

*Dear Friend:*

**21 FEB 2002**

*Enclosed is a sample letter from NetIPR to the leaders of governments in commonwealth countries who going to attend the meeting in Brisbane late this month. Help write/fax letter to the marked Head of State and corresponding High Commission in Canberra. As time permits, please feel free to put the letter in your own words too. Recent correspondences, announcements etc, that come up in recent weeks are being updated with this communication.*

*- With warm regards, U Ne Oo.*

Head of State	Embassy in Canberra
<b>Rt. Hon Helen Clark MP</b> <b>Prime Minister of New Zealand</b> <b>Parliament Building</b> <b>Wellington New Zealand</b> <b>Fax: 64-4-473-3579</b>	<b>Ambassador</b> <b>New Zealand High Commission</b> <b>Commonwealth Avenue</b> <b>Canberra ACT 2600</b> <b>Fax: (02) 6273-3194</b>
<b>Hon. Jean Chretien MP</b> <b>Prime Minister of Canada</b> <b>80 Wellington Street</b> <b>Ottawa, KIA 0A92, CANADA</b> <b>Fax: <del>61-3-944-8900</del></b> <b>1-613-941-6900</b>	<b>Ambassador</b> <b>Canadian High Commission</b> <b>Commonwealth Avenue</b> <b>Canberra ACT 2600</b> <b>Fax: (06) 6273-3285</b>
<b>Sri Atal Bihari Vajpayee</b> <b>Prime Minister of India</b> <b>7 Race Course Road</b> <b>New Delhi 110011, INDIA</b> <b>Fax: 91-11-301-9545</b>	<b>Ambassador</b> <b>High Commission of India</b> <b>3-5 Moonah Place, Yarralumla</b> <b>Canberra ACT 2600</b> <b>Fax: (02) 6273-1308</b>
<b>Mr T.M. Mbeki</b> <b>President of South Africa</b> <b>Priavte Bag X 1000</b> <b>Cape Town 8000, South Africa</b> <b>Fax: 27-21-464-2217</b>	<b>Ambassador</b> <b>High Commission of South Africa</b> <b>Rhodes Places, State Circle</b> <b>Canberra ACT 2600</b> <b>Fax: (02) 6273-3543</b>
<b>Rt. Hon Tony Blair</b> <b>Office of the Prime Minister</b> <b>House of Commons</b> <b>London SW1A 0AA</b> <b>Fax: 44-20-7219-6864</b>	<b>H.E. Sir Alastair Goodlad</b> <b>British High Commission</b> <b>Commonwealth Avenue</b> <b>Yarralumla ACT 2606</b> <b>Fax: (02) 6273-3236</b>



# Net I PR

## Network for International Protection of Refugees

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21 February 2002

.. Dr U.Ne.Oo, Secretary

Sri Atal Bihari Vajpayee  
Prime Minister of India  
7 Race Course Road  
New Delhi 110011, India

Dear Prime Minister:

### Re: Australian Government intercepting of asylum-seekers on high sea

We are the members of the Network for International Protection of Refugees in Asia-Pacific, a non-government organisation based in South Australia. Our organisation has been greatly disturbed by the Australian Government intercepting of asylum-seekers who came to Australia by boat. Australian Government ordered the Royal Australian Navy to intercept and divert the asylum-seekers' boat before entering into Australian waters. The reports indicate the Australian Navy Frigates fire artillery shots and machine-gunned over the boat to frighten the asylum-seekers. The Navy also pushed asylum-seekers boat by force to turn the course. Such method by Australian government using its military forces to intercept and refoule the unarmed asylum-seekers not only violates the UN Refugee Convention to which Australia is a signatory, but also against the humanitarian principles. I therefore appeal you to personally raise this matter with Australian Prime Minister John Howard at the forthcoming Commonwealth Head of States meeting to be held in Brisbane to abandon the policy of intercepting and returning of asylum-seekers on the high sea.

Regarding the extreme danger faced by these asylum-seekers, there had already been sinking of two refugee boats during the blockade by the Royal Australian Navy. The public media reports on these incidents have been rather sketchy because the Australian government does not allow media access to those Navy personnel onboard. However, the Australian government mishandling of asylum-seekers is evident from the death of two women asylum-seekers at sea, as reported in the news on 10 November 2001 (enclosed). The news report indicate, during the intercept operation on the **Sumar Lestari**, two women – one in her mid-70s and another mid-40 – got drowned despite those women were wearing life jackets.

We therefore appeal you, Prime Minister of India, to urge the Australian government at the coming Commonwealth Head of Governments meeting, to abandon such dangerous and non-humanitarian policy to intercept and refoule asylum seekers on the high sea. Thank you for your kind attention to this matter.

Yours respectfully

21/2/2002  
for  
(Executive Committee)

Network for International Protection of Refugees

- Cc: 1. Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, United Nations New York, USA.  
2. Ruud Lubbers, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Geneva Switzerland



*The Australian 10/11/2001*

# Confusion of fire and fear in navy's report

Natalie O'Brien

THE confidential incident brief to COMAST refers to them as PIIs sailing an SIEV into the AS contiguous zone and the episode is reported as a safety of life at sea incident.

