

Refugee boat pushed back by Australian navy crashes on Indonesian reef

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According to Indonesian police, a boat carrying 65 asylum seekers crashed onto a reef off the remote Indonesian island of Landuti last week, threatening the lives of its passengers, who included three infants and four women—one pregnant—after the refugees were turned back by Australian authorities.

The near-tragedy is another damning indictment of the Australian government's anti-refugee policy, which is setting dangerous precedents for similar actions by governments around the world. Indonesian fishermen reportedly found the stranded passengers on May 24. They were then detained on nearby Rote Island before being taken to Kupang, the West Timor capital.

The asylum seekers—54 Sri Lankans, 10 Bangladeshis and one person from Myanmar—were pushed back to Indonesia as Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his ministers were urging European and South East Asian governments to follow their lead in militarily repelling boats carrying thousands of desperate refugees.

Rote Island chief of police senior commissioner Hidayat told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation the boat was intercepted by an Australian border patrol after setting off from West Java. The asylum seekers told police they were transferred onto a wooden boat, given dried fruit, biscuits and life jackets, and escorted back to Indonesian waters, with enough fuel to make it ashore.

“They looked exhausted,” Hidayat told Agence France-Presse. “One female passenger is pregnant. We took her immediately to the hospital but she is OK now.” He said the asylum seekers were spotted near a beach after their boat sank. “According to their testimony, they were pushed back by the Australian navy and immigration after they were interrogated. They said they were on their way to New Zealand.”

The Australian government refused to confirm or deny the operation, in line with the strict military secrecy imposed on its entire anti-refugee program. By repelling boats and refusing to consider any claims for refugee status, the government is also violating the international Refugee Convention, which recognises the right to flee persecution and apply for asylum without being punished for doing so.

The operation occurred amid an ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. Thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants were stranded at sea when the governments of Burma (Myanmar), Thailand and Malaysia emulated Australia by pushing away their boats.

After a public outcry, Malaysia and Indonesia agreed to assist the asylum seekers and provide shelter for up to a year. However, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that at least 2,600 dehydrated and starving refugees were still adrift at sea.

Abbott has bluntly declared that his government will not accept any of the Rohingya or Bangladeshis caught up in the catastrophe. Under Canberra's “Operation Sovereign Borders” regime, asylum seekers attempting to enter Australian waters are turned back by the navy, or forcibly removed to their country of origin.

Significantly, the Obama administration this week backed the Abbott government's stand. Anne Richard, the US assistant secretary of state for population, migration and refugees, said resettling Rohingya asylum seekers in other countries would entice more to leave their homeland.

“Resettlement is not the solution for most refugees on Earth,” she declared on Monday at the end of a three-day visit to Malaysia. “The most important solution is people don't have to leave their country in the first place.”

Richard said the only answer was “peace and stability and citizenship for the Rohingyas in Rakhine state,” despite the Burmese regime’s long record of refusing them any legal status or basic rights.

At a regional meeting in Bangkok on May 29 to discuss “Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean” the Burmese delegation made clear that it has no intention of alleviating the plight of the 1.3 million Rohingya. In fact, the meeting ended without mentioning the word Rohingya, in line with Burmese demands.

This week’s belated reports about the refugees who nearly drowned off Landuti raise further questions about how many other boats have been turned back, or foundered at sea trying to evade the Australian naval blockade.

The commander of Operation Sovereign Borders, Major General Andrew Bottrell, told an Australian Senate committee on Monday that 18 boats had been turned back since the Abbott government took office in September 2013, an increase of three since information was last provided in January.

The general refused to provide the committee with any details. Bottrell reiterated the false claim that secrecy was needed to deny “operational information to people-smugglers”—the term that successive Australian governments have used to demonise those involved in organising refugee boat voyages.

At the same time, Bottrell admitted that boats were still trying to reach Australia. “Despite the results achieved under Operation Sovereign Borders to date, people-smugglers continue to try to take advantage of vulnerable people by convincing them to get on boats to Australia,” he said.

One of the boats “turned back” carried 46 Vietnamese asylum seekers, who were returned to Vietnam on April 18 on board the Australian naval landing ship HMAS Choules. For the first time, Bottrell revealed that their refugee claims were rejected after “screening” interviews at sea that lasted only between 40 minutes and 2 hours.

Immigration Department secretary Michael Pezzullo testified that the interviews were long enough to ensure that none of the asylum seekers’ claims met Australia’s protection obligations under the Refugee Convention. This is a sham because the convention requires individual assessments, with rights of appeal.

Pezzullo further claimed that the Vietnamese

government had given “a level of assurance” that “there would not be any retribution for their illegal departure from Vietnam,” but admitted that Australia had not monitored their treatment since their return. In other words, the Refugee Convention’s core ban on governments returning asylum seekers to face the danger of persecution was flouted.

Bottrell and Pezzullo disclosed that the refugees had been secretly detained on the warship for almost a month, having been intercepted on March 20, and offloaded in the Vietnamese port of Vung Tau on April 18. Pezzullo rejected a suggestion by Labor Senator Kim Carr that the group was effectively held on an Australian “prison ship.”

Pezzullo insisted that the warship could not be labelled a prison ship, “by any commonsensical or reasonable definition,” but how else could one describe imprisonment on a military vessel? Last year, 157 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees were crammed in a warship’s windowless hull for almost a month in attempt to dump them back in Sri Lanka or southern India.

The Labor Party’s objections are purely tactical. When in office, it also sought to “stop the boats” by sending naval ships to intercept vessels, introducing “fast track” onboard “screening” interviews and transporting refugees to barbaric detention camps on remote islands.



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