

Australia: Defiant stand by Oceanic Viking refugees triggers political crisis

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After a defiant four-week stand, 56 Sri Lankan refugees aboard an Australian Customs vessel, the Oceanic Viking, finally disembarked on Wednesday and were locked inside the Australian-funded immigration detention centre at Tanjung Pinang, on the Indonesian island of Bintan.

The asylum seekers were the last of 78 Australian-bound Tamils rescued by the patrolling Australian ship on October 18 in international waters south of Sumatra. Rather than being taken to Christmas Island, Australia's territorial outpost in the Indian Ocean, they were transported to Indonesia, after a personal request by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

The month-long refusal of the Tamils to leave the ship has triggered an extraordinary political crisis for the Australian Labor government, both domestically and in its relations with neighbouring Indonesia.

The plight of the 68 men, 5 women and 5 children on the cramped vessel has become a test case for the Rudd government's reactionary "Indonesian solution", under which it will sub-contract to the Indonesian regime the enforcement of whatever measures become necessary to prevent refugee boats from reaching Australia.

From the outset, Rudd declared that the refugees' demand to be taken to Australia would not be met. His stance echoed that of his predecessor, John Howard, who made the infamous declaration in the course of the 2001 election campaign that "*we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come*".

As the stand-off dragged on, Indonesian authorities became increasingly concerned about the implications of doing Australia's dirty work. Last weekend, Yudhoyono refused to meet Rudd at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Singapore to formally endorse a compact to intercept refugee boats, and then cancelled a three-day visit to Australia that was scheduled to start next Sunday.

In the end, the refugees were convinced to disembark after they were offered a special package by the two governments. The package was originally accepted by 22 of the Oceanic Viking passengers last Friday. Under its terms, they were promised that they would be resettled in a third country within 12 weeks if certified as genuine refugees by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The refugees were also assured that, while awaiting resettlement, the women and children would be held in community housing outside the detention centre's razor wire perimeter. That promise has already been breached. Yesterday, mothers and their children called out to the media from behind bars in a cell block attached to the detention centre. "Help me," one mother carrying an infant begged from the cell window, "the children want to go out and play."

Rudd spent four days of parliamentary question time this week denying that the refugees had been given a preferential deal to get them off the boat. He ludicrously described the package as "non-extraordinary" and even claimed not to have been aware of its terms—which were approved by his cabinet Border Protection Committee, consisting of top officials from his department, five senior ministers and the national security adviser, Duncan Lewis.

The document given to the 78 rescues promised that those already certified by the UNHCR to be refugees would be resettled within four to six weeks of disembarkation, while others would be resettled within 12 weeks if found by the UNHCR to be refugees. The offer also included English language and orientation classes while their cases were being processed, assistance "every day" by Australian officials, and from the Red Cross to help trace family members. Once resettled, they would be provided with services, including "assistance with housing, medical care and counselling, income support, English language tuition and help to find a job".

Even if honoured, the offer falls far short of recognising the unrestricted right of refugees to flee persecution and be granted protection with full legal, social and democratic rights. Rudd

and his ministers also continue to insist that the Oceanic Viking refugees have been given no guarantee of eventually entering Australia.

Nevertheless, the conditions pledged to the 78 rescuees are undeniably more favourable than those endured by the thousands of other UNHCR-approved refugees who have languished for years in Indonesian, Malaysian and Thai camps awaiting re-settlement.

At October 1, there were 2,333 UNHCR-registered or recognised asylum-seekers in Indonesia, many waiting for more than five years. Only 35 of these were resettled in Australia last year. According to the Refugee Council of Australia, more than 36,000 UNHCR-approved refugees are in Malaysia awaiting resettlement, with another 9,000 still being processed. In Thailand, 113,000 have been approved, and 12,000 are still pending. Typically, even after they get their UNHCR cards, resettlement can take up to 10 years. In the meantime they “are living in constant fear of arrest and deportation and regularly experience harassment and exploitation”.

It was these conditions that the Oceanic Viking refugees refused to accept. A similar stand has been taken by around 250 Tamils still refusing to leave their overcrowded boat in the West Javan port of Merak. On October 11, their vessel was intercepted by Indonesian authorities, also at Australia’s request. Despite arguing that the Ocean Viking deal was not preferential, the Rudd government has declared that no such offer will be made to the Merak refugees.

A sordid and increasingly hysterical debate has dominated the Australian media and parliament for days, even though the number of people seeking asylum in Australia is minuscule compared to the global refugee crisis. According to the UNHCR 2008 Global Trends report, there were 42 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide at the end of 2008, including 15.2 million certified refugees. Many are fleeing the hellish conditions created by the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and now the mass detentions and continued repression of Tamils by the Sri Lankan government.

The Liberal-National opposition has denounced the Oceanic Viking deal, with former Howard minister Tony Abbott accusing the government of giving the rescuees a “magic carpet ride” into Australia by “surrendering to people who effectively hijacked an Australian vessel”. The *Australian’s* foreign editor Greg Sheridan declared: “In the battle of wills over the people on the Oceanic Viking, the illegal immigrants have triumphed over the Rudd government.”

While Rudd claimed that his government, unlike Howard’s, would not vilify refugees or exploit them for political

advantage, he has insisted that his measures have been more successful in stopping boats. Interviewed on radio 3AW, he accused the previous government of permitting 250 boats to arrive “with nearly 15,000 people” and for allowing 10 percent of those boats to reach the Australian mainland. “In the case of this government we have had, I think, out of 44 vessels, one which has so far reached the mainland.”

The entire affair has been driven by a rather desperate political balancing act on the part of the Labor government. On the one hand, Rudd is seeking to appear “progressive”—in order, above all, to retain the support of those layers, including in the media, who helped corral hostility to the Howard government behind Labor. Thus his formal apology to the Stolen Generations of Australia’s indigenous population, and his signing of the Kyoto Protocol. On the other, Rudd’s government is implementing, in every area of social and economic life, policies that are even more inimical to the interests of the working class than those of his predecessor.

In relation to immigration and refugee policy, Howard’s anti-asylum seeker measures remain in place. Labor has maintained the “excision” of Australia’s offshore islands from the country’s migration zone, depriving asylum seekers of the basic right to appeal to tribunals or courts against denials of protection visas. It has ramped up the deployment of the Australian armed forces, augmented by customs vessels, to intercept refugee boats and remove their passengers to a remote island—now Christmas Island, instead of Nauru. More than 1,100 people are currently incarcerated there.

For all the Rudd government’s “humane” pretensions, the Oceanic Viking affair demonstrates that the Labor party is resorting to the same nationalist and xenophobic “Fortress Australia” ideology that has been the hallmark of its policy since the end of the nineteenth century. Once more, in a period of deep economic and social crisis, the refugee issue is being seized upon to divert ordinary working people away from a struggle against the government, and the profit system that it defends, and into a divisive and reactionary backlash against asylum seekers and immigrants.



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