

Australia: Further questions raised over Labor government's role in refugee boat disaster

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The Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday declared that no government, military, or intelligence agency had been tracking the wooden refugee vessel that sank off Christmas Island on Wednesday, killing at least 30 people, and possibly many more. The statement has raised more serious questions about the unexplained failure of authorities to intercept the boat.

The confirmed death toll has reached 30—14 men, 9 women, four boys and four girls, including young infants. Another 42 people were rescued, including three Indonesian crew members, but as many as 30 refugees remain missing, presumed dead. Those on board the overcrowded boat were reportedly of Iraqi, Iranian, and Kurdish origin.

Gillard issued a statement that none of the relevant authorities in Australia had any knowledge of the vessel before it was sighted off Christmas Island. If this is true, it means, 1) none of the many Australian Federal Police (AFP) and intelligence operatives in Indonesia, who are responsible for the surveillance of asylum seekers, knew anything about the travel arrangements of the 100 refugees, or the preparations of the Indonesian crew that took them to Australia; 2) none of the Australian military and customs aeroplanes and ships, which monitor the stretch of ocean between Indonesia and Christmas Island, detected the refugees' vessel; and 3) Australia's advanced electronic and radar detection systems, devoted to intercepting refugees, completely failed.

On each score, the official account is highly dubious.

Already, the Labor government has pre-empted the findings of any inquiry into the incident by emphasising that extreme weather conditions made any detection of the vessel impossible. Home affairs minister Brendan O'Connor told Sky News: "I think you've seen, and every Australian has seen, just how bad the seas were around Christmas Island at that time. They were treacherous seas which made contact with that boat impossible." O'Connor then added: "The SIEV [suspected illegal entry vessels] are normally constructed of wood, which means radar detection is nigh on impossible".

This statement has been contradicted by an engineer involved in developing the radar system that monitors Australia's northern waters. The *West Australian* reported the telecommunications engineer, who could not be named, insisting that the radar "was an advanced piece of equipment", and he would be "surprised if something that size [the boat] would not be detectable". The newspaper concluded: "The engineer said even in bad weather JORN [Jindalee Operational Radar Network] should be more than capable of detecting the boat."

Tony Kevin, former diplomat and author of a book on the official cover-up of the 2001 SIEV X affair, also challenged O'Connor's statement in today's *Australian*. "JORN, a powerful and reliable long-distance system covering all these waters, detects incoming boats, their speed and direction of travel," he explained. "Wooden fishing boats with significant metal content (in engines, like the boat that just sank, a typical asylum-seeker boat) are thus detectable by JORN. As boats funnel in towards Christmas Island, their JORN radar signatures becomes stronger and more definite, whatever the weather. Once a boat's time and place of arrival is estimated, an appropriate Border Protection Command ship is stationed at sea to intercept and bring it safely into port... In well over 100 interceptions since 2007, there have been no instances of failure to intercept a boat or to know it was coming."

Overwhelmingly, ordinary people have responded to the disaster with immense sympathy for the affected asylum seekers and deep scepticism over the government's statements. Key political experiences in the last decade have left their mark—from the SIEV X cover up and the "children overboard" government lie campaign in 2001, to the exposure of the Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" fabrications. Many people clearly believe that elements in the government and/or military-customs-intelligence apparatus may have deliberately failed to activate standard refugee interception procedures.

The Gillard government is facing mounting demands for an independent judicial inquiry, but has flatly refused. The prime minister insists that the only investigation into the incident will be carried out by the Western Australian coroner. The coroner will determine the scope of this investigation, while police will carry

out a criminal probe under “people smuggling” laws, and Customs and Border Protection will conduct a review of its own performance.

All this indicates that a cover up is already underway.

