

Australian government forces refugee boats back to Indonesia

By Mark Church
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Over the past month, the Australian navy has forced or towed at least two asylum seeker vessels back to Indonesia under the Abbott government's so-called "turn back the boats" program. These highly dangerous operations, which could have led to the loss of lives, have also heightened tensions with the Indonesian government, which has publicly opposed the practice.

The policy was introduced last September by Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government after an election in which his Liberal-National Coalition sought to outdo the Labor Party in a bipartisan bidding war to adopt the most draconian anti-refugee policy. Both parties declared their determination to "stop the boats," effectively tearing up the international Refugee Convention, which recognises a basic right to flee persecution.

Intent on keeping its operations totally secret from the Australian people, the government has refused to even confirm that the two boats were forced back, let alone provide any details of the methods used. But according to Indonesian police, a refugee boat ran aground on Indonesia's Rote Island, about 500 kilometres northwest of Australia, on December 19 after being turned back. The vessel was carrying 47 people fleeing war-torn areas of Africa and the Middle East.

Interviewed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, passengers said they were intercepted on December 10. After three days of waiting, they were towed back toward Indonesia. Falsely told they were headed for Australia's Christmas Island, they were later dumped and left to fend for themselves. The boat ran out of fuel shortly afterward and drifted before beaching on Rote.

A second boat carrying 45 refugees was discovered on Rote's shore this week after being turned back on

New Year's Day. A disaster was only narrowly averted. Rote police chief Hidayat told the Fairfax Media: "They were rescued by the locals, because the boat engines were dead. The boat now is wreckage, near some reefs."

One of the refugees on board, Yusuf, told the media that the navy towed their vessel back toward Indonesia, after threatening the crew and passengers and also claiming they were being taken to Christmas Island. Asylum seekers who resisted were handcuffed and assaulted. "Some of our people, they jump in the water as a protest," he said. The boat was later cut adrift in rough seas in the middle of the night near Rote.

These incidents raise the obvious question: have other boats been lost at sea as a result of the government's policy? The fate of these two vessels only became known because they were reported by the local police on Rote.

In response to the revelations, Abbott yesterday vowed to continue to do "whatever is necessary" to "stop the boats." The Fairfax Media reported that the government had purchased oceangoing lifeboats in which to send back refugees whose boats were unseaworthy. Such a practice will only compound the likelihood of greater refugee disasters, with both Canberra and Jakarta washing their hands of the perils confronting asylum seekers, including women and children, set adrift on the high seas in lifeboats.

Already, over the past 12 years—beginning with the October 2001 SIEV X tragedy, in which 353 refugees drowned—many hundreds have perished in the waters between Indonesia and Australia. Successive governments in Canberra have refused to take any responsibility for the rescue of people seeking asylum in Australia, instead regarding deaths as useful deterrents to discourage refugees.

Abbott described the turn-back policy as “absolutely non-negotiable,” dismissing criticism from Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, who restated Jakarta’s longstanding public opposition to it. “I shall repeat this once again: Indonesia rejects and is against the policy of boat turnbacks because it’s not a solution,” Natalegawa told the media.

Abbott claimed that his government had no intention to “in any way trespass on Indonesia’s sovereignty,” but Indonesia’s Antara news service quoted a refugee who said one Australian ship travelled seven miles into Indonesian territory on December 13 before releasing his boat, which it was towing.

Last November, the Indonesian government refused to allow a refugee vessel to be pushed back, forcing the Abbott government to accept the boat after a two-day standoff that left asylum seekers dangerously stranded at sea.

The conflict over refugees has exacerbated the tensions that erupted two months ago after documents leaked by former US National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden revealed details of extensive US-Australian spying operations in Indonesia, including the bugging of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s phone calls. Amid public outrage in Indonesia, Yudhoyono suspended cooperation with Australia on intercepting refugee boats, as well as intelligence exchanges and military exercises.

In reiterating Indonesia’s rejection of the turning back of boats, Natalegawa said restoring relations would take some time, despite him holding intensive discussions with Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop in a bid to resolve the diplomatic crisis.

Nevertheless, Abbott yesterday declared that relations between the two countries were “very strong.” He pointed to comments by Indonesia’s military commander, General Moeldoko, who told the *Jakarta Post* that Australian Defence Force chief, General David Hurley, had phoned him to say that “Indonesia should understand if Australia drove back undocumented migrants.” Moeldoko was reported as saying: “I have agreed. Therefore, we don’t need to feel offended.”

Last night, however, Yudhoyono’s office backed his foreign minister’s rejection of Australia policy, saying turning boats back to Indonesia was “unhelpful.”

General Moeldoko said he had been misreported in the media.

Mahfudz Siddiq, head of the Indonesian parliament’s foreign affairs committee, warned that relations could worsen if Australia’s “provocative” action in sending back two boats was followed by the use of lifeboats. “This of course would not be accepted by Indonesian military, because it has been a defence issue and breaching water territory sovereignty,” he said.

“The situation is not helpful. It will get worse for our bilateral relations,” he told the Fairfax Media. “Unless the situation is handled soon, I fear it will deteriorate further after the spying affair and the end of our military co-operation.”

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