

Australian media whips up anti-refugee campaign after asylum seeker boat tragedy

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At least three Afghan asylum seekers were killed in a boat explosion off the north-west coast of Australia yesterday morning. Two others are missing, while many of the 49 passengers suffered critical burns and other injuries. Some of the casualties are believed to be as young as 13 or 14. Three or four Australian sailors were also injured in the blast; the vessel had been earlier intercepted by the Australian naval patrol boat HMAS Albany and was being towed to Christmas Island, an offshore asylum seeker processing centre.

One of the two Indonesian crew members aboard the vessel is among eight men admitted to Royal Darwin Hospital in the Northern Territory overnight. Five of the eight are reportedly fighting for their lives and have been placed in induced comas. They suffered burns to up to 70 percent of their bodies as well as fractures and head injuries. A total of 31 refugees are receiving treatment in Darwin, Perth, and Broome, in Western Australia; another 13 are due to arrive in the Northern Territory today and 4 patients are expected at Queensland's Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital later tonight.

As soon as the tragedy became publicly known, and before any investigation of the circumstances surrounding it, Liberal parliamentarians and the media began making allegations that the refugees had deliberately incinerated their vessel, and that the Labor government's modifications to the previous Howard government's draconian asylum and immigration laws were responsible.

West Australian Liberal Premier Colin Barnett declared yesterday: "What I think is clear is that the refugees spread petrol over their boat, the vessel they were on. Whether they ignited it or it just ignited, is unknown at this stage. But clearly that caused a major explosion, not only injuring refugees but of great concern that four Defence personnel were also injured."

Far from being "clear", the cause of the explosion remains unknown. Barnett's immediate attack on the asylum seekers—made as many of them are fighting for their lives in hospital—recalls the former Howard government's infamous allegation, later exposed as a flagrant lie, that refugees threw their children overboard in October 2001, in order to force the navy to rescue them.

Refugee advocates have noted that the accusation of deliberate sabotage is inconsistent with the fact that the vessel had been intercepted by the Australian navy; the refugees, among whom one reportedly spoke English, were told they were going to be processed in Australian territory. Pamela Kerr of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre told ABC Radio: "I asked a friend of mine about this ... an Iraqi man, and he said to me, 'Do Australians think we're stupid, that we would put our own engines to fire?' He said, 'We are not stupid. If we wanted to stop the engine we

would put sugar in it.'"

If it is finally established that the explosion was accidentally triggered by an attempt to disable the vessel, this would only underscore the refugees' desperate and fearful plight. The government's policy of towing asylum seekers' boats back to Indonesia wherever possible has produced a highly dangerous and life-threatening situation. Those who are driven to attempt the perilous ocean voyage often feel compelled to sabotage their boat as the last available means of having their asylum request processed.

Moreover, among the questions yet to be answered is why the small, overcrowded boat was reportedly deemed "seaworthy" by the navy's inspectors, and why the refugees were not brought to Christmas Island aboard the Australian naval vessels.

The underlying assumption informing the media's coverage of the disaster is that any refugee arriving by boat in Australia is a criminal: to seek refuge for one's self and one's family is completely illegitimate. Never mentioned is the fact that refugees are supposedly guaranteed the right under international law to seek asylum, be protected from abuse, and receive humanitarian assistance.

The refugees killed and injured yesterday morning are among millions of Afghans suffering from persecution, homelessness, and desperate poverty. Their plight is the direct consequence of the illegal invasion and occupation of Afghanistan by the US and its allies, including Australia. The corrupt US puppet regime headed by Hamid Karzai has little authority beyond, or even within, the capital Kabul. The country has been plunged into an economic and social catastrophe; it remains divided into rival fiefdoms headed by warlords financed by the heroin trade; minorities as well as different ethnic and language groups are systematically targeted. American forces routinely bomb and raid civilian areas, killing large numbers of non-combatants with impunity. Widespread hostility to the US-NATO occupation has created the conditions in which the Taliban and other Islamist forces have been able to re-establish control over large areas of Afghanistan.

Unsurprisingly, the number of Afghan refugees has escalated as a result. This has contributed to a sharp rise in the total number of refugees internationally, along with a similar situation in Iraq—again caused by the US-led invasion and occupation—and also in Sri Lanka, where the government, armed and financed by the western powers, is waging a brutal war against separatist Tamil forces. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of asylum-seekers climbed 12 percent last year to 383,000 people.

Australia accepts a small fraction of this total. Last year the figure was

4,750 (up from 3,980 in 2007), with only 179 of these arriving by boat. The UNHCR's Australian regional representative, Richard Towle, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the increase was due to the global rise in refugee numbers: "Insecurity, persecution and conflict around the world are leading to greater numbers of people seeking asylum in industrialised nations, including Australia."

