

HOW GOVERNMENT POLICY CAUSES DEATHS AT SEA

The Labor Government has tried to claim the humanitarian high ground, saying that its efforts to “stop the boats” are designed to stop asylum seekers making dangerous boat journeys and avoid deaths at sea. They are nothing of the sort.

In fact the government’s “deterrence” policies and its criminalisation of people smuggling makes boat journeys to Australia much more dangerous. Australia has been pressuring the Indonesian government to imprison and harass asylum seekers in order to “stop the boats”.

The Australian government has funded the upgrade of Indonesian detention centres and announced \$654 million in 2009-10 to work with Indonesia and other countries in the region to “combat people smuggling”. This means asylum seekers are forced to find a way to escape Indonesia as quickly as possible, and take the risk of getting on unsafe boats.

The fact that Australia impounds and destroys the vessels that bring asylum seekers here means they are more likely to be unseaworthy—as the crossing from Indonesia is the boats’ last voyage. The Labor government’s people smuggling laws are nothing but an attempt to compete with the Liberals to demonise refugees.

Almost all the deaths at sea have been caused by the appalling response of Australia’s search and rescue services, who have been told to prioritise stopping boats, not saving lives. Tony Kevin, author of *Reluctant Rescuers*, has written that the “rescue response is ad hoc and unpredictable... we act when we choose to”. As a result, “Hundreds of people have died when they could and should have been saved”.¹

As recently as June 5, 2013, at least 55 drowned due to the lack of response from the authorities. Although the boat’s engines were dead when it spotted on Wednesday, it was only 40 hours later that Border Protection Command alerted the search and rescue authorities. This is a continual pattern. In July customs waited over five hours after getting a distress signal before directing one of its ships to go to rescue an asylum boat. Nine people are thought to have died.

Processing in Indonesia

Unless there are alternative routes to permanent resettlement in Australia, asylum seekers will have no option but to take boats from Indonesia to Australia. If the government processed asylum claims directly in Indonesia and guaranteed resettlement in Australia, there would be no need for asylum seekers to risk boat journeys.

But successive governments have refused to systemically resettle refugees from Indonesia.

Between 2001 and 2009 Australia accepted just 532 people – an average of less than 60 a year. In recent years it has raised the level slightly, accepting

500 one year in 2010-11 and raising its intake to 600 in the last year.² But this goes nowhere near dealing with the number of asylum seekers stranded in Indonesia. The UNHCR says there are currently 8262 registered asylum seekers and 2078 recognised refugees in Indonesia.³

The government’s own Expert Panel recommended raising the refugee intake to 3200 people “from the region” a year to deal with this problem, but the government has failed to act. Its quota for refugees from Malaysia and Indonesia remains only 1850 a year (and the 1000 from Malaysia were signed up to under the ill-fated Malaysia Agreement).

But regardless of the alternative measures put in place, there will may well be asylum boats that continue to need to travel to Australia. For example boats also travel from Sri Lanka directly to Australia. All of them should be welcomed—and there are real measures the government could take if it was serious about saving lives, not about punishing people and trying to stop them coming.

1. Tony Kevin, “How authorities decide to rescue asylum seekers ... or not”, *Crikey* July 13, 2012
2. Senate Estimates, Legal and Constitutional Committee, 27 May 2013, p108
3. UNHCR website, <http://unhcr.or.id/en/unhcr-inindonesia>

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Ali Jenabi: smuggling refugees to freedom

People smuggler and refugee Ali Al Jenabi’s story is told in the book *The People Smuggler*, by Robin de Crespigny. Originally conceived as a film, Robin de Crespigny’s wonderfully written book projects Ali’s brave and authentic voice in a way that is captivating and compelling. It is a powerful story about some of the realities about who people smugglers are and why refugees use them.