According to a chronology of events issued by customs officials, on Wednesday at 5.48 a.m. local time, Border Protection Command was first notified that a vessel had been sighted about 200 metres from Christmas Island’s Rocky Point. Two minutes later, Western Australian police received the first of three emergency phone calls from a refugee on board the vessel who spoke some English and explained that there was an emergency. At about 6 a.m., the navy’s HMAS Pirie was tasked to respond to the sighting. At 6.31 a.m., AFP officers on Christmas Island reported sighting the vessel being washed onto the shoreline at Rocky Point, causing the people onboard to be thrown into the water. HMAS Pirie only arrived at the scene and began rescue operations at 7.01 a.m. Customs vessel ACV Triton arrived at 7.21 a.m., 47 minutes after HMAS Pirie requested its assistance.

This official chronology is not consistent with initial eye-witness reports, which timed the initial sighting of the refugees’ boat at about 5 a.m. and the boats’ sinking at about 6 a.m. If the witnesses are correct, a number of questions arise. Why was Border Protection Command only notified at only 5.48 a.m., and the AFP made aware of the boat’s sinking at 6.31 a.m.? Why did it take HMAS Pirie an hour to reach Rocky Point given its initial location on the opposite side of the small island’s peninsula? Why was ACV Triton only called in at 6.35 a.m., 43 minutes after Border Protection Command admits it knew that a refugee boat had arrived in highly dangerous weather conditions, and 41 minutes after emergency operators received the first desperate phone call from aboard the boat?

Details are continuing to emerge of the terrible situation confronting the more than 3,500 asylum seekers and UN-recognised refugees who are stranded in Indonesia and prevented from taking refuge in Australia. One man previously held in the Christmas Island detention facility lost seven family members in Wednesday’s disaster, including his wife, uncle in law, and other close relatives. According to one report, at least two of the women and a number of children on the boat were trying to reach their husbands and fathers detained on the island.

Asked yesterday if survivors of the tragedy would be put into detention centres, Gillard made clear that they would, stressing that normal processing procedures apply as soon as appropriate medical assistance had been rendered. She callously declared that “as a government we are very firm on having a mandatory detention policy”.

The Labor government’s xenophobic and repressive “border protection” regime is ultimately responsible for the latest deaths, irrespective of whether the failure of the relevant authorities to intercept the boat was due to gross negligence or a conscious stand-

down.

The Australian political and media establishment is united in its contempt for international law on asylum and the basic democratic rights of refugees. Gillard has an especially filthy record. From 2001 to 2003 she served as Labor’s immigration spokesperson. In this capacity, she orchestrated Labor’s sharp right-wing lurch on refugee policy in order to more closely line up behind the Howard government, both during and after the notorious SIEV X, Tampa, and “children overboard” affairs.

Immediately following her ousting of Kevin Rudd as prime minister last June, Gillard declared that all “political correctness” should be abandoned in the official “debate” on asylum seeker policy, adding that she “understood” concerns that refugees “get an inside track to special privileges”. This calculated effort to incite xenophobia was followed by several reactionary initiatives, including a proposed refugee processing centre to be stationed in East Timor.

The government is now preparing to go even further, with Labor’s national party president Anna Bligh declaring that all “policy settings” will be reviewed. As for the Liberal Party, it is about to go on the offensive, demanding even more punitive measures. Opposition leader Tony Abbott has declined Gillard’s invitation to join a committee that will receive briefings and updates on the ongoing emergency response in Christmas Island. Underlying his response is the overriding attitude of the Liberal Party to the asylum seeker “debate”, exposed by a diplomatic cable recently released by WikiLeaks, in which an unnamed “key Liberal Party strategist” told American diplomats in November last year that the issue of asylum seekers was “fantastic” for them and “the more boats that come the better”.

The media is issuing demands of its own. In its editorial today, the *Australian* advises Gillard to “use this shocking loss of life as a circuit-breaker” and restore some of the Howard government’s policies that have been modified by Labor since 2007, including re-opening a detention facility in the tiny, isolated Pacific island nation of Nauru. The Murdoch newspaper also called for an “open mind” on whether Australia should repudiate the UN’s 1951 Convention on Human Rights.



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