

Up to 50 refugees drown off Australian coast after authorities fail to intercept boat

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Serious questions are being raised about the direct culpability of the Gillard Labor government and Australian authorities in yesterday's horrific sinking of a boat carrying up to 100 refugees off the shore of Christmas Island. The stretch of ocean between Indonesia and Christmas Island, a small Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean, is one of the most heavily surveilled parts of Australia's territory. Why were the refugees not intercepted by naval or customs personnel, as normally occurs, before their wooden vessel disintegrated after being repeatedly smashed against high cliffs by heavy swells?

The incident recalls the sinking of the "SIEV X" refugee boat off north-west Australia in October 2001, when 353 people died. Evidence later emerged indicating that the Australian government and navy may have known about the boat and its vulnerable condition but did nothing to intervene and rescue the refugees.

Of those on the boat that broke up yesterday, 28 mostly Iraqi and Iranian asylum seekers are confirmed dead, including women and small children. Forty-four people were rescued, 11 of them reportedly children, while an unknown number remain missing.

Local Christmas Island residents awoke to the sound of the refugees' screams when the boat was still afloat near high and jagged limestone cliffs at Flying Fish Cove. Mick Tassone told the *West Australian* newspaper that he was getting ready for work at about 5 a.m. when he saw the boat "lurching" past in a swirling 3 to 4 metre swell. "They were waving their arms and yelling 'Australia, Australia, help, help, help,'" he said. Tassone said it seemed the boat's engine was not running and that there was a large quantity of diesel in the water. Other residents reported seeing women desperately holding their babies in the air as they pleaded for assistance.

Sometime later—an hour or longer according to different reports—the boat capsized and disintegrated as a giant wave thrust it into a cliff face. Christmas Island is a submarine mountain peak and has no reef or other natural barriers. Dozens of Christmas Island residents bravely attempted to rescue the asylum seekers, throwing life jackets and lowering ropes and ladders into the water. Some formed human chains in a desperate effort to pull those drowning out of the water, and later required medical attention after suffering cuts on the jagged rocks.

Numbers of refugees in the water managed to cling to lifejackets and debris from the wooden boat for more than an hour before being rescued.

Many questions remain outstanding about the authorities' rescue response. According to official statements, two Australian ships were in the area at the time of the disaster, the Navy's HMAS Pirie and Customs ship ACV Triton. Both vessels had picked up other refugee boats in previous days. It is unclear why neither attempted to rescue the refugees in the time between the first sighting of the disabled boat by residents and its smashing against the cliffs about an hour later. According to some reports, the refugee boat was being "tracked" by HMAS Pirie just before it sank. Yet small rubber Navy and Customs vessels were deployed only after the passengers were already in the water.

"Authorities are tight-lipped about the movements of those ships [HMAS Pirie and ACV Triton] immediately prior to the accident," the *West Australian* reported. "The Defence Department refused to answer any questions about the tragedy yesterday, saying all questions should be referred to Customs—which controls Border Protection Command."

Asked yesterday whether the refugee boat was under surveillance from the time it departed Indonesia, Deputy Prime Minister Wayne Swan replied, "Can I just say we've just had a tragic incident. Now is not the time for that debate." On the contrary: whether Australian border officials knew of the vessel's approach in advance, but permitted it to reach the well-known dangers of Christmas Island's coastline in cyclonic weather conditions, is not a matter for "debate" but an easily established factual question.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard cut short her holiday yesterday in response to the tragedy, no doubt mindful of the outpouring of public sympathy for the refugees, whose terrible plight was captured in photos and video taken by Christmas Island residents. Gillard is yet to issue more than a cursory statement noting what took place.

Immigration minister Chris Bowen told a Melbourne radio station this morning that it had yet to be determined if the boat had

been surveilled. “My understanding is that it wasn’t tracked, but this is early days,” he said.

