

Tamil asylum-seekers reject Australian government demands

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The Rudd government is intensifying moves to force 78 Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers on board the Australian customs ship *Oceanic Viking* to disembark and enter Indonesia immigration detention centres.

The Tamils were rescued on October 18 after their boat broke down attempting to reach Australia. They have been held for over three weeks on the overcrowded *Oceanic Viking*, currently anchored off Indonesia's *Bintan Island*, near Singapore, in violation of their democratic right to asylum in Australia.

The refugees have steadfastly refused to leave the ship, knowing that they could be incarcerated in Indonesia's notorious immigration centres for years. Indonesia is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention. More than 30 of the Tamils on *Oceanic Viking* had already applied for refugee status in Indonesia but after waiting months, or in one case five years, decided to risk sailing to Australia in October.

Another group of over 250 Tamils on the *Lestari Jaya 5*, a 30-metre wooden boat intercepted on the way to Australia on October 11, is currently berthed at *Merak harbour* in northwest Java. They have also refused to disembark and want to be taken to Australia to have their refugee claims processed there.

Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd previously claimed to have an agreement with Jakarta to detain the asylum seekers in Indonesian immigration centres—as part of a new multi-million dollar sub-contracting arrangement. The refusal of the Tamils to disembark has thrown the arrangement into the air and starkly exposed the inhumane and anti-democratic character of Labor's immigration policies.

Indonesian authorities have stated that they will not be party to any attempt to force the Tamils ashore and have declared the asylum seekers to be an "Australian problem". On Friday, Jakarta extended *Oceanic Viking's* permit to remain in Indonesia waters until November 13, but ruled out further extensions.

The Rudd government has responded to the political

impasse by stepping up pressure on the Tamils. With Rudd due to attend an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Singapore this Thursday, everything possible is being done to end the standoff.

Australian immigration officials, psychologists and so-called refugee advocates have held lengthy meetings with the asylum seekers to try to negotiate a disembarkation deal. The 78 men, women and children have reportedly been promised that their refugee applications would be "fast-tracked" and those approved as refugees could go to Australia, New Zealand or Canada. Any already deemed refugees by Indonesian authorities would be resettled first.

Canberra's promises are designed to get the Sri Lankans off the *Oceanic Viking* as quickly as possible and out of the pages of the Australian media. Australia's refugee quota per year is only 13,500, one of the lowest in the industrialised world. The number of refugees resettled in Australia from Indonesia is miniscule. According to immigration department figures, only 460 asylum seekers were resettled in Australia from Indonesia between 2001 and 2009, including just 35 in 2008-09.

Canberra has called on Indonesian authorities to stop journalists chartering small boats, sailing out to the *Oceanic Viking* anchored 10 nautical miles off *Bintan Island*, and retrieving messages thrown overboard by the passengers. Thus far, Indonesian authorities have rejected Canberra's appeals. The *Australian* newspaper reported on November 7: "Australian officials believe that if the Sri Lankans had not been able to communicate with the outside world ... the matter might have been resolved differently."

Handwritten letters thrown overboard and picked up by journalists near the *Oceanic Viking* on Thursday give some indication of the conditions on board. Alleged mistreatment by Australian authorities included inadequate food and washing facilities and the use of abusive language and other methods to try and "push" the asylum seekers to leave.

One letter categorically rejected Canberra's promise to quickly process their refugee claims. "[Y]ou talked about giving us resettlement very quickly if we agree to go ashore

in Indonesia,” it stated. “We are not ready to go back to Indonesia. This is our final decision.”

Another letter said the refugees would suffer “emotional and physical problems” if forced to disembark. They would “rather close their life on the ocean” than agree to enter Indonesia.

Likewise, Tamils on board the Lestari Jaya 5 in Merak harbour have told the media that conditions on their boat are worsening, with severely limited water and food supplies and only one toilet. Apparently more than 30 people, including children, are suffering from conjunctivitis.

With growing concern in Australia over his government’s treatment of the asylum seekers, Rudd conducted more than 15 radio and television interviews over two days last week, cynically repeating that his government was “fair”. The prime minister insisted, however, that the Tamils would be “processed” in Indonesia and has refused to rule out the use of force. Senior members of the Liberal-National Party opposition and sections of the media have demanded that the Rudd government repatriate the Tamils to Sri Lanka.

Australia’s corporate media had uncritically published Sri Lankan government allegations that the Tamils are not refugees but terrorists and/or criminals and “pose a threat to peace and security of Australia”. Last weekend, for example, the Sri Lankan government issued a press release claiming that Alex, a spokesman for the 255 Tamils in Merak harbour, was a “people smuggler”.

Sri Lankan high commissioner Senaka Walgampaya told Channel Ten’s “Meet the Press” that Alex had been running a people-smuggling operation from India for five years. The Tamils, Walgampaya continued, were using the Sri Lankan civil war “as an excuse” to seek asylum Australia. “Sri Lanka suspects a lot of these people are fugitives from justice, so in that event they have to be brought to justice.” Alex, since identified as Sanjeev Kulaendrarajah, has vigorously denied any involvement with so-called people smuggling.

The racist attitude of the Sri Lankan government towards the country’s Tamil minority is underlined by its incarceration of more than 250,000 Tamil civilians since the end of the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May. Media and human rights organisations are banned from the internment camps. In September, a United Nations representative was expelled from Sri Lanka after being accused of “spreading LTTE propaganda” because he criticised the ongoing detention of Tamil civilians, including children.

Far from opposing these anti-democratic and communalist measures, Labor is working hand in glove with the Rajapakse regime to prevent Tamils from fleeing their persecution.

Last year Canberra provided funds for the Sri Lankan government to install CCTV cameras at Colombo Airport. A Sri Lankan MP Mano Ganesan told the *Sydney Morning Herald* last week that at least 29 Tamils had been detained at the airport this month with the help of the Australian cameras. He said that Tamils leaving the country with visas for education, business or personal reasons were being harassed and detained. Ganesan added that he had been contacted by Tamil families fearful that their relatives had disappeared.

An unnamed Sri Lankan government official told the newspaper: “These disappearances at the airport are making people very worried. This is driving people to boats.” A spokesman from the Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka told the newspaper that the cameras were aimed at improving Sri Lanka’s “border security”.

Foreign Minister Stephen Smith has flown to Sri Lanka today to press the Rajapakse government to intensify its efforts to stop further Tamils sailing to Australia. A senior Australian diplomat, John McCarthy, was dispatched to Colombo last week for negotiations.

The Rudd government plans to provide \$48 million to establish a so-called “people-smuggling program” in Sri Lanka with a permanent Australian Federal Police liaison post. The funds will also be used to help train local police and provide computers, cameras and so-called “evidence collection kits”.

Last week’s tragic drowning of 12 Tamil asylum seekers after their boat sank northwest of Cocos Island was a direct result of the Rudd government’s immigration policies. Labor’s intensification of these “Fortress Australia” measures, and its deepening collaboration with the Rajapakse government, guarantees there will be more such disasters.



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