Australia: Latest refugee boat disaster leaves 58 dead

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23 April 2013

An estimated 58 refugees from Afghanistan and Pakistan have died in another asylum seeker boat tragedy in the waters between Australia and Indonesia. It is believed that the boat was carrying 72 men and young boys, and that only 14 survived after their boat sank in heavy seas. No one was rescued for more than 24 hours.

The exact location of the disaster remains unclear, with both the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) and Indonesian authorities blaming each other for the lack of a search and rescue operation. Local fisherman picked the survivors out of the sea.

Roghmali, spokesman of the Search and Rescue Agency of Bandung, West Java told reporters that the boat sank in waters off Indonesia's Sunda Strait between the islands of Java and Sumatra. He said 14 people were rescued in the Ujung Genteng area, in West Java's Suakbumi Regency, early on April 12 "after about a 24-hour drift at sea".

The overcrowded and decrepit boat reportedly left Java, heading for Australia's Christmas Island, at 3 a.m. on April 10. Asylum seeker boats are commonly old and expendable vessels, because Australian authorities confiscate them once they arrive.

By about 11.30 a.m. the boat was sinking. One survivor, Abdul Hussain, told the media: "Then, within one or two minutes ... we went under water ... It was a very chaotic situation."

Some survivors clung onto a rope while others attempted to tread water or hold onto any wreckage they could find. A container ship passed close to their location on April 10 but either did not see them or ignored them, leaving them floating helplessly in the water. Hussain described the events: "Our faces were totally sunburnt. We got injuries in our legs, and were very thirsty. We felt like we wouldn't survive."

The survivors were finally rescued by passing fishermen at around noon the next day. They were subsequently arrested by Indonesian authorities, though they later escaped after apparently bribing police officers. They made their way to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), seeking medical treatment but were refused. IOM official Denis Nihill said his organisation needed permission from Indonesian immigration authorities. "It's a standard operating procedure, part of the agreement we have with the government," he said.

The *Australian* reported that numerous mobile phone calls had been recorded late on April 10 from people saying they were in a boat that was sinking. According to the article, the Australian Federal Police bureau in Jakarta had also notified Indonesian police of the reports of a sinking. It is not known what action the Indonesian police took.

AMSA apparently did not inform the Indonesian agencies until well after the boat had sunk. BASARNAS, the Indonesian search and rescue service, then placed a boat on standby but did not send the boat to sea because it lacked information on the precise location. BASARNAS does not have ocean-going boats and the modern surveillance and rescue equipment of the Australian agencies, on which it relies for intelligence.

Australian authorities did not announce the sinking until two days after it had occurred, by which time the survivors were already back in Java. An AMSA spokeswoman admitted that it had received information that the boat was in distress from an unidentified Australian agency but took no further action, claiming that the vessel was in the Indonesian zone of responsibility.

A similar disaster last August led to the deaths of about 100 asylum seekers after their boat sank off Indonesia. Then too, AMSA, despite being contacted directly by people on the boat and knowing its location, left rescue operations up to the under-resourced Indonesian authorities.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government has

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remained completely silent on the latest sinking. No notification has even appeared on the web sites of Home Affairs Minister Jason Clare and Immigration Minister Brendan O'Connor. Opposition leader Tony Abbott ignored the tragic loss of life but exploited the incident to condemn the government for not doing enough to "stop the boats."

The Gillard government is already using draconian methods to block refugees from fleeing to Australia. It has imprisoned hundreds of asylum seekers indefinitely in offshore detention centres in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It has also washed its hands of responsibility to rescue people from stricken boats, callously using the resulting disasters to deter others from attempting such journeys.

Testifying at 2011 coronial inquest into the loss of 50 lives when a boat crashed into the rocks of Christmas Island, Admiral Tim Barrett, head of the Border Protection Command Rear, stated that that no police, navy or customs agencies had any responsibility to rescue refugees at sea. The latest disaster shows that this official policy remains in place, in violation of international maritime conventions that require people to be rescued at sea (see "Australian government denies responsibility to rescue refugees").

Both Abbott and Gillard insist that their policies are driven by a "humanitarian" concern to stop further refugee deaths at sea. This is a sham. The entire "border protection" regime of military interceptions and deportations drives refugees to attempt hazardous journeys in order to gain entry to the country.

Under the Labor government more than 800 asylum seekers have now drowned at sea, effectively because they have attempted to exercise their basic legal and democratic right to seek protection from persecution. There is no doubt, however, that the Australian government's anti-refugee "border protection" regime is responsible for the deaths.

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