

Australian government tacitly admits payments to “people smugglers”

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In statements to the media yesterday, Prime Minister Tony Abbott again refused to deny allegations that Australian officials paid six so-called “people smugglers” \$US5,000 each in May to return 65 refugees to Indonesia against their will. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, who had earlier denied the claim, have now reverted to the same position as Abbott. The government’s stance can only be taken as a tacit admission that it has been caught out engaging in actions that are flagrantly illegal.

Indonesian police are investigating the allegations, which legal experts believe could be violations of Australian, Indonesian and international law. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has told media that it has independently verified the accusations.

The opposition Labor Party, which hopes to benefit from the scandal engulfing the government, has formally requested that the auditor-general investigate the alleged payment. The Greens are moving a motion in the Senate, the upper house of the Australian parliament, instructing the government to table any documents relating to payments made aimed at stopping refugees from reaching Australia.

The Abbott government has attempted to deflect the growing public attention by virulently denouncing Indonesia. In comments to the *Australian*, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop declared that “Indonesian boats with Indonesian crews are leaving Indonesia with the express intention of breaching our sovereignty, facilitated by illegal people smuggling syndicates.”

The allegation, however, which Abbott and his ministers refuse to deny, is that Australian authorities paid to have 65 people illegally transported to Indonesia. Indonesia’s foreign ministry spokesman,

Arrmanatha Nasir, said on Saturday that if the claims were true, “it will be a new low for the way that the Australian government is handling this issue... This is endangering life. They were in the middle of the sea, but were pushed back.”

Abbott’s defenders in the media have asserted that even if criminal acts were committed, they were for the right reasons. Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of the *Australian*, wrote today: “If Australians did make any payments such as this, they were probably trying to save people’s lives in a desperate situation at sea.”

In fact, the refugees allege that the Australian navy intercepted them in international waters as they were en route to New Zealand. They reported that Australian authorities paid the six crew members a total of \$30,000, destroyed the original boat and supplies, forced the refugees onto two smaller, lower-quality boats with only minimal food and fuel, towed them toward Indonesia and set them adrift.

After one boat ran out of fuel, the 65 people from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar were compelled to cram onto the remaining vessel, which was wrecked on a reef near a remote Indonesian island. The refugees, whose lives were placed at risk by the actions of the Australian government, claim that they had to swim for 90 minutes to reach land and were rescued by Indonesian villagers. (See: “Australia: Tony Abbott’s government accused of paying ‘people smugglers’”)

The incident may only be the tip of an iceberg. A “senior intelligence source” told the *Daily Telegraph* that the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) “has been engaged in covert disruption and intelligence operations which may have involved such payments.” The source implied that it would have been an ASIS agent who paid the crew, telling the newspaper that “the navy doesn’t have authorisation to do such things

nor do they sail around with safes full of US dollars in them.”

In comments last Friday, Abbott also appeared to point to the involvement of the intelligence agencies. He declared that “there are all sorts of things that our security agencies do, that they need to do to protect our country, and many of those things should never be discussed in public.”

The entire policy of “border protection,” enforced by successive Liberal and Labor governments, is a criminal operation. Year after year, in violation of international law, refugees are being systematically blocked from exercising their right to claim asylum in Australia. Ample evidence exists that Australian personnel have been ordered to do nothing as boats sink at sea, leading to the loss of hundreds of lives. Under the draconian regime of “offshore processing,” asylum seekers are detained in appalling conditions in prison camps on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Nauru and denied any prospect of ever being settled in Australia. Many thousands of men, women and children have been permanently traumatised by their treatment.

Abbott, in particular, has justified the brutal persecution of refugees on the pretext that it is the only way to “destroy the business model” of “people smugglers” who are paid by desperate asylum seekers to transport them by sea to Australia. He regularly asserts that his policy of “turn back the boats”—forcing asylum seekers to return to Indonesia—is the reason why there has been a decline in the number of vessels setting out for Australian waters.

However, if the Australian government is using its intelligence agencies to pay the “people smugglers”—whom Abbott has labelled “criminal scum” and “human filth”—to either not set sail or to take refugees back, its entire “border protection” campaign must serve other, unstated, political purposes.

Refugees have been the subject of a reactionary witch-hunt for more than a decade and a half. The demonisation of asylum seekers has developed in lockstep with the deployment of the Australian military to US-led wars and intrigues around the world. Anti-refugee xenophobia has been used, along with the fraudulent “war on terror,” to divert social tensions over declining living standards and to justify sweeping attacks on civil liberties.

The working class must take the sharpest warning from Abbott’s assertion that his government will “do whatever it takes” to “stop the boats”—that is, prevent asylum seekers reaching Australia. He represents a political establishment that is utterly contemptuous of democratic rights and increasingly acting without legal restraint. The entire “border protection” operation is run by the military behind a veil of what amounts to war-time secrecy.

As a crucial part of the struggle to defend its independent class interests, the working class must reject the chauvinist hysteria against refugees and uphold the fundamental democratic right of every person to live and work in the country of their choice, with full rights of citizenship. As for the Abbott government, it must be held to account for every act of criminality for which it has been responsible.



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