

Indonesia demands suspension of Australian naval operations against refugees

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The Australian government's increasingly aggressive military operations to push refugee boats back to Indonesia have triggered a new crisis in relations between the two countries.

Last night, the Indonesian government released a statement demanding that Australia halt activities under its "Operation Sovereign Borders" that lead to the navy entering Indonesian territorial waters without permission, and announced increased naval patrols in the border area.

Australian Immigration Minister Scott Morrison publicly apologised yesterday for Australian naval vessels "unintentionally" entering Indonesian waters on several occasions, "without knowledge or sanction by the Australian government."

Asylum seekers forced back to Indonesia also reported that the Australian navy has begun using lifeboats to dump them near Indonesia, with only enough fuel to get ashore, and that the navy fired shots near one refugee boat to push it back to Indonesia.

A spokesman for Indonesia's minister for politics, law and security, Djoko Suyanto, declared: "The government of Indonesia underlines that any such [border] violation, on whatever basis, constitutes a serious matter in bilateral relations of the two countries."

Agus Ruchyan Barnes said: "Indonesia demands that such operations conducted by the Australian government that lead to these incidents be suspended until formal clarification is received and assurance of recurrence of such incidents has been provided."

According to the *Jakarta Globe*, the ministry withdrew an earlier statement that referred to deep regret over the incidents. The language used in the new statement was stronger. Agus said three Indonesian navy ships had been sent to the region where Australia is understood to have been turning back asylum seeker boats. A naval frigate will also be sent to the area.

Relations between the two governments have been

strained for the past two months, since documents leaked by former US National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden revealed details of extensive US-Australian spying operations in Indonesia, including the bugging of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's phone calls. Responding to public outrage in Indonesia, Yudhoyono suspended cooperation with Australia on refugee boats, intelligence exchanges and military exercises.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop unsuccessfully tried to call her Indonesian counterpart, Marty Natalegawa, on Thursday night to "offer an unqualified apology on behalf of the Australian government ... and to provide an assurance that such a breach would not occur again."

Earlier that day, Natalegawa warned against sending refugees back to Indonesia in lifeboats, describing it as a "slippery slope" and asking: "Where will this lead to?" The Indonesian foreign minister declared: "It's one thing to turn back the actual boats on which they have been travelling but another issue, when they are transferred onto another boat and facilitated and told to go in that direction." He said the developments were "unhelpful" for efforts to "return to normal" the Indonesian-Australian relationship.

The Indonesian government is acutely aware that Canberra is fully committed to the US "pivot to Asia" and preparations for war against China. Jakarta's sensitivity to the intrusion of Australian warships into its waters reflects deep concerns about the Pentagon's strategy to control key shipping lanes used by China that pass through the Indonesian archipelago.

Australian Immigration Minister Morrison insisted that the violations of Indonesia's 12-nautical mile limit were caused by navigational errors. He made no attempt to explain how such errors could have occurred. He refused to give any details of how many navy vessels were

involved, when the violations occurred or how far the vessels went into Indonesian waters.

Whether Australian “border protection” vessels deliberately crossed the 12-mile limit or not, they must inevitably infringe the border in order to achieve the purpose of the Abbott government’s entire operation—to force refugees back within Indonesian territorial waters. Morrison declared that despite the violations, the operation would proceed “full steam ahead.”

There are now reports of at least five boatloads of people being towed back to Indonesia since December 13, despite long-standing Indonesian government opposition to the practice.

Yesterday, detailed accounts from refugees confirmed that the Australian navy is using ocean lifeboats to force people into Indonesia waters, despite Natagelawa’s specific objections to such methods. Fairfax Media interviewed members of a group of 56 asylum seekers from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq and Palestine whose wooden vessel was intercepted by an Australian Navy vessel, HMAS Stuart. After being detained for five days on naval and customs ships, they were put on a small, bright orange lifeboat-style vessel close to the Indonesian shore, with only enough fuel to return there.

Pakistani asylum seeker, Fazal Qadir, 28, said the group, which included one woman with a 20-month-old toddler, was photographed, interviewed by navy personnel and tagged with white, numbered wrist bands. After being loaded into the lifeboat, they were tossed a four-page document in a range of languages, which stated: “You only have enough fuel to reach land in Indonesia... You are responsible for your own actions.”

As well as seriously endangering the lives of the passengers, the Abbott government’s operations underscore the criminality of Australia’s anti-refugee regime. Not only does it violate the international Refugee Convention, which recognises the right to flee persecution, but infringes international maritime safety provisions and laws against arbitrary detention.

In another case, an Indonesian local police commissioner from southern Java told Fairfax Media that villagers rescued asylum seekers from the water on January 8 after their boat was turned back near Australia’s Christmas Island. The police chief, quoting one of those on board, Snilul, 25, from Bangladesh, said the navy “shot into the air just to scare them.” The boat was carrying 25 people from Bangladesh and Myanmar, including four children.

In keeping with the strict secrecy that the Australian government has imposed in order to hide its operations from the public, Immigration Minister Morrison refused to comment on the incident. He claimed that “no shots have been fired at any time by any persons involved in Operation Sovereign Borders.”

That denial is no more plausible than the ones initially issued by the previous Howard Coalition government in October 2001, when the navy, under its orders, fired shots toward a refugee boat carrying 233 passengers, including 54 children and 42 women, thought to be fleeing from Iraq. When the boat sank the following day, Prime Minister John Howard and his senior ministers falsely accused parents of throwing their children overboard in order to force the navy to rescue them (see: “Australian navy opens fire on refugee boat”). The “children overboard” accusations, which were fully backed by the Labor Party, became a turning point in the demonisation of refugees in the lead up to the 2001 federal election.

Labor Party opposition party leader Bill Shorten yesterday criticised the secrecy surrounding the naval operations and accused the Abbott government of damaging relations with Indonesia, but claimed credit for the government’s claim that no refugee boats had landed in Australia for the past three weeks. Shorten said the previous Rudd Labor government had “stopped the boats” by announcing that all new arrivals would be detained on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

These comments underscore the bipartisan nature of the anti-refugee policy. Amid a deepening economic downturn and growing unemployment, the Liberal-National Coalition government is taking to new levels the barbaric measures taken by its predecessors, Labor and Coalition alike, to make innocent people fleeing oppression scapegoats for the worsening social conditions.



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