But what this confusing navy-speak really means is that a boatload of asylum-seekers was found heading for Australia when a fire forced them to jump overboard and two women tragically drowned.

John Howard yesterday took the rare step of making public an intelligence report describing what the

## 'This was a deliberate action . . . They all wore lifejackets'

Naval report

navy believes was a deliberately lit fire aboard the Indonesian flagged fishing boat Sumbar Lestari.

The brief to COMAST (the Commander of the Australian Theatre) Rear Admiral Chris Ritchie — which was released a day after Defence Minister Peter Reith flatly refused to release the intelligence report regarding the alleged children-throwing incident — says the boat-

people knew of the government policy and had done everything possible to stop being returned to Indonesia.

The boat was spotted by a Customs vessel and HMAS Wollongong was called in to intercept it and board it.

Navy reports say the boatpeople threw pieces of the boat overboard and that they had set up barricades to stop personnel coming aboard.

It also said that when navy personnel did get on deck they discovered the boat was on fire in the midships' hold.

"Boarding party officer attempted to extinguish fire, which had taken hold and a drum exploded and the hold erupted in flames," the brief said.

"As the fire exploded the PII panicked and rushed to the starboard side and the vessel listed 15 to 20 degrees."

Some of the boatpeople jumped into the sea and others were helped off by navy officers. Two women wearing lifejackets were found a short time later floating and unconscious with no pulse and could not be revived.

The report concluded the fire was deliberate and the exploding drum was "indicative of an attempt to prevent the boarding party from extinguishing the fire".

"That this was a deliberate action by the PII is reinforced by the fact they all wore lifejackets."

*The Advertiser 10/11/2001*

## Government 'acts like Goebbels'

A FORMER chief of the Australian navy has accused the Federal Government of acting like Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels in its handling of defence and refugee issues.

Retired Vice Admiral Sir Richard Peek said the Government had muzzled defence forces over what was happening

with asylum seekers and deliberately was keeping the public in the dark. "Under the current rules the services generally are completely muzzled and treated rather in the way the German population was treated by Dr Goebbels in World War II - not allowed to say anything in public," he told ABC radio.

The Advertiser 10/11/2001

## Two Asylum Seekers dies as vessel torn apart

By MICHAEL MADIGAN  
in Canberra

A CONFRONTATION that has left two women asylum seekers dead began to go seriously wrong at 6pm on Thursday.

The Sumbar Lestari - a wooden vessel flying an Indonesian flag - had sailed into Australian waters in defiance of navy warnings.

Suddenly, some of the passengers among the 162 people on board - 30 children, 24 women and 108 men - began tearing their boat apart.

The Australian Customs vessel Arnhem Bay had seen the boat an hour earlier 63km north of Ashmore Reef heading south at 9km/h.

About 5.35pm the Arnhem Bay was close enough for sailors to issue a blunt threat.

Passengers were told they faced months in an off-shore detention centre and the crew up to 20 years

in jail. But the vessel did not stop.

At 6pm the vandalism began. Passengers began, throwing fuel and water overboard along with parts of the boat they had ripped up. The crew of the nearby patrol boat HMAS Wollongong received permission to board and at 6.10pm with the Sumbar Lestari nearly 2km inside Australian waters a six-person boarding party got ready to act.

### **‘An attempt to intimidate us’**

At 6.20pm the first sailors aboard were confronted with barricades. Overcoming them, they encountered a fire in the midship hold which they tried to extinguish.

But the fire had taken hold and a

fuel drum in its path exploded, the hold erupting in flames.

The asylum seekers had moved to the bow and some were jumping into the water.

When the drum exploded, many panicked, rushing to starboard causing the vessel to list up to 20 degrees.

By 6.40pm the boarding party had helped about 40 passengers off the crippled boat and then escaped themselves with fire threatening to engulf them.

With at least 20 people in distress, HMAS Wollongong and Arnhem Bay plucked the helpless from the water - including a woman in her mid-70s and another, unconscious, in her mid-40s.

Both, who had been in the water about 30 minutes, received CPR for about 30 minutes before being declared dead. By 7.20pm, with all



passengers recovered, the Wollongong reported the Sumbar Lestari had sunk.

On board the Wollongong, sailors helped the rescued people before setting course for Ashmore Reef where a plan for removal of the bodies will be developed.

There are now about 340 people moored at Ashmore Reef with a further 220 on Christmas Island and another 65 on Cocos Island.

The defence minute and accompanying cable said the fire had been deliberately lit.

"It is not possible to know at this time if anyone was trapped in the burning vessel," the report said.

Prime Minister John Howard, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock and Defence Minister Peter Reith

were told about the incident on Thursday night.

Mr Howard yesterday ordered the navy report on the incident be made public. "What I'm going to do on this occasion is I am going to require that the report that I have received be made public so that if there are any subsequent corrections then people can't come around and accuse me or any of my ministers of manipulating the facts," he said. "What it represents is an attempt to intimidate us," he said.

Opposition Leader Kim Beazley said he was saddened by the tragedy. "I note those tragedies today and the reports of them, and I'm saddened at the thought that two more people have died as a result of this ignominious trade," Mr Beazley said.