

Australian “border protection” regime responsible for more refugee deaths

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A number of incidents in recent days have highlighted the brutal character of the Labor government’s “border protection” regime directed against refugees.

Late last night an overcrowded nine-metre long wooden boat that was carrying more than 70 asylum seekers en route to Australia foundered off Java in Indonesia. By the time Indonesian navy crew arrived, at least 8 people—including five children—had reportedly been killed. Fifteen others are still missing, feared dead, while 57 people have been rescued. Those killed include three two-year-old girls and another girl aged 14. According to media reports, those on board were from Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

The terrible incident is only the latest of a series of mass drownings of refugees. The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is directly responsible for these deaths—many refugees from the Middle East, Sri Lanka, and other regions find it impossible to claim asylum in Australia through the narrowly restricted official channels and are compelled to undertake the perilous journey with their families by sea.

The Gillard government immediately exploited the latest deaths to again insist that its “Malaysia solution” must be implemented. Under this proposed scheme, asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat will be immediately deported to Malaysia, to languish in squalid refugee camps with no possibility of ever being granted refugee status in Australia. The plan—which blatantly flouted basic and internationally recognised legal protections covering asylum seekers—was struck down by the High Court in August. Gillard was later unable to win support from the opposition Liberal-National coalition to pass legislation aimed at circumventing the High Court judgement and granting the government the unfettered right to deport refugees to any country in the world.

Labor’s Home Affairs Minister Brendan O’Connor declared that the latest drownings showed that the

Malaysia solution was needed to provide “the strongest possible deterrent” to anyone claiming asylum in Australia.

The tragedy off Java followed last week’s suicide by a Sri Lankan refugee in the Villawood detention centre, in western Sydney. Jayasakar Jayrathana, a 27-year-old Tamil, ingested poison on October 25. His death is only the latest in a series of suicides, attempted suicides and desperate aspects of protest by refugees targeted by the government’s “mandatory detention” regime.

Jayrathana had arrived by boat in Australia in October 2009, and was immediately detained at the Christmas Island detention centre. Two years later, at the time of his death, he was still locked up—despite being awarded official refugee status. His claim had been initially rejected by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), and in March 2010 he was moved from Christmas Island to the Villawood detention centre. Jayrathana appealed the decision, and won refugee status in August this year.

He was kept in detention, however, pending a security clearance from the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). The Sri Lankan refugee had no idea how long this would take, or how much longer he would be detained. ASIO can keep asylum seekers locked up indefinitely without providing any details on the progress of their investigations. More than 460 refugees in Australia’s detention network are currently awaiting security clearances despite being recognised as refugees.

On the night of his death, Jayrathana reportedly spoke to his girlfriend, Sangi, an ex-detainee, and told her he had ingested poison. Sangi notified emergency services, but Jayrathana died after being transported in an ambulance to a nearby hospital.

Refugee advocate Sarah Nathan told the *Australian* that Jayrathana “was talking about how frustrated he was that Serco [the private company which operates Australia’s

detention centres] had control over his movements”. He had asked to be allowed to celebrate a Hindu religious holiday that day with a friend in Sydney, but was not allowed to temporarily leave the detention centre. According to the *Age*, three weeks earlier Jayrathana had asked to be released for a day to attend the engagement party of Sarah Nathan’s daughter, but was also refused.

During his detention in Villawood, Jayrathana witnessed, or was directly affected by, three other suicides. According to the *Age*, Jayrathana took part in a rooftop protest along with a number of other detainees in September 2010 after a refugee, who was to be forcibly returned to Fiji, threw himself off a building. Jayrathana was then placed in the high-security Fowler complex at Villawood, where on December 8 he witnessed the suicide of a British detainee. Six refugees have now killed themselves in the last twelve months in Australia’s detention network.

In a press conference announcing the latest suicide, Labor’s Immigration Minister Chris Bowen denied any responsibility. “We take responsibility for ensuring that people have the chance to make their claims and for ensuring the national security is taken into account,” he declared. “We cannot and will not compromise on matters of national security.”

The government has made clear that there will be no alteration to its brutal refugee regime despite the mounting detention centre death toll.

As of October 15, 4,800 people remained in detention—3,445 men, 512 women, and 848 children. In a Senate estimates hearing last month, DIAC secretary Andrew Metcalfe stated that 228 asylum seekers were on anti-psychotic medication, and 527 were taking anti-depressant medication. This equates to nearly one in six asylum seekers being given drugs for mental illness. Metcalfe also told the Senate that there were 289 incidents of self-harm by detainees in the three months to September 30, and 669 threats of self-harm.

The term “self-harm” obscures the appalling reality of what unfolds every day within Australia’s detention centre regime. On October 24 the ABC’s “Four Corners” provided an insight into the conditions inside the detention facilities. The television program detailed the regular incidents of detainees hitting their heads against walls, refusing to eat, cutting themselves, and threatening to ingest poison, hang themselves or swallow sharp items. A Serco guard, whose identity was concealed because guards are forbidden to speak with the media, explained that she had to dissuade detainees from committing

suicide on a daily basis, with up to 30 people on a “suicide watch list” at any time.

Suresh Sundram, a psychiatrist with the government’s Human Rights Commission, reported seeing “lots of people with significant post traumatic stress disorder”, others with “disorders like schizophrenia”, and “a couple of individuals who were clearly psychotic”.

“Four Corners” revealed that many detainees suffering from insomnia as a result of their detention were given anti-depressant medication. Suresh Sundram said that detainees had been prescribed Mirtazapine, an anti-depressant, while thinking that they had been given sleeping pills. A detainee named Adel, who has been detained at a Darwin centre for 16 months, explained he was given three kinds of sleeping tablets: “The first, second, and the third one, just make you feel dizzy and relaxed. When you wake up—no problem, your mind is empty. There is another tablet they give us, we call it just happy tablet. We don’t know what is the name of that tablet.”

The Labor government is determined to maintain a veil of secrecy over what occurs inside the detention centres.

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship recently released a “deed of agreement” contract that media representatives visiting centres must comply with. Referring to asylum seekers as “detainee clients”, the document insists that journalists must be accompanied at all times by a DIAC representative, who can arbitrarily approve or deny access to any asylum seeker. After any interview that is conducted, journalists must hand over all their footage to DIAC, which can edit and delete any material it does not approve of before releasing it back to the journalist.

Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Jean-François Julliard denounced the new restrictions. “If these rules are applied,” he said, “they would turn Australia’s immigration detention centres into the most impenetrable places in the world, on a level with Guantanamo.”



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