

# Another boat disaster highlights criminality of Australian refugee policy

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Last week's deaths of at least 55 people, including women and children, is the latest refugee boat disaster in Australian waters. It raises the question: is the Labor government deliberately allowing asylum seekers to drown in the Indian Ocean as a means of deterring them from seeking refuge?

Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her ministers have refused to explain why no full-scale search-and-rescue operation was launched until more than 24 hours after a naval vessel spotted wreckage and floating lifejackets, just 28 nautical miles from the Australian outpost of Christmas Island.

The search—mandatory under international maritime law—began on Friday, June 7, but came too late. The next day, 13 bodies were seen in the water near the boat's overturned hull. Just a day later, the search was called off, on the grounds that there would be no survivors. Despite outraged objections by refugee communities, customs officials announced that no operation would be conducted to retrieve any of the passengers' bodies.

The Labor government's message was unmistakeable: if you seek asylum in Australia, you are likely to drown at sea. Not even your remains will be recovered. It has openly exploited the disaster, saying the deaths should be a deterrent to other refugees trying to sail to Australia.

"This is another terrible tragedy, another terrible reminder of how dangerous these journeys are," Home Affairs Minister Jason Clare declared.

Clare's remarks are a chilling echo of those made by the former Howard Coalition government's immigration minister Philip Ruddock when 353 men, women and children lost their lives in the 2001 SIEV X catastrophe. He told SBS TV at the time that the SIEV X sinking "may have an upside... in the sense that some

people may see the dangers inherent in it." (See: "Did the Australian government deliberately allow 353 refugees to drown?")

The latest tragedy brings to nearly 1,500 the number of known drownings since 2001, with almost 1,000 since the Labor Party came to power in 2007. Many more asylum seekers are feared to have perished.

This mounting toll is the direct responsibility of the policies adopted by successive federal Labor and Liberal governments to deny refugees their basic democratic and legal rights, recognised by international law, to flee persecution and seek asylum. The entire "border protection" regime established since 2001, including intensive Australian police surveillance in Asian transit countries and military interceptions of boats, has forced asylum seekers to undertake increasingly hazardous voyages.

The refugees who take such risks have virtually no other prospect of finding refuge. Around the world—from Europe and North America to Asia—governments are increasingly shutting their borders, leaving millions of displaced people languishing for many years in squalid refugee camps. Most are fleeing from countries, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Sri Lanka, which have been devastated by war or economic sanctions, led or backed by the US and its allies, including Australia.

In Australia, the Labor government, with the bipartisan support of the Liberal-National coalition, has taken the unprecedented step of excising the entire continent from the country's own migration zone. The purpose of this measure is to strip asylum seekers of virtually all legal rights. They can be shipped off to remote detention camps in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, and denied access to tribunals and courts to challenge their treatment.

In what amounts to a bid to force refugees to quit the country, Gillard's government has imposed a "no advantage" rule. Before even being permitted to apply for a protection visa, asylum seekers have to wait for as long as if they had remained in an overseas camp—that is, for many years. In other words, they face indefinite detention, without any trial or hearing. Because detention centres are already overflowing, some refugees are being consigned to "community detention," living under close supervision without any right to work or study and facing destitution.

As a consequence of the Labor government's policies, all the horrors produced by the Howard government's mass detention of refugees have reappeared, including mental health breakdowns, suicides and desperate hunger strikes. According to the federal Ombudsman, 11 detainees have died since mid-2010—only two of natural causes.

The "border protection" measures are a blatant violation of the international Refugee Convention, which recognises a number of rights: to flee persecution, to do so without punishment, and not to be forcibly returned to a country of origin to face persecution. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has publicly condemned the Labor government's policies. Its own Human Rights Commissioner has branded the "no advantage" rule as unlawful, because it sets no time limit on detention.

The Australian media is fully complicit in the Labor government's renunciation of fundamental legal principles and seek to whip up xenophobia with inflammatory claims of an invasion of refugees. To this end, the *Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan this week invoked the spectre of the country being overwhelmed by "Muslim immigration" and being threatened with "jihadist" extremists.

Like its counterparts around the world, the media and political establishment is consciously scapegoating asylum seekers, in order to divert attention from the deepening assault on jobs, living standards and social services to which all major parties are committed. Refugees are not responsible for the factory closures, corporate cost-cutting and budget slashing that the working class now confronts. This onslaught is the product of the bankrupt profit system and the austerity agenda being imposed by governments internationally in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis.

Central to the Socialist Equality Party's 2013 election campaign is the political fight against all forms of nationalism, racism and chauvinism, as part of the struggle to unify the international working class on the basis of a socialist perspective. The SEP champions the unconditional right of refugees and all workers to live and work in Australia, or any country they choose, with full legal, democratic and citizenship rights.

Refugees fleeing persecution face huge obstacles to their movements. But no such restrictions apply to the wealthy or to the operations of the global corporations that exploit the working class. Anyone with enough money can literally buy a visa. In fact, the Gillard government's new Significant Investor Visa entitles anyone with \$5 million to invest to obtain permanent residency.

The SEP opposes the entire anti-working class system of "border protection" and immigration restrictions upheld by every parliamentary party, including the Greens, who endorse the underlying nationalist framework, with cosmetic modifications, and have propped up the Labor government for the past five and a half years.

Workers around the world are confronted with the dangers of war, austerity and the drift towards dictatorship. The only way to build a world fit for all to live in is through the unified struggle by the working class to abolish global capitalism and its reactionary nation-state system, and establish a world-planned socialist economy to meet the social needs of humanity as a whole, not the super-profits of the wealthy few.

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