

At least four dead in latest Australian refugee disaster

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For the second time within a week, a refugee boat travelling from Indonesia to Australia has capsized, throwing desperate men, women and children into the sea. A heavily-laden boat sank yesterday morning, 107 nautical miles north of Christmas Island, an Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean.

The Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) initially reported that the boat may have been carrying as many as 150 people, but later estimated that 134 people were onboard. Thanks to the timely arrival of several merchant ships that happened to be nearby, 130 passengers were rescued. One body has been recovered. AMSA said another three people “went down with the vessel.” Rescue operations were called off last night.

The sinking further exposes the deadly consequences of the Australian government’s “border protection” policy, which seeks to block refugees from seeking asylum in Australia, thus forcing them to try to evade authorities by taking perilous journeys, often in unseaworthy and overcrowded vessels.

According to AMSA, a distress signal was received from the refugee boat at around 6:20 a.m. [Australian Eastern Standard Time]. It appears that someone on the boat contacted the Australian Federal Police using a satellite phone, advising them that the boat’s generator had broken down. Some media reports said there was a second call at 7.30 a.m., giving the vessel’s exact location.

The first merchant vessel reached the scene three hours later, at approximately 10:20 a.m., and advised AMSA that the boat had sunk and passengers were in the water. AMSA said a second merchant vessel arrived

subsequently and both began attempting to rescue people.

An Australian naval ship, HMAS Maitland, arrived at around 1 p.m., well after the boat had sunk. One merchant ship, MV Tancred, rescued 68 people, and the other, MV Bison Express, saved 9 refugees. HMAS Maitland rescued 53 people.

Indonesian officials told the Australian Associated Press they thought the vessel had been sabotaged when it approached Christmas Island, for fear that it would be turned back if it approached in seaworthy condition. Australian authorities said there was no evidence of sabotage.

Just last week, on June 21, a refugee boat carrying around 200 passengers capsized in the same vicinity, approximately 110 nautical miles north of Christmas Island. Only 110 people were rescued and 17 bodies recovered. It is thought that between 90 and 100 people died.

Australian authorities had received distress signals from that vessel at least as early as June 19, some 41 hours before it sank, leaving ample time to rescue the passengers. However, AMSA instructed the boat to return to Indonesia, and no rescue action was taken until the boat had capsized.

Like last week’s tragedy, most of the refugees involved in yesterday’s disaster were from war-torn Afghanistan. Home Affairs Minister Jason Clare said that of the survivors, there were 113 men, 3 women, 2 girls, and 12 boys.

A further distress call was reported last night, but AMSA said the incident was being responded to by Indonesian authorities and involved a fishing boat. Another refugee boat carrying 100 people arrived at Christmas Island last night, but was not in distress.

Both the boats that sank yesterday and on June 21 were in international waters, and were headed toward the Australian territory of Christmas Island. Nevertheless, the Labor government rejects primary responsibility for rescue efforts in these waters on the spurious grounds that they lie within Indonesia's "Search and Rescue Region."

In an attempt to justify this policy, AMSA published a map yesterday, which revealed that Christmas Island itself was entirely within the Indonesian region. Apparently basing herself on this demarcation, AMSA spokesperson Jo Meehan said yesterday afternoon: "The previous incident was about 120 nautical miles south of Java so it is in the same vicinity. It is definitely in Indonesian waters."

Attempts by the Australian government to shift responsibility to Indonesia expose the reactionary logic of "border protection," and the utter indifference of the political establishment to the plight of refugees. Australia maintains a vast network of naval and aerial patrols over the waters between Indonesia and Australia, and also operates extensive police and intelligence operations in Indonesia, collecting information on boats preparing to set sail.

By contrast, Indonesia has few available resources to rescue refugees. Vice Marshal Daryatmo, the head of Basarnas, Indonesia's search and rescue agency, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* yesterday that it was ill-equipped to carry out ocean rescues. Basarnas had just one fibreglass-hulled rescue boat, based in Jakarta, that could be deployed for rescues between Java and Christmas Island. According to Basarnas's director of operations, Air First Marshal Sunarbowo Sandi, the boat could not operate in swells greater than two or three metres. Australian-supplied patrol boats are based on the north-west tip of Java, but Indonesian search and rescue officials said they were too small to go beyond coastal waters.

At least 340 asylum seekers have perished while trying to reach Australia since December 2010, when more than 50 died after a vessel known as SIEV 221

crashed against rocks off Christmas Island. During an inquest and parliamentary hearings into that tragedy, Australian Border Protection Command officers made clear that their protocols insisted that their forces take no responsibility for the safety of the lives of those aboard the boats they are charged with intercepting.

Reflecting its determination to deter refugees, the Labor government has rejected calls to reinstate safety at sea as a core responsibility of the Border Protection Command. As a result, the Australian authorities continue to refuse to take charge of rescue operations until a refugee boat has actually started to sink.

Like last week's catastrophe, yesterday's capsizing became the subject of hypocritical displays of anguish on the floor of the Australian parliament, with MPs from all parties proclaiming their concern for the loss of innocent lives. Cynically, this humanitarianism was professed for the purpose of pushing a bill through the lower house to introduce an even more draconian "border protection" regime.

The legislation, due to go to the Senate today, calls for the adoption of the Labor government's "Malaysian solution," which involves the deportation of refugees to Malaysia, where they will be stripped of all rights and protections under the international Refugee Convention. This will be combined with reinstatement of the previous Howard government's equally barbaric "Pacific solution," which led to the incarceration of asylum seekers for years on the remote island of Nauru.

No amount of crocodile tears can hide the fact that the policy of trying to prevent refugees from seeking asylum, which is supported by the entire political establishment, is responsible for the latest disasters, and will only lead to further tragedies.



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