

Australia: 13 dead in two more refugee boat disasters

Mark Church, Mike Head
17 July 2013

Two more asylum seeker boats have sunk trying to reach Australia in the past five days, killing at least 13 people. The sinkings underscore the mounting human toll of the Labor government's escalating measures to stop refugees seeking to exercise their democratic and legal right to flee persecution and claim asylum.

Last night, a search for survivors was called off within hours after a boat carrying about 150 people capsized earlier in the evening, killing at least four passengers. At the time it sank, two Australian Navy ships were escorting it to the government's detention camp on Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean.

The circumstances remain unclear, except that the distressed boat was under the control of the navy and being taken to Christmas Island, 70 nautical miles away. None of the passengers had been transferred to the safety of the navy ships. A perfunctory media release from Australia's Border Protection Command said personnel from HMAS Albany "attempted to board the vessel to determine the nature of assistance required; however weather conditions and the size of the vessel prevented the boarding party from getting on board."

Last Friday, a lengthy delay in initiating the rescue operation for another refugee boat in distress, contributed to the deaths of a small baby, whose body was recovered, and eight other people, presumed drowned after the search for them was called off a day later. The 88 survivors, who fled repression in Iran, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, were transported to Christmas Island to be detained.

According to the official timeline released by Home Affairs Minister Jason Clare, there was a five-hour delay between the first mayday call and the dispatch of a patrol ship to assist the passengers, whose boat sank soon after the ship's arrival on the scene.

Clare said the Australian Federal Police received word on Friday at 11.15 a.m. AEST (Australian Eastern Standard Time) that a refugee vessel required assistance, after a phone call from the boat to an anonymous Melbourne man, who provided the police with GPS coordinates for the vessel.

However, the Australian Maritime Safety Authorities (AMSA) took until 12.30 pm to ask for assistance from the Border Protection Command (BPC), which used military radar systems to locate the troubled boat. At 3 p.m., AMSA asked nearby merchant ships to assist. It was not until 4.30 p.m. that the customs ship MV Triton was dispatched. By then, the refugee boat reported that it was disabled and taking on water. The Triton arrived at 10pm, but the boat sank half an hour later, 87 nautical miles from Christmas Island.

Minister Clare, as he has done with previous tragedies involving rescue delays, dismissed calls for a public inquiry. He said there would be an internal review of procedures, but refused to comment on the delay, saying as a minister he should not be "second guessing" border protection actions.

In reality, there has been a long line of such cases, all pointing to a deliberate policy of refusing to take responsibility for rescuing asylum seekers in time to stop lives being lost, in order to send a blunt message to refugees: do not attempt to sail to Australia to seek asylum (see: "Another boat disaster highlights criminality of Australian refugee policy"). Australian government videos on YouTube aim to terrorise asylum seekers by warning that if they try to reach Australia they will drown.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd immediately seized on Friday's tragedy to reiterate that his government is planning harsher measures to block the arrival of asylum seekers. Rudd said the incident "underlines the

absolute importance for Australia to continue to adjust its policies to meet changing circumstances in the region and in the world when it comes to border security.”

As with previous tragedies dating back to the SIEV X disaster of 2001, when 353 people drowned, Rudd is exploiting refugee deaths to call for more draconian anti-asylum seeker policies. Already, refugees are subjected to indefinite detention and possible incarceration on the remote island of Nauru or Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

No details of Rudd’s new measures have yet been released, but he has foreshadowed arbitrarily redefining the already strict criteria that determine official recognition as a refugee, and cutting off work rights for asylum seekers who try to challenge denials of their refugee status in the courts, in order to force them to leave Australia.

With a federal election due to be announced, Rudd and opposition leader Tony Abbott are engaged in a bidding war over more punitive measures against refugees. This is a reactionary diversion from the preparations being made by both parties for stepped up militarism abroad and deepening attacks on the working class at home.

Despite the harsh measures already in place, boat arrivals have increased, because millions of refugees are trying to flee war, poverty and persecution, particularly in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, including due to the criminal military interventions of US imperialism and its allies, including Australia.

More than 1,000 refugees are thought to have died trying to reach Australia since Rudd initially took office in 2007. The Labor government has washed its hands of any responsibility for averting the drownings, despite a vast intelligence gathering operation in Indonesia, an extensive sea and air patrol fleet and a state of the art radar system to detect and intercept boats.

During a coronial inquest into a December 2010 disaster on the rocks of Christmas Island that claimed 50 lives, BPC Rear chief Admiral Tim Barrett openly stated that the Australian authorities had no obligation to rescue refugees—a direct violation of international maritime law. In other tragedies, the Australian agencies sought to palm off rescue operations to the poorly equipped Indonesian rescue authority

BASARNAS.

Last month, testifying at an inquest into the deaths of 100 asylum seekers off Indonesia last June, AMSA search and rescue manager Alan Lloyd declared: “Refugee vessels tend to follow a script.” He insinuated that they make fake distress calls in order to compel Australian authorities to rescue them.

Responding to the latest deaths, former Australian diplomat Tony Kevin, a critic of official refugee policies, stated: “This is the latest in a long series of highly questionable deaths at sea after Australian authorities have, in many cases, detected and even intercepted asylum seeker boats. It reflects growing indifference to asylum seekers losing their lives at sea and a growing brutalisation of our practices.”

Kevin spoke of an “entrenched doctrine” under which distress calls from asylum boats are disregarded as not credible. This “entrenched doctrine” cannot be explained simply as a matter of bureaucratic callousness or “indifference.” The relevant search and rescue protocols, as well as the official attitude, are shaped by the illegal policies of the government, flouting the fundamental right to asylum.

For his latest comments, Kevin has been subjected to vitriolic attacks from high-level officials. Customs and Border Control head Michael Pezzullo declared: “Any suggestion that we treat persons on the basis of ethnicity or their legal status as asylum seekers, with, quote, disdain, which was the word that he [Kevin] used yesterday, is offensive. It’s repugnant.” The purpose of such remarks is to intimidate and silence criticism of the government’s anti-democratic, inhumane and deadly refugee policy.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact