

Indonesian police shoot two refugees trying to reach Australia

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The real face of the Rudd government's hoped-for "Indonesian solution" for asylum seekers began to emerge last week. Indonesian police, using an Australian-supplied fast pursuit boat, shot and seriously wounded two men aboard an Afghan asylum seekers' boat, allegedly for resisting arrest.

The shooting, which has left the two in a serious condition in hospital, occurred last Thursday after police intercepted a boatload of 61 Afghan refugees headed for Australia. According to witnesses, a 17-year-old boy was shot in the hand, while a 30-year-old man was shot in the leg as the boat neared Rote Island, just south of West Timor.

A teenage Afghan asylum seeker on the boat told Melbourne-based refugee advocate Pamela Curr that the police had started shooting without any announcement, after the refugees refused to pay a bribe. Indonesian police chiefs insisted that four police officers had boarded the vessel and shot the pair because they put up a fight to resist arrest.

Whatever the exact circumstances, the incident flows directly from the Australian Labor government's policy of sub-contracting to Indonesia, and other regional governments, the enforcement of measures designed to prevent asylum seekers from reaching Australia.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd wasted no time in endorsing the actions of the Indonesian authorities. While declaring that the shooting "lies within the purview of the Indonesian National Police," he added: "I just say this: when it comes to people smuggling, we have consistently said we support and are engaged with our friends and neighbours in the region in a hardline

response."

Jakarta's "hardline response" has been carried out directly at the behest of the Rudd government. Canberra is paying Jakarta to conduct such operations—with the close involvement of the Australian Federal Police and intelligence agencies—and to detain refugees on Indonesian soil.

The pursuit craft is believed to have been patrolling as part of an Australian-funded \$15 million joint program between Australian and Indonesian police. As well as equipping them, the program includes training Indonesian police in techniques to combat so-called "people-smuggling".

The "Indonesian solution" has been discussed in a series of meetings between Australian and Indonesian officials in recent months, some personally involving Rudd and Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Rudd has claimed to be close to reaching a formal agreement with Jakarta to intercept and detain refugees in Australian-funded Indonesian immigration centres.

Refugees can languish for years in these overcrowded facilities, even after being recognised as genuine refugees by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), waiting for another country to accept them.

At last weekend's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Singapore Rudd failed to finalise any compact with Yudhoyono, who has been under intense domestic pressure not to allow Indonesia to become a "dumping ground" for the Australian government's unwanted asylum seekers. In a

significant diplomatic snub, Yudhoyono has now postponed, at the last minute, a scheduled three-day visit to Australia.

For the Rudd government, one of the advantages of out-sourcing its anti-refugee measures to Indonesia is that Jakarta is not a signatory to the international Refugee Convention, which prohibits countries from “refouling” or sending back, refugees to face the governments whose persecution they have fled.

Indonesian authorities are reportedly preparing to detain and deport many of the 250 Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers who have refused to leave their boat in the West Javan port of Merak. The refugees were intercepted by Indonesian authorities at Canberra’s request on October 11.

According to Australian media reports, Indonesian negotiations with Sri Lanka involve the forced repatriation of about 130 of the Merak passengers who do not carry UN registration cards certifying that they have been accepted as genuine refugees. Any such deportations without the right to apply for asylum would flout the Refugee Convention.

There is no doubt that Sri Lankan Tamils satisfy the convention’s test of fleeing political or ethnic persecution. Decades of official anti-Tamil discrimination led to the country’s protracted civil war when only just ended in May. The Sri Lankan government is currently detaining more than 250,000 Tamil civilians in military-run camps in breach of the country’s constitution and legal system and preparing for a permanent military occupation of Tamil areas of the island’s north and east.

The Rudd government underscored its “hardline” approach last weekend by chartering a 100-seat jet to Sri Lanka in order to forcibly remove six Sinhalese asylum seekers who staged an eight-hour protest inside the Christmas Island immigration detention centre last month. They were accompanied by 17 guards and immigration officials. One of the men had climbed a 12-metre pole and threatened to jump from it in a desperate attempt to avoid being sent back.

The six fishermen had become the first detainees to be isolated inside the centre’s “red block”, built by the

previous Howard government, with small metal cells for supposedly violent or unstable prisoners. They were among 50 Sri Lankans who had been trying to reach New Zealand when their boat hit a reef in the Torres Strait, between Australia and Papua New Guinea, on March 28. So far, only 12 have been granted refugee visas.

Last week, Australian foreign minister Stephen Smith and his Sri Lankan counterpart Rohitha Bogollagama signed a statement in Colombo agreeing to launch a joint crackdown aimed at preventing Tamils from fleeing the island and seeking asylum in Australia. In this instance, the Rudd government is directly collaborating with the regime responsible for the persecution of Tamils (see “Australia-Sri Lanka deal for joint crackdown on Tamil asylum seekers”).

Conscious of the groundswell of public revulsion toward the Howard government’s brutal policies, which played a significant part in Howard’s landslide defeat two years ago, the Rudd government has claimed to be following a more “humane” course. In reality, it is cajoling regional governments to help it carry out a major escalation of the measures introduced by its predecessor.

As the latest shooting again demonstrates, the inevitable logic of that “Fortress Australia” policy is the use of lethal police or military force to deny refugees the fundamental democratic right to live where they choose, with full legal, social and political rights.



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