

Refugee standoff heightens Australian-Indonesian tensions

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A group of 60 asylum seekers aboard a broken-down wooden boat were subjected to a two-day standoff in treacherous seas between Australia and Indonesia before being transported to Australia's Christmas Island detention centre last Saturday.

The ordeal for the refugees from Afghanistan and Pakistan, which occurred because the Australian government demanded that they be sent back to Indonesia, highlighted the deteriorating relations between the two countries. These tensions are not just over Australia's criminal policy of "turning back" refugee boats to Indonesia, but Australia's involvement in the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific region, exacerbated by the recent revelations of US and Australian spying on Indonesia.

The saga began early last Thursday morning, when the boat, which was 57 nautical miles off Java and about 120 nautical miles from Christmas Island, sent a distress signal to the Australian authorities. In keeping with the secrecy surrounding the Abbott government's military-style "Operation Sovereign Borders" to repel refugees, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison refused to disclose any details of the unfolding maritime emergency.

According to information released by the Indonesian search and rescue agency Basarnas, the Australian naval vessel HMAS Ballarat responded to the distress call, but sailed away upon concluding that the boat was not in danger. An Australian customs vessel, the Ocean Protector, later arrived after the boat's engine failed, then stood by the boat, refusing to rescue the passengers, while the Australian government insisted that they be forced to return to Indonesia.

Having endangered the lives of all aboard the refugee boat, Morrison finally issued a self-serving statement on Saturday, saying he had accepted Indonesia's refusal to take the asylum seekers back "in the best interests of the safety of the passengers and the crew." He declared that

the refugees would be rapidly taken from Christmas Island to detention on either Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, and "will not be resettled in Australia."

Prime Minister Tony Abbott likewise insisted that the outcome was consistent with his government's policy to turn back boats to Indonesia and rejected claims from the Labor opposition that this policy was now in tatters. Labor's criticism, along with that of the Greens, its former de facto coalition partner, was from the right, accusing Abbott of failing to deliver on his election vow to "stop the boats" and block all asylum seekers.

In 2009, the previous Labor government made an earlier such attempt, prevailing upon Jakarta to accept the unloading of rescued refugees from the customs ship Oceanic Viking at an Indonesian port. However, the asylum seekers refused to disembark, leading to a month-long impasse.

Abbott and Morrison asserted that the latest incident occurred in Indonesia's search and rescue region, and therefore was not Australia's legal responsibility. As they know full well, Indonesia lacks the resources to carry out rescue operations across the vast zone, which, according to Australia, stretches all the way to Christmas Island. Both governments are completely indifferent to the plight of refugees, but the passengers are clearly Australia's responsibility because they are seeking asylum in Australia, not impoverished Indonesia.

An editorial in yesterday's *Australian* spelt out the brutal logic in Canberra's position, demanding that the government "stand firm on turning back boats." It declared: "Australia should not be rescuing people thousands of kilometres from our mainland, and only a short distance from Indonesia." In other words, refugees should be left to drown.

This has been the underlying, but unacknowledged, policy of successive Australian governments since the

2001 SIEV X disaster, when 353 men, women and children drowned in waters under close Australian military surveillance. Governments have cynically seized on such tragedies—at least 1,000 people have perished in the past decade—to send a chilling message to asylum seekers: don't try to sail to Australia.

The Abbott government's stance provoked strident comments from one of Indonesia's most senior ministers. "Australia already has its own 'detention centres' in Nauru and PNG. That's where the asylum seekers should be sent, NOT TO Indonesia," Djoko Suyanto, the coordinating minister for legal, political and security affairs, messaged to reporters last Friday.

Earlier, Djoko's spokesman said Indonesia declined Australia's last three pleas to turn back boats, undercutting Morrison's cover-up of the rebuffs at his weekly media briefings. These interventions by Djoko, a close confidant of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and a former armed forces chief, points to top-level concerns in Jakarta. Defence Minister Purnomo Yusciantoro made similar comments.

Morrison further fanned the flames yesterday by describing the Indonesian response as "very frustrating" and lacking "rhyme or reason." In fact, the Yudhoyono administration has repeatedly stated its refusal to accept asylum seekers being returned to Indonesia. In September, after meeting his Australian counterpart Julie Bishop in New York, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa told the media he had conveyed "loud and clear" to Bishop that Indonesia could not "accept any Australian policy that would, in nature, violate Indonesia's sovereignty."

These tensions are bound up with the wider strategic questions provoked by the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot" to Asia, directed against China. Ruling circles in Indonesia, which, like other countries throughout the region, depends on Chinese markets, are increasingly concerned by Canberra's close military involvement in the US plans for a potential war with China, in which Indonesia would be caught in the middle. These concerns have been exacerbated by the revelations, based on documents leaked by National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden, that Australia is also a vital partner in US surveillance operations across South East Asia.

Last month, the Fairfax media reported that the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) gathered electronic data, as part of an NSA program, from Australian diplomatic missions throughout Asia, including Jakarta.

The revelations triggered public outrage in Indonesia over the blatant manner in which the NSA and ASD spy not only on Indonesian officials, but the entire population.

On Friday, the *Jakarta Post* reported that Yudhoyono's government was "under growing pressure to ask for clarification from the US and Australian governments over allegations they conducted surveillance activities in the country." On Saturday, presidential spokesman Teuku Faizasyah declared that such operations were unacceptable and that both the US and Australia should clarify the matter.

The Abbott government, however, has refused to admit, let alone clarify or apologise for, the spying operations. At a Bali Democracy Forum last Friday, Foreign Minister Bishop told Indonesia's Natalegawa that her government would not do anything to "harm the strong and vibrant relationship," but stuck to Canberra's insistence that it would not discuss intelligence matters, "as a matter of principle."

In Jakarta on the same day, Indonesian Defence Minister Purnomo also had a closed-door meeting with his Australian counterpart David Johnston, but told reporters that Johnston refused to talk about the espionage issue. To add insult to injury, Johnston skipped a press conference after the meeting, avoiding dozens of local and international journalists waiting to ask him about the spying program.

Despite suggestions in the Australian media that the refugee conflict will subside once the furore over the spying fades, there is a direct and ongoing connection between the refugee and military-intelligence issues. Australian governments have exploited boat arrivals, not only to whip up anti-refugee xenophobia at home, but as a pretext to establish a substantial naval and air presence in waters near Indonesia and key shipping lanes through the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok straits. As strategic documents published in Washington have made clear, these sea lanes are potential "choke points" to cut off China's trade, making Indonesia a potential battleground in a possible war.



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