

Australia: Refugees stage detention centre demonstrations after boat disaster

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The terrible deaths of more than 30 Iraqi, Iranian, and Kurdish refugees last Wednesday off Australia's Christmas Island has escalated tensions within the Labor government's repressive "mandatory detention" asylum seeker system. Refugees in one of three detention centres located on Christmas Island staged multiple demonstrations on Friday, desperately appealing for international assistance and accusing Australian authorities of responsibility for the boat's sinking.

Early Friday afternoon, about 50 refugees detained at the Phosphate Hill facility scaled internal fences to gather inside the perimeter, where they appealed to nearby journalists. Several security guards hired by the detention centre's private operator, British transnational company Serco, faced off against the refugees to prevent them escaping. According to the Department of Immigration, the action was triggered when the centre's air conditioning system failed. The focus of the protest, however, was not the inadequate conditions inside the facility, but the catastrophic loss of life on rocks below Christmas Island just two days earlier.

At least one survivor of the boat wreck participated in the protest. The young man lifted his shirt to show cuts and scratches on his back, which he suffered before being rescued. Another man held a torn piece of cardboard with "Help. Where is UN?" written on it. Several of those present had reportedly lost family members. According to one report, their distress was heightened when told they would have to view some of the bodies to assist with identification.

A young woman screamed, "My mother. Where is? My daughter. Where is my daughter, two years old? Where is my family?" A man shouted: "The baby, three months old, is dead. My family, parents, daughter, father." He

demanded to know why the boat had not been intercepted by the Australian navy. In broken English, he declared: "The navy give two boats. They [the refugees] were shouting, 'Please help me, navy'. Where is the navy?" Another protestor said, "The navy not come here. Why?" And another: "Why are the mothers and children dead? Why did the navy do nothing?"

Serious questions remain about why Australian authorities failed to intercept the refugees' vessel, or even, allegedly, to detect it, until just before it smashed into steep rocky cliffs on Christmas Island (see: "Further questions raised over Labor government's role in refugee boat disaster"). One survivor, 22-year-old Rana Mohamad from Iraq, has told the *West Australian* that the boat's Indonesian crew switched off the engines at about 2 a.m., telling those on board that the navy would soon arrive and that they should shout and scream to attract attention. But it was not until about 5 a.m. that their screams were heard by Christmas Island residents. If this account is accurate, it means that the refugee boat was somehow lurching off the coast of Australia's heavily surveilled outpost in the Indian Ocean for around three hours without being detected.

The second refugee protest staged on Friday involved around 70 refugees, who scaled the detention centre perimeter at night. The Phosphate Hill facility is a converted community recreation centre and has less stringent security than the main, purpose built, detention centre on Christmas Island. The demonstrators staged a sit-in protest on the adjacent road, waving pieces of paper covered with messages. Australian Federal Police officers blocked journalists from getting close enough to hear what the refugees were saying, but an immigration department spokesperson admitted that "the protesters raised concerns that not enough action was taken to rescue

passengers from the boat that sank”.

The two-hour protest was peaceful, and none of the detainees attempted to escape. Some press reports the next day nevertheless repeatedly referred to the incident as a “riot”.

The media has played a filthy role throughout the latest refugee disaster. Sections of the press, led by the Murdoch-owned News Limited, are seeking to exploit the mass drowning to press for even more punitive and repressive anti-asylum seeker measures. Its flagship *Australian* has repeatedly demanded that Prime Minister Julia Gillard “take the sugar off the table”—a highly provocative phrase implicitly identifying refugees with cockroaches, ants or other vermin. The *Australian* wants to bar asylum seekers from accessing the country by reinstating the former Howard government’s “Pacific Solution”. Under this scheme, hundreds of refugees, including children, were imprisoned for years in squalid facilities on isolated Pacific Island states such as Nauru.

Opposition leader Tony Abbott has demanded a return to the so-called Pacific Solution, as well as to Howard’s temporary protection visa (TPV) system, under which asylum seekers had to regularly prove their fitness for refugee classification, even after they had been accepted. They therefore faced the constant threat of deportation, while being forced to live as second class citizens, denied basic rights and access to services such as social security payments. Like the “Pacific Solution”, the TPV regime had a devastating effect on the mental health of many already traumatised men, women, and children.

Abbott, who has consistently attempted to whip up xenophobic hysteria over asylum seekers—especially against those who travel to Australia by boat—declared yesterday: “We stopped the boats before, we can stop the boats again if we put the right policies in place.” The Liberal Party’s cynicism was underscored in recent WikiLeaks-provided US cables, in which one party strategist told American officials that the issue of asylum seekers was “fantastic” for them, and “the more boats that come the better”. Moreover, independent parliamentarian Andrew Wilkie has revealed that during minority government negotiations following the federal election last August, Abbott offered to double Australia’s humanitarian refugee intake as part of his unsuccessful attempt to win the independent’s support. In other words,

for Abbott, political considerations—particularly his own career—take centre stage in determining refugee policy.

The Gillard government’s approach is no less calculated. The Labor government bears ultimate responsibility for the latest refugee deaths—its vicious “border protection” regime, and refusal to accept all but a miniscule number of refugees through official channels, forces desperate people, often separated from family members who are already in Australia, to take the dangerous journey by boat.

Labor and Liberal alike have shown utter contempt for international legal conventions on the treatment of asylum seekers. One unnamed senior Labor parliamentarian, suggesting that the Gillard government’s draconian approach could go further, told the *Australian*: “If you want to stop illegal immigration of this sort, you’ve got to go back to the policy that was proved to work under the previous government. I think the current government, when it faces the sort of political onslaught that is coming, can certainly change the policy back. Whether it will or not is another question, but the view I express is one held by many.”

It is in fact not “illegal” for persecuted people to claim asylum in another country. Every refugee, and every immigrant, should have the right to be welcomed, provided with whatever support and services they require, and have the same rights as citizens. But not a single parliamentarian in Australia—whether Labor, Liberal, independent, or Green—supports these democratic principles. For all the tactical differences between them, they all agree that Australia’s borders should continue to be policed and restrictions placed on the number of people allowed entry.



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