

At least 55 die in another Australian refugee boat disaster

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An estimated 55 people, thought to include women and children, are dead after another boat carrying asylum seekers sank last week in the Indian Ocean near Christmas Island, an Australian outpost. No information has been released about the nationalities of those who perished.

The tragedy has raised further questions about the Australian government's anti-refugee policy, including its refusal to take responsibility for the rescue of passengers aboard vessels in distress.

According to the official account, the doomed boat was first spotted last Wednesday, June 5, just 28 nautical miles northwest of Christmas Island, by an Australian air force patrol plane at 5.45 p.m. AEST (2.45 p.m. local time). The Australian Maritime and Search Authority (AMSA) reportedly dispatched the HMAS Warramunga to the location, yet it did not arrive there until 1.30 a.m. AEST Thursday. It reported that no ship was in sight, but identified wreckage and floating lifejackets.

It was not until 24 hours later, on the morning of Friday June 7, that a full-scale search began, involving Australian customs aircraft and private vessels and planes. At 3 p.m. AEST Friday, a search plane reported sighting the overturned hull of the boat 65 nautical miles northwest of Christmas Island. On Saturday, 13 bodies were seen in the water.

The search was called off on Sunday at 9.15 p.m. AEST, reportedly on advice that it was medically impossible for anyone to be alive. Customs officials announced on Monday morning that there would be no search for the bodies of the victims, outraging members of the affected communities. Bala Vigneswaran of the Australian Tamil Congress condemned the decision, commenting: "I don't think we would have treated Australians like this."

Tony Kevin, a former Australian ambassador, and a long-time critic of official asylum seeker policies, called for a coronial inquiry, stating: "I contend that if they'd taken prompt interception or assistance action by a surface vessel on Wednesday afternoon, those 55 people would still be alive." Kevin questioned the fact that AMSA did not send out a PAN-PAN (Potential Assistance Needed) call until 10 a.m. on Friday.

The failure to launch a full-scale search and rescue operation until 24 hours after the boat was known to be missing, with wreckage indicating a disaster, fits a continuing pattern. Successive Australian governments have regarded such disasters as opportunities to be utilised to discourage refugees from seeking asylum in Australia.

At a coronial inquest into the December 2010 loss of 50 lives when a boat crashed into the rocks of Christmas Island, Admiral Tim Barrett, head of the Border Protection Command Rear, said that police, navy and customs agencies had no responsibility to rescue refugees, in violation of international maritime conventions that require people to be rescued at sea (see "Australian government denies responsibility to rescue refugees").

Such disasters continue to occur, despite the Australian border command and AMSA possessing highly capable radar and search equipment, as well as receiving intelligence from the Australian Federal Police operatives in Indonesia who routinely monitor boat departures.

In two cases, last August and this April, a total of 158 asylum seekers lost their lives after Australian authorities left rescue operations up to under-equipped Indonesian agencies, despite knowing the locations of the disasters. (See: "Australia: Latest refugee boat disaster leaves 58 dead")

On this occasion, Home Affairs Minister Jason Clare denied that Australian authorities received a distress call. He claimed that the boat was stationary when initially spotted, but not in apparent distress. He dismissed calls for an inquiry, saying that an internal review would be conducted by Customs and Border Protection, “as is standard practice.”

As he had done previously, Clare sought to politically exploit the disaster, saying it should be a deterrent to people seeking to sail to Australia. “This is another terrible tragedy, another terrible reminder of how dangerous these journeys are,” he said. Similar statements have been made after each such incident, dating back to the loss of 353 lives in the 2001 SIEV X catastrophe, which the previous Howard Liberal government used to seek to intimidate refugees into abandoning any hope of reaching Australia.

These continuing disasters are the direct responsibility of the policies adopted by successive Australian governments to deny refugees their basic democratic and legal rights, recognised by international law, to flee persecution and seek asylum. This “border protection” regime has only forced asylum seekers to undertake hazardous voyages to seek refuge.

The Labor government has gone well beyond the punitive measures adopted by the previous Howard Liberal government, including the indefinite detention of refugees, some in barbaric facilities in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. Labor’s so-called “no advantage” test forces them to wait for as long as the refugees languishing, potentially for decades, in overseas camps.

It has also sought to strip asylum seekers of all legal rights by excising the entire Australian continent from the country’s migration zone, denying them any right to apply for protection visas and making it much more difficult to appeal to the courts against being denied refugee status.

Many more lives are likely to be lost. Indonesian authorities last week reported the rescue of 100 survivors from a ship in distress off Java. Another 78 asylum seekers were rescued by the British oil tanker MT British Curlew on Friday after their ship foundered northwest of the Cocos Islands, another Australian Indian Ocean territory. On Sunday, HMAS Warramunga intercepted another boat in distress 110 nautical miles from Christmas Island.

Regardless of the dangers of death in open waters and

imprisonment in detention centres, refugees fleeing from war-torn or devastated parts of the world, including Iraq and Afghanistan, or fleeing persecution from Sri Lanka and Iran, have not stopped trying to reach Australia.



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