

# Australia: New details about “SIEV 36” refugee deaths expose official lies

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8 September 2009

On April 16, an Indonesian fishing boat carrying 47 asylum seekers exploded off the north-west coast of Australia, near Ashmore Reef. The overcrowded vessel, designated by Australian authorities as SIEV (Suspect Illegal Entry Vehicle) 36, which was intercepted by the navy 20 hours earlier, quickly sank after the blast. Five refugees died and over 40 were injured, including several with serious burns.

Australia’s political and media establishment responded to the tragedy by blaming the refugees and whipping up anti-asylum-seeker sentiment. Western Australian state premier Colin Barnett claimed, without a shred of evidence, that the Afghan refugees had deliberately soaked the vessel with petrol and ignited it, in order to force the navy to save them and bring them to Australian soil.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd declared that his government was tough on “border protection” and denounced so-called “people smugglers” as the “lowest form of human life”. The campaign was taken up by right-wing talkback radio hosts and sections of the media, which continued to suggest that the explosion was a result of refugee sabotage.

These claims have now been exposed as lies in a series of interviews with an Afghan elder and with unnamed, “well-placed” sources who have seen video footage of the event. Their interviews were published in the *Weekend Australian* and yesterday’s *Australian*.

The new evidence reveals that the refugees were innocent victims of the government’s immigration policy.

According to the reports, defence personnel played a key role in creating the conditions for the explosion and then prevented asylum seekers thrown into the sea by the force of the blast from climbing into rescue boats. No life vests had been provided to the refugees by the navy prior to the blast, despite a routine safety requirement to do so, and in the face of the obviously unseaworthy character of the fishing boat.

The revelations have been covered up by Canberra for almost six months. They are a damning indictment of the Rudd government, which has continued the same inhuman anti-refugee policies that contributed to the downfall of its predecessor, the Howard government.

Hassan Gulam, an Afghan elder who interviewed the survivors, told the *Weekend Australian* that the explosion occurred after an

Australian Navy officer on the vessel directed the crew to fill a small bilge-pump fuel tank. Gulam said that fuel vapours, which had built up in the boat’s engine compartment, were probably ignited by a cigarette.

“All of these guys (Afghans) were very stressed and anxious about what was going to happen to them and were smoking constantly,” he said. “An Australian Navy man on the roof of the boat—he ordered the people to move to the front of the boat. That night, he (the Australian) ordered the crew to fill the engine, which pumps the water out—I don’t have his name. The crew filled a tin with petrol and then put it into the pump engine; there was this strong smell of petrol and then the explosion.”

Gulam went on to explain that one group of navy personnel forcibly stopped refugees getting into naval rescue boats: “The first number of people who tried to get on board were rejected—they were pushed back by the navy. They are all quite clear and told me this, but (minutes) later the female navy officers fished them out of the water on to the rescue boat.”

Gulam told the newspaper that he didn’t know how long survivors were pushed back by the navy rescue crew but said this was “a culture, a longstanding official culture to express a dislike of refugees”. Some of the asylum-seekers told him that “they believe their colleagues drowned because they were forced off the navy RHIBs [rigid hulled inflatable boats].”

## Allegations confirmed

The refusal of the navy crew to rescue survivors—a direct violation of international law that guarantees asylum-seekers the right to receive humanitarian aid and assistance—has been confirmed by two anonymous sources. The sources told the *Australian* that they watched the Defence Department video of the event, and described the scenes as “distressing” and “inhuman”.

One source told the *Weekend Australian* that male personnel on one rescue vessel started “kicking these people to stop them climbing on to this RHIB.... People say that’s what they’re trained to do. But they

don't throw them a line immediately, they don't do anything."

Another said: "There is a stench about this case and we all knew it from day one. It's funny, isn't it, that a week or two after this happened, the ADF [Australian Defence Force] started throwing out life vests to people on boats [during refugee boat seizures]. This will not go down as one of our most glorious hours."

Yesterday another navy crew member told the *Australian* that the mainly male rescue crew "abused and physically prevented the Afghans—many with serious burn injuries—from boarding their rescue vessel."

