

Two refugees killed in latest boat disaster off Australia

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Two refugees, a woman and a young boy, were killed on Monday when two large waves hit their vessel, just after officers of Australia's Customs and Border Protection Command had boarded. The latest disaster raises further questions about the culpability of Australian authorities. More than 800 asylum seekers have drowned at sea in the past five years under the Labor government.

Border Protection Minister Jason Clare and Border Protection Command chief Admiral David Johnston held a press conference on Monday to provide an official account of the circumstances of the latest deaths. At about 4 p.m. (Australian eastern time) on Sunday, a Customs and Protection aircraft detected the refugee vessel, 76 nautical miles north northwest of Christmas Island, an Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean. Five and half hours later, at 9.30 p.m., someone on board the vessel, now 55 nautical miles from Christmas Island, contacted the Australian Maritime Safety Authority and requested assistance. According to Clare, "the nature of the assistance required was unknown." Only 43 minutes after the alert was received, at 10.13 p.m., was the armed patrol vessel Ocean Protector dispatched to find the boat.

The stricken vessel was not found for another six hours, at about 3 a.m., now 33 nautical miles from Christmas Island. Despite the dark conditions at night, and apparently without any contact being made by Australian officials with those on board the vessel, Customs and Border Protection authorities decided that the boat was not in distress and so did not intervene. The refugees were instead tracked for four hours as they continued south. At 11 a.m. (7 a.m. local time), about 40 minutes after daybreak, Ocean Protector deployed its smaller response vessels to the refugees' boat, now 14 nautical miles from Christmas Island.

Officials boarded the boat, after those on board had cut the engine, but two waves suddenly struck, causing the vessel to roll and take on water.

Several people were thrown into the ocean. Ninety three people were eventually rescued: 3 Indonesians, believed to be crew, and 90 asylum seekers, including at least 16 children, from Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries. In addition to the two people who drowned, three others were seriously injured, including a boy aged 6 or 7 years old, and two women in their 20s, one of whom was pregnant. The three were later flown to a hospital in Perth, Western Australia, and treated for injuries related to the ingestion of water and diesel fuel.

Many questions remain unanswered from the official account. No one in the government, the Customs and Border Protection agency, or the Australian Federal Police (AFP) has said whether they knew of the boat's departure from Indonesia, reportedly early on Saturday. The AFP and other agencies maintain an extensive intelligence network in Indonesia, aimed at monitoring and disrupting asylum seeker vessel departures. It remains unclear whether the Australian aircraft that detected the boat on Sunday afternoon did so while searching for it, after receiving intelligence about it setting off for Christmas Island, or whether it was spotted on a random patrol. None of the journalists at the press conference held by Clare and Johnston even raised this basic question.

Why were no Australian naval patrol boats activated after the sighting by air? The vessel was a grossly overcrowded Indonesian fishing boat—the kind that has been involved in numerous disasters in Australian waters in recent years. Yet nothing was done in response to the sighting.

Once Ocean Protector found the boat, it appears that

no effort was made to speak with anyone on board, including the person who made the call for help. This would be an elementary measure to assess the condition of the vessel and the health and well being of the 95 people on board. Johnston said officials assessed that the boat was not in distress because of “some night vision capability [that] determined that the vessel was moving and appeared sea worthy.”

Johnston said night boardings were considered dangerous and only to be done when necessary. He added that the refugees’ boat was not guided toward Christmas Island because of protocols governing the treatment of vessels that enter Australia’s waters. According to Johnston, the Indonesian crew stopped the engine, instead of just slowing down, which significantly reduced its stability. Border Protection officials were among those thrown into the water when the two waves hit.

Video surveillance footage of the operation has not been publicly released. The incident underscores, at the very least, the callous indifference of the Australian government and its “border protection” protocols to the safety and welfare of asylum seekers.

A 2011 coronial inquest, into the deaths of an estimated 50 refugees whose boat smashed into a Christmas Island cliff face, heard testimony from Admiral Tim Barrett, head of the Border Protection Command Rear, that no police, navy or customs agencies had any responsibility to rescue refugees at sea. The latest disaster makes clear that this official policy remains in effect—in violation of international maritime and refugee conventions that require people to be rescued at sea and for the maintenance of effective search and rescue services. (See “Australian government denies responsibility to rescue refugees”)

In 2001, the SIEV X catastrophe saw 353 people drown after Australian military authorities left them to their fate. The former Howard government promoted the deaths as a “deterrent” to would-be asylum seekers. (See “Did the Australian government deliberately allow 353 refugees to drown?”)

The present Labor government has responded in a similar manner to every further round of drownings. Prime Minister Julia Gillard has sought to exploit the deaths to justify her illegal and brutal policies of attempting to consign refugees to detention in Malaysia, Nauru and Papua New Guinea. Again, after

the latest drownings she urged opposition leader Tony Abbott to assist the government in implementing even more punitive measures, denouncing the Liberal Party’s “negativity” on the issue.

The government maintains that its measures are driven by a “humanitarian” concern to stop further refugee deaths at sea. This is an utter fraud—as the absence of basic search and rescue facilities and protocols for the waters between Australia and Indonesia makes clear.



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