The government has been challenged to quickly provide a full explanation. “We have air surveillance, we have water surveillance, we have a very efficient border security operation out there,” Pamela Curr of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre pointed out. “What happened that they allowed this boat to come in the rough seas? We need answers. They knew—Search and Rescue had intelligence from Indonesia—they knew this boat was coming. They knew how many people were on it, so why weren’t they there to meet them? Why did they let the boat go alone when they knew the seas they were going into?”

David Marr, journalist and author of a book on the notorious 2001 “Tampa” refugee affair, added: “The key mystery of this tragedy is how that boat was allowed near those cliffs in that filthy weather... Navy and Customs are everywhere. For a boat to reach the cove undetected is extremely rare. Some are allowed to make their own way to port, but the routine is to intercept them far out to sea and take their passengers on board to trans-ship them to the island. It didn’t happen this time.”

Marr raised another important question about the authorities’ rescue response: “Calls to dive-shop operators [from Christmas Island residents] brought more lifejackets to throw over the cliff. But where, the islanders wondered, were the hundreds of lifejackets Immigration kept down at the wharf?”

Tony Kevin, former diplomat, and author of a book detailing the official cover-up of the SIEV X disaster, has demanded that the Gillard government immediately convene an independent investigation. He told ABC Radio that any attempt to leave an inquiry in the hands of the Western Australian coroner would mark “a transparent effort to get over the three-day news cycle and leave it to languish in the coroner’s court for two years”.

Kevin was asked if the very bad weather off Christmas Island was the most obvious explanation for the failure to intercept the refugees’ boat. “No,” he replied adamantly. “The ships of border command are equipped and their crews are trained to operate in all weather conditions. They’re not Sunday excursion sailors, and out at sea they can pick up and intercept boats in any weather conditions. The question is why a boat was not ordered to sea to pick up this tragic vessel at a safe distance, 12 or 24 nautical miles, from Christmas Island, as is the normal practice.”

Following the SIEV X sinking in 2001, then immigration minister Philip Ruddock declared that the 353 deaths “may have an upside, in the sense that some people may see the dangers inherent in it”. In other words, the catastrophe could be just what the government required to deter more refugees attempting to reach Australia. The question has to be raised: did government and/or military/state authorities make similar calculations and deliberately permit the refugee boat to reach Christmas Island yesterday?

Even if it turns out that the disaster was the result of gross negligence rather than conscious design, ultimate responsibility rests with the Labor government and the entire political establishment in Australia. The reactionary nostrums of “border protection” have been pushed without letup by every parliamentary party, including the Greens. While anyone fleeing persecution has the legal and democratic right to claim asylum in any country they choose, the response of successive Australian governments, both Labor and Liberal, has been to vilify and scapegoat refugees—drawing on the filthy ideological traditions of White Australia—and to further militarise the country’s maritime borders.

In 2007, Labor was elected to office amid enormous hostility towards the incumbent Howard government, including over its vicious treatment of asylum seekers. Yet the Gillard government has seamlessly continued its policy. Refugees are stymied at every turn. More than 2,700 registered asylum seekers are currently in Indonesia, waiting to be formally recognised and permitted into Australia, while another 800 have been officially recognised. The Australian government promised to accept just 500 of these refugees by the end of this year, but the *Age* reported today that fewer than 100 had arrived under the program, with only around 50 more cleared to come. With little hope of being given sanctuary through official channels, asylum seekers and their families are forced to take their lives into their hands and make the dangerous journey from Indonesia to Australia on overcrowded and unsafe vessels.

Yesterday’s disaster is only the worst of a series of recent refugee deaths. As many as 170 people may have already drowned trying to reach the country since Labor came to power, and three refugees have committed suicide in detention centres in recent months. The Gillard government has been exploiting the fatalities in the same way that the Howard government used the SIEV X deaths. In June this year, it released immigration department video advertisements on YouTube designed to discourage asylum seekers, including one featuring a drowning person.



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