Latest Australian refugee disaster worsened by slow response

Mark Church
31 August 2012

Another boat carrying refugees to Australia has sunk after sailing from Indonesia. Reports indicate that only 54 people have survived, after being stranded in the water for almost 24 hours before help arrived. The boat was reported to have had 150 passengers from Afghanistan.

An unidentified passenger twice contacted the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) Rescue Coordination Centre early Wednesday morning, at 4.20 a.m. and 5.05 a.m. AEST, reporting the vessel was in distress. AMSA said the boat was eight nautical miles south-west of Java. Later, it amended that report to correctly estimate that the vessel would have drifted to a location about 50 nautical miles west of Java.

Instead of launching an Australian search and rescue operation, AMSA passed its initial information on to its Indonesian counterpart, BASARNAS, which received the report at 1.30 a.m. its time. BASARNAS, however, lacked night-time search equipment and delayed sending out a search helicopter and two boats until 7.15 a.m. A BASARNAS spokesman told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “The helicopters are not equipped with devices designed for night-time flying. And in order to dispatch boats we normally must get a permit [from the harbour] but the harbour office doesn’t do it at night time.”

Indonesian search and rescue vessels are also known to be unable to operate far from the coast or in heavy weather between Indonesia and the Australian outpost of Christmas Island, where most refugee boats head.

Indonesian authorities called off the search in the late afternoon, 12 hours after receiving the AMSA report. It was not until 9 p.m. AEST that AMSA sent updated information to rescue authorities, better plotting the likely position of the stricken refugee boat by taking into account drift modelling.

The first six survivors were rescued by the cargo ship APL Bahrain at 3.30 a.m. AEST Thursday. Earlier, the ship had spotted bodies in the water. Captain Manuel Nistorescu reported: “We were doing scheduled searching. At the last moment when I was thinking to abort, I heard some noises, and we spotted them in the water.” The survivors reportedly used whistles and yelling to attract the ship.

According to the survivors, they were stranded in the water after their ship’s engine failed and the pumps became inoperable. Because the Australian government seizes and destroys all intercepted refugee boats, some are poorly maintained or mechanically unsound, significantly increasing the danger for asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia.

AMSA and the Australian Border Protection Command dispatched two planes and the patrol ship HMAS Maitland on Thursday morning to assist the Indonesian authorities and three merchant vessels to conduct search operations. The Maitland arrived at 4 p.m., 33 hours after the ship was reported to have sunk, while the first plane arrived at midday. With four merchant vessels on site, 48 survivors were rescued on Thursday.

When journalists questioned Australian Home Affairs Minister Jason Clare about the poor initial response, he asserted: “Don't underestimate how difficult this task is; don't underestimate how big the sea that we're searching is.” Yet the record demonstrates that accurate plotting was possible. The real issue was the Labor government’s policy, implemented by AMSA, of denying responsibility for search and rescue operations that supposedly occur in Indonesian waters.

© World Socialist Web Site

The tragedy also exposed the dangerous consequences of the government's accusations, shared by the Liberal National Opposition, that asylum seekers are resorting to "false alarms" of distress, in order to force the Australian authorities to rescue them and transport them to Christmas Island. The latest boat is the fourth known to have sunk en route to Christmas Island in recent years.

In order to reinforce the Labor government's determination to wash its hands of refugees in distress, and deter asylum seekers from exercising their right, under international law to seek refuge from persecution, the rescued passengers are being forcibly taken back to Merak, in western Java, rather than to Christmas Island. Minister Clare told a media conference: "Given that this is so close to Indonesia it's my expectation that the survivors will be taken to Indonesia."

A BASARNAS spokesman told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation of an overnight plan to transfer the survivors from the HMAS Maitland to Indonesian authorities, so they could be shipped to Merak. In the past, survivors have been taken to Christmas Island, rather than Indonesia, which is not a signatory to the 1951 international refugee convention, and detains and deports even recognised refugees.

At his media conference, Clare reiterated the Labor government's line of blaming "people-smugglers" for endangering refugees' lives. He accused boat organisers of stepping up voyages in order to thwart the government's preparations to consign all asylum seekers to indefinite detention in camps on Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. He claimed that "people-smugglers are running a closing-down sale…They're telling people: get on the boat before there's no more chance to come to Australia."

Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government has dispatched military teams to both Nauru and Manus, and is planning to send refugees there as quickly as possible, to live in tents until other temporary accommodation is erected. Immigration Minister Chris Bowen said refugees would need to "see planes leaving for Nauru" in order to be deterred. The government has cynically justified its plan to detain refugees for years on Nauru and Manus by falsely claiming that it will prevent drownings and save lives.

These responses only underscore the fact that the latest disaster is the product of Australia's "border protection policy," which forces refugees to attempt hazardous journeys to Australian territory in order to gain entry to the country.

This week's tragedy came just days after more evidence emerged that Australian authorities had delayed action to aid a refugee vessel in distress off Christmas Island in June. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on August 27 that BASARNAS documents showed that the Indonesian authority had requested help from AMSA to rescue survivors from the sinking boat on June 20.

This was eight hours after AMSA had received information on the vessel and transferred responsibility to the Indonesians, claiming it was in their jurisdiction. After BASARNAS raised the alarm that it would be unable to effectively respond to the disaster, it took Australian authorities another 21 hours before they dispatched a rescue vessel. Some 90 people died in the sinking.

These events demonstrate that the Gillard government's insistence on shifting responsibility for rescues to the Indonesian authorities is causing disasters. Further, the growing numbers of boat sinkings, like the deaths of 353 people aboard the SIEV X refugee boat in 2001, raise questions about whether the Australian government is complicit in permitting tragedies to occur, as a means of deterring asylum seekers.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site