

Australian government's refugee policy claims more innocent lives

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13 May 2010

The Rudd government's continuation and toughening of the anti-refugee policy it inherited from the previous Howard government claimed more innocent lives last week. Five Australia-bound asylum seekers perished in the Indian Ocean, about 125 nautical miles from the Cocos-Keeling Islands, an Australian territory. They had apparently set themselves adrift in a desperate bid to find a passing ship when their wooden fishing boat ran out of fuel, food and drinking water.

The five Sri Lankan men are the latest victims of Labor's "border protection" regime, which consists of maintaining an extensive naval and customs cordon to intercept and repel refugee boats or take their passengers to be detained on another remote Indian Ocean outpost, Christmas Island. People who are fleeing persecution—a right protected by the 1951 international Refugee Convention—are undertaking increasingly perilous journeys in an attempt to get to Australia.

The five men died within Australia's maritime exclusive economic zone, in which the federal government bears search and rescue responsibility. They are presumed to have drowned, or been eaten by sharks.

The government's Border Protection Command and Australian Maritime Safety Agency (AMSA) received a plea on April 30 to provide assistance to the 18-metre boat, which had stalled carrying 65 people, including 12 children and infants. Instead of rescuing the passengers, the authorities asked vessels in the area to assist. A Panamanian merchant ship responded on April 30 by providing fuel and supplies, and, according to Home Affairs Minister Brendan O'Connor, reported

that the boat appeared seaworthy.

Clearly, however, the boat was still in distress—the five men left it just three days later, using tyre tubes to keep afloat, in an attempt to find help. A Russian merchant vessel, the *Postonja*, finally rescued the passengers late on May 7, and discovered that the five men had not been seen since. Horrified crew members told the media that the waters were seriously shark-infested.

A belated aerial search and rescue operation was conducted by AMSA the following morning, only to be called off later the same day. Tyre tubes and lifejackets were located by air force planes, and an apparently motionless person was spotted on a tyre tube, but O'Connor said the person could not be seen on a later flight. O'Connor said the operation was discontinued on the basis of medical advice that survival was "no longer a reasonable possibility". He was backed by Defence Minister John Faulkner, whose office refused to say how much time had elapsed between the flights.

O'Connor has rejected calls for an inquiry into why the boat was left to flounder for nine days. Instead, while professing regret for "a tragic and unnecessary loss of life," he essentially blamed the asylum seekers for the deaths. "Unfortunately, loss of life at sea can occur when people are persuaded to embark on these poorly maintained vessels over such a great distance." He added that the incident "highlights that these types of voyages are extremely dangerous".

His remarks were an echo of the chilling comments by the Howard government's immigration minister Philip Ruddock in October 2001 after 353 asylum

seekers, including 150 children, drowned, when their refugee boat, later dubbed the SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicle X, or unknown), sank. That disaster occurred in waters between Indonesia and Australia that were under heavy surveillance by the Australian air force and navy.

Ruddock declared: “This may have an upside, in the sense that some people may see the dangers inherent in it.” In other words, the Howard government hoped that the disaster would deter asylum seekers from trying to reach Australia. Shortly afterward, refugee boats did stop arriving, and the Liberals boasted of “stopping the boats”.

Last week’s catastrophe is at least the third loss of life in just over a year. In April 2009, five Afghan men were killed when their boat exploded after it had been intercepted by the navy near Ashmore Reef, about 400 kilometres off the Western Australian coast. Last month, a coronial inquest concluded that the men had died as the unintended result of a plan to cripple the boat when the 47 passengers were issued with a warning notice that made them immediately fearful of being forcibly turned back to Indonesia.

Last November, 12 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees drowned northwest of the Cocos-Keeling Islands—not far from the latest tragedy—also apparently trying to bypass Labor’s naval blockade by sailing further out into the treacherous waters of the Indian Ocean.

As part of its efforts to block entry to refugees, in violation of the 1951 Convention, the Rudd government, like its predecessor, has “excised” Australia’s territorial waters and offshore islands from the country’s migration zone. Asylum seekers who arrive in these areas in spite of the naval cordon are detained indefinitely on Christmas Island, deprived of all basic legal rights and can be deported without any appeal to a tribunal or court.

In recent weeks, the government has escalated its measures by suspending all asylum applications from Sri Lanka and Afghanistan for at least three and six months respectively, and introducing jail terms of up to 20 years for refugee boat crew members, who have

been branded “people smugglers”. It has also reopened a notorious detention camp in northern Australia to accommodate the overflow from the crowded Christmas Island facility.

In the budget on Tuesday, the government allocated \$1.2 billion to bolster “border protection,” including the purchase of eight new patrol boats to cover known refugee routes. These provisions will only increase the likelihood of further fatalities, as refugee boats are taken further out to sea to escape detection, and crews arrange to be picked up by other vessels before boats reach areas under Australian jurisdiction.

The Labor government is engaged in a campaign to outdo the Liberal opposition in demonising and repelling asylum seekers. This week, the Liberals launched crude television ads, demanding “real action” to stop “illegal migration”. The ads depict Australia being swamped by big red arrows labelled Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iran, Iraq and Indonesia, with a “Stop Illegals Now” tagline.

Both the Liberals and Labor are appealing to the most nationalist and xenophobic layers, seeking to make the relative handful of people arriving on boats scapegoats for continuing high unemployment, worsening working conditions and deteriorating public services. Their fomenting of hostility toward asylum seekers amounts to a modern-day version of the “White Australia” policy, which the business elite and the Labor Party employed for much of the twentieth century to divide Australian workers from their Asian brothers and sisters and divert attention from the real causes of social deprivation, which lie in the profit system itself.



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