

Many feared dead in Australian refugee disaster

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A refugee boat, thought to be carrying more than 200 people, and attempting to sail from Indonesia to Australia, was found capsized on Thursday, about 110 nautical miles north of Australia's Christmas Island. Though reports remain unclear, it appears that between 90 and 100 people are missing, feared dead.

The bodies of three men have been recovered, while 109 people, including a 13-year-old boy, have been rescued and taken to Christmas Island, where they will be detained.

All of the passengers were reportedly male. Most were believed to be from war-torn Afghanistan. According to some reports, refugees clinging to pieces of debris were sighted as far as three nautical miles from the boat. Those who remain missing are in rough seas, and may not have life jackets.

The tragic loss of life is the latest in a series of disasters that flows directly from the Australian Labor government's so-called "border protection" policy, which seeks to prevent asylum seekers entering Australia by boat, thus forcing desperate people to make increasingly hazardous journeys in a bid to escape detection.

Most recently, as many as 200 people drowned last December when a boat sank off the coast of East Java on its way to Australia. A year earlier, more than 50 asylum seekers died when a vessel known as SIEV 221 crashed against rocks off Christmas Island in December 2010.

As in all the past tragedies, unanswered questions have emerged about whether Australian authorities could have saved the passengers' lives. At least 41 hours passed between the boat's first reported distress call and when it was found capsized—plenty of time for a search and rescue operation.

Moreover, disparities exist between the timeline

issued by the Australian Home Affairs Minister Jason Clare and faxes received by the Indonesian search and rescue authorities from their Australian counterparts.

According to Clare's timeline, which has been uncritically reported throughout the Australian media, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) received a distress call at 10 p.m. on Tuesday, June 19, from a boat. AMSA said no indication was given of its location.

On Wednesday, at 1:30 a.m., AMSA received further distress calls from the vessel. These indicated that it was 38 nautical miles (70 kilometres) south of Indonesia. Australian authorities advised the boat to return to Indonesia, and contacted Indonesian authorities.

At 3:15 p.m. on Wednesday, Australian Customs and Border Protection aircraft conducting routine surveillance sighted the vessel, and reported that it appeared to be in good condition. AMSA continued to receive distress calls from the boat.

After additional reports that called into question the seaworthiness of the vessel, a Customs and Border Protection plane departed from Christmas Island, after 1 p.m. on Thursday, to search for the boat. The boat was found capsized after 3 p.m., with dozens of refugees clinging to the upturned hull of the vessel.

An Australian air force plane arrived two hours later, and dropped life vests. A merchant ship reached the scene at 5:40 p.m., followed by two others shortly later. Australian naval patrol boats arrived at 7:20 p.m.

Faxes sent by the Australian Rescue Coordination Centre (ARCC) to Indonesia's search and rescue agency BASARNAS, published by ABC-TV's "Lateline" program raise questions about this timeline. They suggest that a second boat may have issued distress calls, and that Australian authorities may have

had knowledge days earlier of the boat that ultimately capsized.

A fax sent to BASARNAS on June 17 said a boat that had left Sri Lanka on June 1 had broken down around 200 kilometres north of Christmas Island.

Another fax, at 2 a.m. on June 19, said there had been “further contact” with a “previously reported” vessel carrying 204 men, no women or children, 38 nautical miles south of Indonesia. The ARCC reported that the boat had suffered “hull damage” and was “taking water.” This was more than 36 hours before the capsized boat was found.

At 12:40 p.m. the following day, the ARCC said the vessel was “taking water with persons onboard fearful for their safety.” The boat was only located two-and-a-half hours later.

At a media conference, Home Affairs Minister Clare defended the role of the Australian agencies, insisting that “Australian search and rescue authorities and Australian border protection authorities have acted very proactively.” He ruled out any critical examination of the official response, stating that he would not “second guess” the actions that the agencies had taken.

However, both Clare’s timeline and the Indonesian documents indicate that Australian authorities knew the refugee boat was in distress well before taking action. It is also still possible that a second boatload of people may have perished. Clare said rumours that another refugee boat was in distress off the coast of East Timor were untrue.

Earlier this year, it was revealed that in October 2009, the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service waited almost four hours before alerting rescue authorities after receiving intelligence that a refugee boat carrying 108 people was sinking. All those aboard drowned. When documents detailing the chronology of the incident were released this February, they showed that an Australian Federal Police (AFP) spy working with so-called “people smugglers” in Indonesia had tipped off authorities about the boat’s departure six days before it sank. The Labor government suppressed this information for over two years. Since it was made public, the mainstream media has accorded it scant attention. (See: “Australian government’s culpability in refugee boat disaster”)

On October 21, 2001, 353 refugees drowned on the SIEV-X boat, in the worst maritime disaster in

Australian history. There is significant evidence that the former Howard government permitted the tragedy to occur, and then exploited it politically, using the deaths as a deterrent to warn refugees not to seek asylum in Australia.

As the WSWS noted last year: “Powerful circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that the drownings were the direct result of deliberate political decisions taken by Prime Minister John Howard and his Liberal-National coalition government. A decade on, no inquiry into the events surrounding the SIEV-X sinking has been conducted, and no one has been held politically accountable, let alone charged with responsibility, for the multiple deaths.” (See: “Ten years since the SIEV-X tragedy: Did the Australian government deliberately allow 353 refugees to drown?”)

Like the SIEV-X tragedy, the most recent disaster is being used by media commentators and the entire political establishment to whip up xenophobia and justify even more regressive “border protection” policies. Calls are being made for the revival of the Gillard government’s “Malaysian solution” of deporting asylum seekers to be detained in Malaysia (a scheme declared unlawful by the Australian High Court), or of the Howard government’s “Pacific solution” of removing them to Nauru.

Independent MPs Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor, on whose parliamentary votes the minority Labor government depends, called for the Labor, Liberal and Greens parties to develop a common policy that, in Windsor’s words, “makes it unattractive for people to take the huge risk of getting onto one of these death traps.”

In reality, the tragedy is another indictment of the “border protection” regime that has been maintained by the entire political establishment. As long as asylum seekers, fleeing war, poverty and political repression, are denied their democratic right to asylum, similar tragedies will inevitably continue to occur.



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