The crew of the Albany, the navy ship that intercepted the Indonesian fishing boat a day earlier, is also alleged to have ordered the refugees to sit in the sun's blistering heat on the fishing boat's deck while the navy towed it in "figure-eights off Ashmore Reef" throughout April 15. This is believed to have made the asylum-seekers "confused and feeling sick" and heightened their fears.

The Defence Department has told the media that it cannot comment on the newspaper reports without ministerial approval but insisted, nonetheless, that there was "no evidence to suggest that any inappropriate actions took place". A department spokesman callously declared that ADF members had simply followed "operating procedure", which was to give rescue "priority" to "their own personnel", some of whom were on the fishing boat and had been thrown into the sea by the force of the explosion.

The navy continues to argue that it provided prompt assistance to the injured asylum-seekers. The defence department web site says that the first injured Afghans were receiving medical attention on HMAS Childers within nine minutes of the explosion. Yesterday, however, the department claimed that crews from HMAS Albany and Childers recovered all survivors "within about 15 minutes".

Whatever the exact time it took to rescue the asylum-seekers, a majority of whom were unable to swim, it was nearly 10 hours before the most seriously injured were transported to an offshore oil rig and then flown to the Australian mainland for hospital treatment.

The refugees believed to have been killed, either in the explosion or by drowning, were: Awaz Nader, 50, Baquer Husani, 26, Mohammed Amen Zamen, 38, Mohammed Hasan Ayobi, 45 and Muzafar Ali Safarali, 45. Two of the bodies have never been found.

The response of the government to the revelations about SIEV 36 has a chilling similarity with the political modus operandi of the Howard government.

In October 2001, a boat carrying 223 asylum seekers sank after the navy intercepted the vessel and forced it to turn around. The passengers were rescued but Prime Minister Howard and other senior ministers falsely claimed that they had thrown their children overboard. The government lies served to whip-up anti-refugee sentiment during the 2001 federal election campaign. Soon after, another refugee boat—the SIEV X—sank as it was trying to reach Australia. Some 353 men, women and children lost their lives. No rescue operation was mounted by the navy or other Australian

Defence Forces.

The government falsely claimed to have had no knowledge that the dangerous and seriously overcrowded SIEV X had set sail from Indonesia to Australia, despite ongoing air and sea surveillance of the area and several intelligence reports about the boat's movements from its agents in Indonesia.

According to the media, Defence Minister John Faulkner will receive a Defence Department internal report, as well as video and photographs of the SIEV 36 incident, in the next few days. A spokesman for Faulkner said that the video and photographic evidence would be released publicly "at the earliest possible opportunity" when Northern Territory (NT) authorities—the police and the coroner—had concluded their investigations.

But NT Coroner Greg Cavanagh is not expected to begin his official investigation into the deaths of the Afghan asylum seekers until February next year. Moreover, the *Australian* has reported that police have had to interview ADF personnel again because their testimony about what happened on April 16 has "not been consistent."

Faulkner's promises should be taken with a large grain of salt.

Eight days after the SIEV 36 explosion near Ashmore Reef, the Rudd government released a so-called "sequence of events" memo, together with 24 selected photographs. No details were provided at that time about the explosion or about what happened after the boat's passengers were thrown into the sea. The Afghan survivors—who are still being detained by Australian immigration authorities—were also barred from speaking about what had happened to the media.

During the 2002 inquiry in the "children overboard" affair and the SIEV X tragedy, Faulkner raised a series of questions about the role of the Howard government and the military authorities in the catastrophe but then, together with other Labor Senators, voted with the government to shut it down. The vote was taken after evidence emerged that Australian Federal Police agents based in Indonesia had been involved in the sabotage of refugee boats. Faulkner's vote ensured that damning evidence about government culpability for the SIEV X tragedy was never fully brought to light.

Having played a key role in shutting down the 2002 inquiry, Faulkner is being relied upon to keep information concerning any criminal responsibility, on the part of the military and the Rudd government, for these latest deaths safely under wraps.



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