

Australia: New evidence of refugees being assaulted at sea

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Media interviews with asylum seekers on boats forced back to Indonesia by the Australian navy under the Abbott government's "stop the boats" regime have confirmed earlier reports of physical assaults and abuse, with asylum seekers being beaten, pepper-sprayed and handcuffed.

Reports published last weekend by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) and the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper also provided pictures of enclosed orange lifeboats into which refugees had been herded against their will and then dumped at sea near Indonesia in the most dangerous fashion.

The Abbott government is now claiming "success" in turning back refugees—a direct violation of the international Refugee Convention that recognises the right to flee persecution. The government is locked in a xenophobic competition with the Labor opposition, which insists that the previous Labor government's policy of transporting all asylum seekers to a remote detention camp on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island is responsible for stopping the arrival of refugee boats.

It is unclear how many boats have been repelled in recent weeks. Because the Abbott government has shrouded its operations in secrecy, reports of boats being turned back and asylum seekers being assaulted are only starting to surface in Indonesia. The reports included photos of refugees with badly burnt hands.

Last week, the ABC interviewed 20-year-old Somalian refugee, Bowby Nooris, who was on a boat turned back on January 6. After the boat was intercepted by the navy, there was an altercation between its passengers and navy personnel involving the use of pepper spray, he told the ABC. "There was an argument, do you understand?" he said. "When they sprayed me in the eyes I couldn't see anything. While I was looking for a way out I stumbled on the engine and

my hand got burnt."

In pain, Nooris jumped off the boat. "I felt pain like chillies went into my eyes," he recounted. "I could not see anything. It was dark and I threw myself into the sea." He was later pulled back on board.

Another refugee, Faisal, told the *Australian* that he and other asylum seekers jumped into the sea to protest against being pushed back to Indonesia. They were left in the water until they asked to be let back in the boat, then tied up and left in the open sun. Some asylum seekers, including his wife, were also injured when they tried to access a lavatory being restricted by the navy. His wife was pushed into a blistering hot engine, suffering burns.

An 18-year-old asylum seeker, Ali Mohamed, said he was almost punched unconscious after attempting to start a protest. Six weeks later, he still had the remains of a black eye.

The *Australian* claimed that its interviews discredited earlier ABC reports that asylum seekers may have been tortured, but the fresh accounts instead provided further evidence of naval mistreatment. At least one refugee, Yousif Fasher, maintained that some refugees were tortured. "Three people had their hands put on the engine by force, I saw everything," he told the newspaper.

The *Australian* also reported interviews with asylum seekers from a boat turned back on December 19 near Darwin. Mohamed Abdirashid, 18, stated that during an argument with Australian sailors he was thrown against an engine and handcuffed, injuring his arm. Other witnesses reported that two sailors from HMAS Stuart "made physical abuses to us."

These refugees also provided evidence of the government's close involvement in the implementation of its policies. The captain of HMAS Armidale said to

them: “It’s not up to me; this decision is up to the government.” The captain had to wait for an official order before carrying out the tow-back.

In a statement issued on January 31, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison did not deny that asylum seekers had been injured. In an apparent reference to the use of pepper spray and other implements, he stated that naval personnel had “personal defensive equipment” as standard issue. He declared: “The equipment is used, for example, to bring people under control when they are engaged in non-compliant, threatening behaviour to other passengers or crew.”

Morrison and Prime Minister Tony Abbott have flatly refused to allow any investigation of the claims of abuse or torture, despite some of the witnesses having photos and video footage, with some of the images also showing the incidents being recorded by naval personnel. This blatant contempt for the most basic civil and political rights is also an attempt to disguise the fact that such assaults have been directly authorised by the government itself.

On December 20, the Chief of the Defence Force issued a declaration that, with the employment minister’s approval, parts of the Work Health and Safety Act no longer apply to sailors carrying out the government’s immigration policy. Specifically excluded were provisions requiring that “reasonable care” be taken by sailors to ensure their own health and safety and that their “acts or omissions do not adversely affect the health and safety of other persons.”

Successive Labor and Liberal-National governments have established one precedent after another curtailing fundamental democratic rights and legal protections for the most marginalised sections of the planet’s population—those fleeing war and persecution. Under Labor in 1992, Australia was the first country in the world to impose mandatory detention of asylum seekers. Now, an Australian government is physically assaulting them.



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