Refugee details punishment at sea by Australian navy

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In an interview with *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Michael Bachelard published yesterday, Sudanese refugee Yousif Ibrahim Fasher provided a further eye-witness account detailing Australian naval personnel physically assaulting and punishing asylum seekers who were attempting to reach Australia by boat.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) yesterday also released a video filmed from inside a capsule-like orange lifeboat full of asylum seekers, as it was towed by an Australian "border protection" ship away from Australia, in flagrant violation of international law. The refugees, including at least one infant, were dumped by the Australian navy several kilometres from Indonesia, with only enough fuel to just reach Java, where it arrived on Wednesday night. It is not clear what, if any, amenities and supplies were available in the vessel.

The Liberal-National Coalition government has responded furiously to the latest media reports, denouncing any publication of asylum seekers' reports of their brutal treatment. A witch-hunt against the ABC has been stepped up for reporting the torture allegations. (See: "Witch-hunt against Australian ABC escalates over refugee torture allegations")

Fasher's interview, conducted in a refugee detention centre in Sumatra, corroborates earlier testimony by others aboard his boat, but goes further. He states that sailors intentionally held the hands of three asylum seekers over burning hot engine pipes, inflicting severe burns, as punishment for their protests at not being allowed access to the toilet. Another two people were burned as a result of being assaulted by sailors.

"Why people would burn their hands by themselves?" Fasher said. "If [it was only] one person you could say an accident, but five people?"

Fasher also provided new information that four men, two Somalis, one Sudanese and another Yemeni—one of them his 23-year-old cousin Usman Ali Fasher—fell overboard and had likely drowned during their voyage to Australia, approximately 37 kilometres from Darwin. The fishing vessel subsequently detoured to a nearby island and called for help. According to Bachelard, Fasher "claims naval crews were told of the tragedy, but did not appear to make any attempt to search for the missing men."

Fasher has no evident reason to lie as his application for refugee status in Australia will likely be blocked as punishment for his testimony.

According to Fasher, after navy personnel boarded the fishing vessel carrying 45 asylum seekers on January 1, they immediately imposed restrictions on refugees' access to the toilet. Women were allowed to go only once per day, at night time, and men during the day.

Bowby Nooris, one of the four men who protested, attempted to reach the toilet, but was assaulted by sailors. Pepper sprayed, and, stumbling, he blindly grabbed at the boat's hot engine. According to Fasher, as punishment for their protests the navy personnel then grabbed the wrists of the three other men—whose names have not been released—and, one by one, put their hands over the pipes.

"I saw it with my eyes because I was translating," Fasher said. "They punished three of them ... so they would never want to go to the toilet again." An officer instructed Fasher to threaten the other passengers with the same punishment. Fasher also stated that his wife fell onto the hot engine pipes after being pushed by a navy officer.

Abdullah Ahmed, an Eritrean asylum seeker who was on the boat but did not witness the incident, told

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Bachelard that news spread quickly among the other passengers. “I saw people with burned hands,” he said. “They said: ‘Don’t go to the toilet, it’s punishment ... from the Navy’.”

Both Fasher and Ahmed told Bachelard that the refugees were refused medical treatment for their burns for the remaining five days before the vessel arrived near Indonesia.

Fasher’s testimony, detailing what can only be described as punitive torture, cannot be explained solely by the evident callousness of individual naval personnel. Such methods are the logical and inevitable consequence of the Abbott government’s “Operation Sovereign Borders,” which involves the mobilisation of the military, with orders to stop and tow back any refugees attempting to reach Australia by sea.

Fasher also reported racist insults by naval personnel. “They said: ‘F--k you ... You choose to come from your country, we don’t ask you to come’,” he recounted. “To the black Africans, one said: ‘Oh, you’re a monkey from Africa’.”

Such xenophobic conceptions reflect the campaign conducted by the media and both big business parties—accelerated under the former Labor government and now the present Coalition government—to criminalise and vilify asylum seekers.

The three other refugees now in Indonesia whose hands were burned have refused to comment out of fear. Bachelard told the ABC yesterday: “They are extremely nervous about the consequences for them, both from Australia but also from Indonesian authorities if they speak.”

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