

# Nearly 100 perish in latest Australian refugee disaster

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In yet another tragedy involving asylum seekers trying to reach Australia, an estimated 98 Rohingya Muslim refugees from Burma (Myanmar) have died of starvation and dehydration aboard a wooden boat in the Indian Ocean

The disaster highlights the terrible plight of people trying to flee oppression throughout Asia and globally, and the mounting toll produced by the draconian measures being taken by governments, particularly Australia's, to block asylum seekers.

Sri Lankan naval authorities reported that they had reluctantly rescued 31 men and one boy about 500 kilometres east of Sri Lanka on Saturday. Survivors said there were originally 130 passengers on board, but 98 had died on the way and their bodies had been dumped at sea. The Sri Lankan navy released photographs of emaciated survivors, who had been at sea for 65 days.

The refugees told their rescuers they had been turned away by Malaysia, then intercepted by the Thai navy, which towed them back to the high seas. A Sri Lankan fisherman came across the boat on Friday night and radioed for help.

Commodore N. Attygalle said the Sri Lankan navy asked Indian authorities in the Andaman Islands to conduct the rescue, but India had insisted that the boat was in the Sri Lankan maritime zone. He said he was concerned that if word got out Sri Lanka was welcoming Burmese refugees, more could attempt the perilous journey.

The UN estimates at least 13,000 people fled Burma and Bangladesh by boat last year, with 485 thought to have drowned. Many were ethnic Rohingya Muslims, one of the most oppressed groups in the world. Though Rohingya have lived in Burma for generations, some 800,000 are stateless, with the governments in Burma

and neighbouring Bangladesh both refusing to grant them citizenship or any basic social, legal and democratic rights.

Last June, communal violence in Burma left at least 78 dead and tens of thousands displaced. Since then, many ethnic Rohingya have languished in squalid camps in Bangladesh, where aid agencies have reported worsening malnutrition, skin infections and other ailments caused by poor sanitation. But Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr yesterday ruled out permitting Rohingya refugees to settle in Australia.

Another tragedy was narrowly averted on Wednesday when Australian authorities were forced to rescue asylum seekers after their boat capsized on the way to Christmas Island, a remote Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean. The boat, carrying 88 passengers, had sent out a distress signal earlier in the week, but the navy delayed taking the refugees off the vessel until just before it sank. During the operation, the boat capsized, throwing 22 people into rough seas. After an hour-long search, the navy said it was "confident" it had recovered all those in the water, some of whom were injured.

As it has done after every refugee disaster, the Labor government's response was to exploit the latest deaths to proclaim its determination to stop asylum seekers trying to reach Australia. While professing sympathy for refugees, it blamed the victims for getting on boats in the first place. Immigration Minister Brendan O'Connor declared: "[P]eople need to understand how important therefore it is that we send the message that it is too dangerous to get on these vessels."

O'Connor reiterated the "very strong message" that the government had sent by deporting 938 asylum seekers back to Sri Lanka last year, and by incarcerating hundreds of refugees indefinitely in

detention camps in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. This regime seeks to intimidate refugees and deny them the basic right, enshrined in international law, to flee persecution and seek asylum.

O'Connor sought to outdo the Liberal-National Party opposition, which has vowed to "stop the boats." He insisted that the government's measures would ultimately lead to "a cessation of these boats." O'Connor urged the opposition to drop its objections to the "Malaysian solution"—the government's scheme to consign refugees to camps there as well, a plan that the Australian High Court ruled would violate the 1951 Refugee Convention and international human rights provisions.

The barbarity of the government's "Pacific Solution" of consigning refugees to Nauru and PNG's Manus Island was further underscored this week when four Iranian detainees on Nauru sewed their lips together, and 11 others staged a renewed hunger strike protest over their imprisonment and their appalling conditions, which include living in tents in stifling tropical heat.

Many hundreds of asylum seekers have lost their lives trying to find a safe haven in Australia over the past decade, including 353 who drowned aboard the so-called SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel X) in October 2001, an estimated 48 who died on the rocks of Christmas Island in December 2010, and nearly 100 whose boat sank in the waters between Indonesia and Australia last August.

Just like the Howard Liberal government before it, the Labor government bears the responsibility for the latest deaths. Its entire "border protection policy" forces refugees to attempt hazardous journeys in order to gain entry to the country. In the three disasters cited above, the Australian authorities might be been more directly responsible. In each case, they claimed to have failed to detect the distressed vessels and then either refused to take charge of rescuing the victims, or were slow to do so.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard's efforts to put a humanitarian gloss on her government's incarceration of refugees have become ever-more threadbare and discredited. At a "community cabinet" meeting in Adelaide this week, Gillard was visibly taken aback when she faced two unexpected questions from secondary school students on her government's inhumane policy.

To a student who asked if politicians could stop fear-mongering and find a humanitarian solution for refugees—whom he emphasised were "people"—Gillard claimed that she had to govern with her "head," not her "heart." She unconvincingly repeated the government's claim that its sole concern was to stop people drowning at sea.

The truth is that as the global economic situation deteriorates, and deepens its impact on Australia, both the government and the opposition are ratcheting up their anti-asylum policies, making refugees scapegoats for rising unemployment, declining living standards and worsening cuts to social spending, especially health, education, welfare, public services.



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