonesian fishing boat so that it can be towed back to sea, despite warnings from Christmas Island residents that the decrepit 20-metre wooden boat will quickly sink in open waters. Local councillor Gordon Thompson said: "That boat is a death trap." In the meantime, armed sailors are standing guard over the asylum seekers, including four alleged "trouble-makers" who have been forced to sit on the deck all day in the tropical heat, with their legs crossed and hands behind their heads.

Despite the government's policies, many more people are about to undertake these perilous voyages. Because of the imminent cyclone season, a further 1,200 people are expected to set sail from Indonesia within the next three or four weeks, with up to 9,000 more asylum seekers waiting in Malaysia and throughout Indonesia. Among them, no doubt, will be more women and children seeking to be reunited with some of the 6,617 temporary visa holders living in Australia.



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