

Refugees rescued off West Timor after being dumped by Australia

Max Newman
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Local residents of Tablolong, a fishing village on the western tip of Indonesian West Timor, last Friday rescued 16 men who had been left at sea a week earlier by the Australian navy without enough fuel to safely sail to Indonesia.

Once again, as in previous cases of the Australian government offloading refugees onto wooden boats to transport them to Indonesia, the asylum seekers could easily have died.

On November 20, a boat carrying 16 asylum seekers had arrived off the coast of Christmas Island, a small Australian-controlled island in the Indian Ocean, only to be intercepted by a naval patrol boat and towed back out to sea. Christmas Island residents witnessed the operation, photographing naval personnel boarding the boat.

After the incident the asylum seekers vanished, only to reappear a week later near the Timorese coast. The Australian navy had offloaded them onto another small boat, named the Farah, that ran out of fuel, stranding them at sea. Villagers helped to bring the boat into shore.

Local man Daniel Lani told Indonesia's Antara news agency: "They were yelling for help ... we led them to land, then we contacted the local police." A local policeman reported that the refugees had enough food and water, but because they ran out of fuel "they could've died if they sunk or if no one found them."

On board the boat were 16 men fleeing from India, Nepal and Bangladesh, and one Indonesian crewman. They said the Australian navy gave them some supplies, a GPS and limited fuel and told them to sail north to Indonesia.

Bangladeshi asylum seeker Muhammad Anwar, 22, told Antara: "We were heading to Christmas Island in Australia. When we arrived, we were detained for four

days, and the boat we used from Jakarta was destroyed by Australian security."

Anwar said he had paid \$US5,000 to come to Australia, which is 18 months wages for an average Bangladeshi worker. "In my country there are many problems, everything is expensive, wages low, many killings," he said. "All I want in Australia is to make a living, and they didn't help."

The Farah is one of 10 "alternative transportation vessels," resembling Asian fishing boats, that the Australian government built in Darwin this year to forcibly return asylum seekers to other countries. People are paid to crew these boats to sail asylum seekers to Indonesia—a dangerous and illegal "people smuggling" operation by Canberra.

Australia's Liberal-National government claims to have "turned back" 20 refugee boats since late 2013, when it launched Operation Sovereign Borders, a military mobilisation to repel boats. In the name of "national security," however, it has clamped a wall of secrecy around the operations, in order to keep the details hidden from the Australian public.

This latest incident, directly witnessed by independent observers, sheds further light on the brutal methods being used, with the personal backing of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. When asked by journalists about the eyewitness reports, Turnbull said: "I can't help you other than to say that we do not comment on operational matters."

Hypocritically, the Labor Party's immigration spokesman Richard Marles asked Immigration Minister Peter Dutton to "provide an assurance that Australia is complying with its international obligations in respect of refugees." Successive governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, have sought to block entry to all refugees trying to reach Australia by boat, violating the

international Refugee Convention, which recognises the right to flee persecution and seek refuge without being punished for doing so.

The previous Labor government reinstated the “Pacific Solution” in 2012, reopening the isolated detention facilities on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island, where asylum seekers are incarcerated indefinitely. Moreover, Labor leader Bill Shorten ensured that Labor’s national conference this year dropped Labor’s professed opposition to Operation Sovereign Borders.

The potentially fatal journey of the latest boat further exposes the fraud, pioneered by the Labor government in 2012, that the “border protection” regime is driven by a desired to save lives at sea by stopping refugees undertaking perilous voyages in the hands of “people smugglers.” In reality, this policy endangers lives, first by refusing to allow people to seek asylum in Australia, and then by offloading refugees on the high seas.

Behind the phony pretence of “saving lives,” Australian governments have led the way globally in barring entry to desperate poor and working class people fleeing war and repression, and making asylum seekers the scapegoats for soaring unemployment and deteriorating social conditions.

An investigation by Amnesty International, published in late October, pointed to at least seven earlier instances in which Australia may have paid “people smugglers” to transport refugees to Indonesia under similar life-threatening conditions.

The report outlined the “modus operandi” of the “border protection” regime. First, the navy intercepts boats found attempting to reach Australian waters. Then the boat is boarded and the passengers subjected to verbal abuse, physical abuse and interrogation by the authorities before being placed in ill-equipped boats, typically with not enough fuel to reach their destination, and told to sail north to Indonesia.

The investigation provided evidence that in two incidents at least, the Australian authorities may have given incentives to the crews to sail boats back to Indonesia. In May, six crewmen were paid \$US32,000 by Australian officials. The following month, two crew members of an intercepted boat were separated from their passengers, then reappeared with two strange bags in their possession before sailing the refugees back to Indonesia. After the refugees demanded to see what

was in the bags, Australian officials ordered the crew not to open them.

Amnesty International also interviewed six people who had been turned back to Indonesia by Australian ships in five separate incidents between December 2013 and mid-2014. Although these testimonies were not as detailed as the two 2015 incidents, “they are consistent with the modus operandi of the May and July 2015 turnbacks,” the report stated.



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