Sections of the media and political establishment are nevertheless attempting to whip up a xenophobic scare campaign, drawing on the filthy traditions of the country's notorious White Australia immigration policy. Opposition immigration spokeswoman Sharman Stone led the fray, castigating the Rudd Labor government for revising Howard's legislation. "I'm very concerned that since August, when announcements were made about the end of TPV's or temporary protection visas, what we used to call the Pacific solution, a green light flashed [in] a lot of people-smuggling business headquarters, and we saw the boats begin to come on down," she declared. "You can't announce a softer policy and then not expect people to lose their lives through people smuggling."

Liberal leader Malcolm Turnbull followed suit, insisting: "There is no doubt the impression has been created that we are now more accommodating or taking a less hard line towards people smuggling than we had in the past... We do no service to anybody by being seen to be more accommodating or more receptive to people smuggling."

The media, led by the Murdoch press, has steadily escalated the campaign. The *Australian* today featured a comment by foreign editor Greg Sheridan titled "Soft line fosters people-smuggling" and an editorial declaring that the Afghan deaths were "part of the price of Immigration Minister Chris Evans's policy of making it easier for unauthorised arrivals to jump the asylum-seeker queue by simply turning up and making their claim to refugee status from Australia".

The campaign—featuring the dredging up of all the old anti-refugee slanders such as accusing them of being "queue jumpers"—has been mounted as a conscious political diversion. It is no coincidence that the scapegoating of an oppressed and vulnerable minority, aimed at inciting the most confused and reactionary nationalist sentiments among layers of the population, occurs just as the impact of the world economic crisis begins to be felt in Australia, especially reflected in rapidly rising unemployment figures.

The Labor government is unable to answer the opposition's attacks because there is bipartisan agreement on the basic repressive framework for dealing with asylum seekers. The previous Labor government of Paul Keating introduced mandatory detention of refugees in 1992; in opposition from 1996-2007, the Labor Party consistently issued its full support to the Howard government's measures.

Speaking on ABC Radio this morning, immigration minister Chris Evans stressed that all that the Rudd government had altered was the "Pacific Solution"—it ended the detention of asylum seekers on Nauru and other Pacific island states—the "TPV" (temporary protection visa) system and the speed with which asylum claims are processed. Potential refugees are now generally permitted to live in the community while their cases are more rapidly processed. All the other draconian aspects of Howard's legislation remain in place, including mandatory detention laws and the excision of Christmas Island, Ashmore reef, and other areas from Australia's migration zone.

"We are not at all going to allow Australia's borders to be threatened," Evans declared. "We believe in strong border security but we have also

rejected the worst excesses of the Howard years."

What Evans describes as "excesses" were brutal measures deliberately aimed at punishing refugees in order to discourage others from seeking asylum in Australia. Families were divided and men, women, and children were held for years behind razor wire fences in degrading conditions—leading to numerous hunger strike protests and detention centre rebellions. On October 19, 2001 the SIEV X refugee vessel sank, killing 353 people; substantial evidence later emerged indicating that senior government and military officials deliberately withheld assistance in order to allow the victims to die. Phillip Ruddock, Howard's immigration minister, subsequently declared that the disaster "may have an upside in the sense that some people may see the dangers inherent in it".

The same murderous logic underlines the latest demands for Labor to reverse its asylum seeker law reforms. For its part, the Rudd government has already indicated it will reassess its policies. "There are more people coming and we are going to have to keep all of our procedures and strategies under review," Home Affairs Minister Bob Debus declared. He added: "The present government is just as strong in some respects stronger than the previous government on detection and suppression of people smuggling activities."

The government's asylum reforms were driven, not by any concern for the well being or rights of refugees, but above all by the need to adapt to growing political hostility to the Howard government in the leadup to the 2007 federal election. Broad opposition—including among Howard's traditional constituencies—to the Liberals' long record of lies and demonisation of refugees had led to demands for more humane policies. Once elected, Rudd could not simply maintain the status quo. His government eliminated some of the "excesses", while maintaining all the essential features of Howard's—and Paul Keating's—measures.

Rudd today defended his record with right-wing, tub-thumping rhetoric. "People smugglers are engaged in the world's most evil trade and they should all rot in jail because they represent the absolute scum of the earth," he declared. "People smugglers are the vilest form of human life... That's why this Government maintains its hardline, tough, targeted approach to maintaining border protection for Australia." At least some of these so-called "people smugglers" are ordinary Indonesian fishermen, who use their fishing boats to ferry asylum seekers from Indonesia to Australia. Their former meagre livelihoods have been destroyed by the Rudd government's ban on fishing in "Australian" territorial waters.



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