

Australia: Refugees narrowly survive another boat disaster

By Mark Church
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Refugees aboard a stricken boat almost crashed onto rocky cliffs in stormy weather off Christmas Island, an Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean, on the evening of November 20.

The 79 asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Sudan and Pakistan were rescued thanks to the efforts of local volunteers and naval personnel, although the captain of the ship is missing after he was believed to have jumped overboard to avoid arrest by the Australian authorities.

The near-tragedy occurred almost a year after last December's smashing of a refugee ship onto the cliffs of Christmas Island in similar conditions. That disaster, involving a boat designated Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel (SIEV) 221, cost the lives of 50 asylum seekers.

As with the SIEV 221, the Australian government's Border Protection Command claimed that the latest boat arrived undetected, despite intensive surveillance of the waters between Australia and Indonesia.

The vessel was only officially reported after one of the passengers made a triple-0 emergency telephone call to a relative living in Australia. Marine Volunteer Rescue Service (MVRS) and Australian Federal Police rescue boats were launched at about 6 p.m. local time.

The MVRS crew, led by a local school teacher, an accounts manager and an electrical goods salesman, located the vessel only 30 minutes before it would have been dashed on the rocks. The volunteers, however, were not equipped to rescue such a large number of refugees and were forced to stay a distance away from the stricken boat.

The police rescue craft had to turn back, reportedly because it began to struggle under the conditions. A naval patrol ship arrived 20 minutes later, by which time the refugee boat was only 300 to 400 metres from the rocks. Some refugees were transferred onto the

naval boat while the rest were towed to safety.

The similarity between the two incidents exposes the continuing dangers facing asylum seekers trying to reach Australia as well as the inadequate measures taken by successive federal governments to ensure their safety.

The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the Liberal opposition led by Tony Abbott have engaged in an increasingly xenophobic campaign to block asylum seekers from reaching Australian shores. A large military, police and intelligence apparatus exists to prevent refugees from using more safe or legal methods to reach Australia. The result is that desperate refugees pay large sums to risk dangerous journeys across the Indian Ocean to Australia, where they face lengthy imprisonment under inhumane conditions.

The latest incident also occurred less than a month after 20 people died when a refugee boat sank off Indonesia. The loss or near-loss of refugee ships at sea continues to raise questions about whether the Australian government has an undisclosed policy of allowing refugee ships to sink to deter refugees from attempting to reach Australia.

On November 1, responding to the Indonesian sinking, Home Affairs Minister Brendan O'Connor told the media it "underscores the absolute dire need to put in the strongest possible deterrent" to stop refugees getting on boats to Australia. His remarks were another echo of those made by the previous Howard government's immigration minister, Philip Ruddock, at the time of the sinking of the SIEV X in 2001, resulting in the deaths of 353 people. Ruddock said: "It [the sinking] may have an upside, in the sense that some people may see the dangers inherent in it."

The latest near-tragedy has exposed flaws in the

official response to last December's disaster. The new Gemini police rescue vessel, which was put into service after the loss of the SIEV 221, was unable to handle the rough conditions around the island. A Border Protection Command spokeswoman claimed that the island's newly installed radar, another measure taken as a result of the 2010 disaster, had also failed to detect the refugee boat.

Similar claims about the failure of naval and aerial surveillance measures were made after the sinking of SIEV 221. Subsequent testimony from Sonia Radovanovic, who was Department of Immigration and Citizenship assistant director on Christmas Island at the time, indicated that the Navy had known of the existence of the vessel.

It remains unclear if the Navy or other government agents were aware of the approach of the latest vessel but it is difficult to understand how the aerial, naval and intelligence forces deployed in the region could have missed the ship.

That no major overhaul has taken place in the past year to prevent another disaster on the island speaks volumes about the callous indifference shown by the Labor government toward the fate of refugees.

Official investigations into last December's disaster have only served to whitewash the role of the Gillard government. The major questions regarding why SIEV 221 was not detected and why Christmas Island did not have effective rescue facilities remain unanswered (see: "Australian parliamentary inquiry whitewashes refugee disaster"). Similar questions still surround the responsibility of the Howard government in the sinking of the SIEV X (see: "Australia: Ongoing conspiracy of silence over SIEV X tragedy").

The Gillard government has surpassed its predecessors in its hostility to the basic legal and democratic rights of refugees to seek protection from persecution. The Labor government remains intent on getting legislation through parliament to overturn a High Court decision that outlawed its so-called "Malaysian Solution," which would have involved the forced removal of refugees to Malaysia. The court ruled that the scheme flouted even the limited requirements of the 1951 Refugees Convention.

Labor is also pushing through amendments to its "people smuggler" legislation to retrospectively make it illegal to aid or support the unofficial movement of

refugees into Australia even if they are legitimately seeking asylum according to international law. Under these laws, crew members of refugee boats face imprisonment for up to 20 years. These measures make understandable the decision of the captain of the boat in the November 20 incident to jump overboard, almost certainly to drown.

Labor and the Liberals have sought to inflame the issue of refugees, both as a diversion from the austerity measures and worsening inequality being imposed on the Australian working class, and as a means to expand military and security operations in the highly strategic waters of the Indian Ocean. As a result of these policies, further refugee disasters are all but inevitable.

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