

Australian government accused of ignoring refugee boat emergency calls

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Survivors of another horrific refugee boat disaster in the waters between Australia and Indonesia have accused the Australian government of ignoring their emergency distress calls. The accounts again raise the question as to whether Canberra allowed the drownings in order to bolster its “hard line” anti-refugee regime and deter other asylum seekers.

After spending five days at sea, the vessel attempted to return to Indonesia and sank just 50 metres off the west Javanese coast on Friday morning, at around 10.30 a.m. It is believed that about 80 asylum seekers were on board. The 26 survivors, almost all men, were able to swim to shore in rough seas, while 21 women and children are confirmed to have drowned and at least another 33 people are believed missing.

The deceased reportedly include people from Eritrea, Jordan, Iraq, and Iran, though most of those on board were from the northern Lebanese region of Akkar. This area has been badly affected by the US-led regime change operation in Syria, with heightened sectarian tensions in Lebanon and a large influx of Syrian refugees creating an economic crisis. Among the survivors was a Lebanese man who lost his wife and eight children.

The refugee boat disaster is the first under the Liberal-National coalition government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott, and its military-run “Operation Sovereign Borders” anti-refugee regime. It came on the eve of Abbott’s meeting today with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. This discussion is being held amid sharp tensions over Canberra’s anti-refugee policies, including having the Australian navy forcibly return refugee boats back to Indonesian waters (see: “Australian ‘border protection’ regime fuels dispute with Indonesia”).

Details of Friday’s refugee disaster remain scanty. In

line with the Abbott government’s policy of not disclosing asylum seeker boat arrivals, not a single statement have been issued by the customs and border protection department, the immigration department, or the head of Operation Sovereign Borders, Lieutenant General Angus Campbell. Prime Minister Tony Abbott on Saturday brushed aside questions from reporters about the incident.

Two statements issued by immigration minister Scott Morrison denied reports that Australian authorities had advance knowledge of the stricken refugee vessel, saying they first knew about the boat on Friday morning. No details were provided. Morrison claimed that border protection authorities issued an all-ship alert and also mobilised a surveillance aircraft to the reported area of the vessel, 25 nautical miles off the Indonesian coast, but the refugees could not be located.

Serious questions remain unanswered. There is a glaring contradiction between Morrison’s claims and the account provided by one of the survivors, Jordanian Abdullah al-Qisi. The refugee, who speaks near fluent English, said that he used a satellite phone and an iPhone to make multiple emergency distress calls to Canberra on Thursday. By that stage, the boat was badly leaking and had severe motor problems. Those on board had also run out of food and water.

“I called the Australian embassy,” Al-Qisi told Fairfax reporters. “For 24 hours we were calling them. They told us, ‘just send us the position on GPS, where are you?’. We did, and they told us, ‘OK, we know where you are.’ And they said, ‘We’ll come for you in two hours.’ And we wait two hours. We wait 24 hours, and we kept calling them, [saying] ‘We don’t have food, we don’t have water for three days, we have children, just rescue us.’ And nobody come. Sixty person dead now because of Australian government.”

The Australian government has flatly denied receiving a rescue emergency alert 24 hours before the boat sank.

According to Morrison, authorities learned about the vessel on Friday morning, i.e., sometime after midnight and before the boat sank at around 10.30 a.m. If this is correct, it means that no attempt was made to issue a distress call from the stricken vessel during its four and a half days at sea, until it was forced to turn back to Indonesia.

In all likelihood Australian authorities knew about the boat much earlier. The waters between Australia and Indonesia are closely monitored by Australian military, intelligence, and border protection personnel. Moreover, Australian Federal Police and Australian Secret Intelligence Service agents actively work in Indonesia to prevent and detect refugee boats leaving for Australia.

Reports have emerged that Australian naval and border protection personnel were involved in two other refugee boat incidents. According to the *Australian*, Indonesian officials said that at the time of the disaster on Friday morning, Australian customs vessel Triton was about 25 nautical miles south of Indonesia's Rote Island, off West Timor, intercepting a disabled refugee vessel that had been en route for Ashmore Island, and which was later returned to Indonesia. Earlier, on Thursday, Australia's HMAS Ballarat reportedly entered Indonesia's Sunda Strait to assist an Indonesian coast guard vessel intercept another refugee boat and return those on board to Indonesia. The Australian government, emergency rescue authorities, and customs and border protection department have refused to comment on these two operations.

Were Australian navy and customs vessels simply too overstretched to mount another search and rescue operation? Or is the explanation more sinister?

There is ample evidence indicating that in 2001, the Liberal-National government of Prime Minister John Howard deliberately did nothing while a refugee vessel known as SIEV X sank, resulting in the drowning of 353 people. Afterwards, immigration minister Philip Ruddock notoriously declared that the incident "may have an upside in the sense that some people may see the dangers inherent in [seeking asylum in Australia]." The SIEV X catastrophe was used by the Howard government, in the immediate aftermath of the

September 11 terrorist attacks, to promote nationalism and xenophobia, conflating Middle Eastern asylum seekers with terrorists and "border protection" with the so-called war on terror.

Under the Gillard-Rudd Labor governments, there were also a series of refugee boat disasters in which serious questions were raised about the Australian authorities' foreknowledge and culpability (see: "Australian government's culpability in refugee boat disaster"). The government cynically used these sinkings to justify its draconian measures aimed at stripping people of the basic democratic and legal right to claim asylum in Australia as necessary to "save lives".

Abbott has retained all of the draconian and illegal measures introduced under the former Gillard-Rudd Labor governments, including the permanent deportation of refugees to Papua New Guinea, overseen by a more highly militarised and secretive command structure. Before winning the September 7 election, Abbott placed the reactionary slogan of "stopping the boats" at the centre of his election campaign. There is no question that the newly installed government will use the latest deaths at sea to bolster its "deterrent" measures.



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