

Australian sailors say Labor government ordered them not to rescue refugees

Mike Head
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Naval personnel have provided damning testimony that points to successive Australian governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, illegally ordering Navy crews not to rescue asylum seekers on sinking boats, causing many deaths. Others described the sickening task of retrieving the bodies of dead asylum seekers or coping with ill and distressed people, including children.

Interviews with traumatised sailors and naval officers, past and present, shown on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" television program on Tuesday night add to the substantial evidence that the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, like the Howard Coalition government before them, deliberately allowed refugees to drown in an effort to frighten people away from seeking asylum in Australia.

The naval personnel all served on "Operation Resolute," the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments' forerunner to the present Abbott Coalition government's "Operation Sovereign Borders," which is continuing the same policy, kept out of the public's view on the pretext of military operational secrecy.

A serving Navy officer, identified as 'Michael,' said he witnessed unseaworthy asylum seeker vessels not being boarded because of decisions made in Canberra. He said these instructions came in the form of "suggestions" relayed to the captains of Navy boats, rather than formal orders.

"Our vessel was delayed 15 hours for a boarding on one occasion and we got reports in from surveillance aircraft that that vessel had sunk 13 hours ago," Michael said. "All we found was probably a line about 70 miles long of bodies. We fished them out for as long as we could, 'til we were full. And that wasn't uncommon."

In another incident, Michael's captain received

instructions from Canberra to leave a stricken boat, which later disappeared. "[A] struggling boat of Rohingyas halfway to Christmas Island did all they could to comply with the boarding commander's instructions," he said. "Then we left them alone, 150 nautical miles from anywhere in a poorly-repaired boat."

'Fiona' another serving Navy officer, worked at the Northern Command in Darwin, which directed the Navy ships intercepting asylum seeker boats. "There were times when we had crews that conducted boardings and saw the state of the vessel, which was largely overcrowded, and they would have concerns for the welfare of the people onboard," she said. "But they were told they were only to conduct a boarding to deliver necessary equipment, then they had to disembark and monitor. On one occasion at least, a vessel overturned and people died."

The "pressure came from Canberra," she said. The Labor government wanted the boats to enter Australian waters before being boarded. "[W]e were told the minister himself was standing in Border Protection Command and he did not want that boat to be boarded."

After the Abbott government took office in September 2013, Fiona said refugees were further endangered by offloading them into lifeboats and pushing them away from Australian waters. "To simply turn them back for the sake of policy and put them on those not-purpose-built lifeboats is putting women and children in danger, and we could have taken them onboard," she said.

According to "7.30," it contacted former Labor government ministers, who "categorically denied any such interference." The program provided no details of whom it asked, or what they said. Labor's immigration

ministers were Chris Evans, Chris Bowen, Brendan O'Connor and Tony Burke.

There are obvious reasons for such denials. The ministers responsible could be prosecuted for homicide, or for violating Safety of Life at Sea and Search and Rescue laws, both domestic and international, which require governments to come to the rescue of vessels in distress.

To admit that government ministers had a direct hand in decisions that caused the deaths of asylum seekers would expose the criminal nature of the bipartisan "border protection" regime of repelling refugee boats. It would lay bare the lie, constructed by the Rudd and Gillard governments and maintained by the Abbott government, that the policy aims to "save lives" by stopping boats trying to reach Australia. Far from saving lives, refugees have become casualties of a calculated drive to shut Australia's borders to impoverished and oppressed people.

By some estimates, 1,200 refugees died seeking to reach Australia under the Rudd and Gillard governments, but the true toll may be higher because of boats that are thought to have disappeared. In a series of refugee boat disasters, serious questions were already raised about the government's and the immigration authorities' foreknowledge of the stricken boats and culpability in the resulting deaths.

The current immigration minister, Scott Morrison, made a fleeting reference to the "7.30" revelations at a media conference on Wednesday. He cynically declared that by turning back refugee boats his government had ended the deaths. In reality, such drownings are almost certainly continuing, and more asylum seekers are dying while being forced back to Indonesia or Sri Lanka, all behind a wall of military secrecy. No member of the press gallery challenged Morrison's claim.

The precedent for failing to rescue boats, and then exploiting the tragedies to deter refugees from trying to get to Australia, was set under the former Howard Coalition government. In October 2001, 353 refugees drowned while sailing to Australia in an over-crowded boat, later dubbed SIEV X.

Considerable evidence implicates Howard government ministers for knowingly allowing the asylum seekers to drown, and for refusing to mount a rescue. Despite being one of Australia's largest-ever

maritime tragedies, the government prevented any investigation into the disaster. Labor helped block calls for a judicial or parliamentary inquiry, because it intended to use the same methods once it got into office.

The SIEV X coverup, which has continued ever since, paved the way for an escalating and ever-more explicit repudiation of the fundamental democratic right, also recognised by international law, to seek asylum.

In response to the "7.30" program, the Greens, who propped up the minority Labor government from 2010 to 2013, called for a judicial inquiry, not into Labor's culpability for the deaths of refugees, but into the impact on the mental health of Australian sailors. While the Greens posture as critics of the most barbaric aspects of the "border protection" regime, they defend its basic framework of maintaining national-based restrictions against the entry of desperate asylum seekers, and thus share responsibility for the terrible deaths at sea.



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