

# Australia: Refugee boat disaster claims over 180 lives

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A refugee boat carrying at least 200 passengers sank on Saturday, reportedly about 75 kilometres off the coast of Java. Though reports remain unclear, it seems certain that more than 180 asylum seekers, including about 40 children, have died attempting to sail from Indonesia to Australia, making it the greatest such disaster since the SIEV X sank in still unexplained circumstances in 2001, taking 353 lives.

Indonesian fishermen have so far rescued 34 people. Australian and Indonesian authorities are continuing search and rescue operations but have said they do not expect to find further survivors. Confusion over the number of people aboard means the final death toll may never be known.

The boat was believed to have been carrying refugees primarily from Iran and Afghanistan when it sank in stormy seas. Reports indicate that it was severely over-crowded, unseaworthy and crewed by inexperienced sailors. Indonesian officials said the boat was capable of carrying only 100 passengers and had just 19 lifejackets.

It was the second such disaster in recent weeks. Last month, eight people died when a boat capsized en route to Australia. Saturday's sinking came almost exactly one year after 50 asylum seekers perished on the rocks of Christmas Island on December 15 last year, leaving unanswered questions about how such catastrophes are allowed to occur despite intense Australian intelligence and surveillance operations to detect refugee boat departures and voyages.

Limited media interviews with the latest survivors gave some insight into the fear and desperation that drives asylum seekers to undertake voyages to Australian territories, such as the Indian Ocean outpost of Christmas Island, despite the obvious and immense dangers involved.

A 17-year-old Afghan student, Armaghan Haidar, said: "We want to go to Christmas Island and live a better life in Australia. There is nothing in Afghanistan. There's a lot of terrorism. We couldn't study, go to college, find jobs.

There's no future for us there." Noroz Yousefi from Iran said: "I came from Jakarta but I was planning for Australia to find freedom."

Despite these statements, which clearly show why refugees feel compelled to pay to secure boat passages to Australia, the Gillard Labor government and the mainstream Australian media immediately blamed the tragedy on "people smugglers." A chorus of statements, opinion pieces and editorials sought to exploit the deaths of innocent refugees to ramp up the pressure for even more draconian measures to stop asylum seekers from attempting to exercise their basic right to flee persecution and seek protection.

While feigning sympathy for the refugees and their families, Acting Prime Minister Wayne Swan declared: "It's a tragic reminder of the dangers of attempting journeys like this." His remarks, like those of other Labor government ministers following the past two disasters, were another echo of the chilling comments of Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock after the SIEV X tragedy. Ruddock stated: "It [the sinking] may have an upside, in the sense that some people may see the dangers inherent in it."

Like the Howard government before it, the Labor government has cynically sought to use the terrible losses of life to deter asylum seekers, in violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention which prohibits measures to discriminate against or punish refugees who arrive without official permission.

In reality, the measures taken by successive Australian governments to block access to asylum seekers—such as militarily intercepting refugee boats, imposing severe jail sentences on so-called people smugglers and confiscating their boats after arrival—have acutely increased the risks to which refugees are exposed.

Trying to minimise the legal penalties of the Australian "border protection" regime, boat operators are evidently

cramming more people onto boats, using cheap and disposable vessels, and hiring Indonesian teenagers from poor fishing families as crew members. Almost 50 teenagers are currently in Australian jails, awaiting trials in which they will seek to prove that they are too young to be prosecuted and imprisoned for up to 20 years.

Many of the refugees attempting to reach Australia come from the Middle East, in particular Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. All these countries have come under attack, or threat of attack, from the United States and its allies, including Australia, under the guise of the “war on terrorism,” killing thousands of people and making life intolerable for millions more.

Saturday’s disaster is being exploited specifically to demand that the Liberal Party Opposition led by Tony Abbott join hands with Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s government to pass “offshore processing” legislation permitting the government to swiftly deport all asylum seekers to other countries, such as Malaysia and Nauru, where they would languish indefinitely in appalling conditions.

Newly appointed Home Affairs Minister Jason Clare blamed the deaths on “the scum who take the money off people and put them on a boat and risk their lives.” He then declared: “My view on this is offshore processing is the way to go, that’s the government’s position, it’s the Opposition’s position as well.... we need to maturely and sensibly get together to implement offshore processing.”

Today’s editorial in the *Australian*, which has been running a campaign to recall parliament to enact the government’s bill, reiterated the demand. It said Gillard and Abbott had to strike an agreement, as soon as possible, to “pass legislation amending the Migration Act to allow the government of the day to enact offshore processing in the location or locations of their choice.” The editorial also called for stepped-up naval patrols and the re-introduction of temporary refugee visas so that Australia was not viewed as a “soft touch.”

The Gillard government’s preferred offshore processing regime, the “Malaysian Solution” of transferring 800 asylum seekers to Malaysia, was blocked by the High Court in September. The judges ruled that the agreement signed with the Malaysian government breached even the limited legal protections given to refugees in the Migration Act. Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN convention on refugees, and can therefore deport them back to their home countries, and has

no domestic legal protections for asylum seekers.

Former Labor leader Mark Latham the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney Cardinal George Pell and Anglican Church Archbishop Dr Phillip Aspinall all added their voices to this agitation, while claiming to be doing so for compassionate reasons.

A key question remains what intelligence information the government and its military, police and intelligence agencies possessed about the latest boat prior to its departure. Home Affairs Minister Clare refused to answer a reporter’s question as to whether the government had intelligence on the voyage.

Under the guise of combatting “people smugglers,” the government has built-up intelligence services and expanded military operations in a strategically important part of the Indian Ocean. The issue of refugees arriving by boat also serves a political purpose domestically, serving as a distraction from the real causes of mounting economic crisis and social inequality, which lie in the Labor government’s commitment to enforcing the dictates of the financial markets and the corporate elite.

Against this drive to whip up xenophobic sentiments to pit one section of the working class against another, the Socialist Equality Party insists on the right of refugees and all working people to live and work wherever in the world they choose, with full political and civil rights.



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