

Case of siev-x (suspected illegal entry vessel x- unknown) in australia

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In the early hours of October 18 2001, around 1: 30 am (GT), an unnamed, 19-meter vessel, later dubbed SIEV-X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel X-unknown), under the endorsement of alleged people smuggler, Abu Qnessai, departed from Bandar Lampung, south Sumatra, sailing to Christmas island. Onboard were 421 people- 10 refused to board and the remainder were forced at gun point (according to survivor accounts) by Indonesian officials. Before heading to Christmas island, the boat stopped near the islands of Sunda Strait where 24 Mandaean passengers disembarked the vessel- doubting its seaworthiness- leaving behind 397 passengers. A day later one of the boat's engines stall and within an hour the situation immediately deteriorates causing the boat to sink, claiming the lives of 353 people.

A few days later, the first international report that the boat has sunk appears on CNN. Survivors of the tragedy are taped giving their emotional testimonies with many families weeping and emotionally breaking down. Najah Muhsin was a young mother who survived this tragic event. She said that ' when we were brought to the boat, we were told that we would be transported to the main ship, we found this to be untrue. We felt like meat on meat (like sardines)' She also reported that ' people had not eaten since Wednesday so that they do not throw up.' This account surfaces a troubling, inhumane act committed cowardly by people smugglers. She also described the brutal way her son died. She quoted that, ' the waves kept washing me and my son dragging him under and over until the milk started coming out of his face (nose or mouth).' He was only eighteen-month-old. Only one member of her family survived.

Ahmed Hussein was another survivor of this horrific tragedy. He was a tearful man. Based on his testimonies, ' wherever you look you see the dead children like birds floating on the water, those who survived 22 hours in the water saw the dead bodies of women and children with cuts from nails on the boat and with scars from where the fish were biting at them in the water and saw blood.' His account gave a strong imagery of the appalling scene they had to witness. However, he later noted about something oddly strange. He quoted that, ' the people on the top deck of the boat, as it was rocking before capsizing, saw 2 large ships, they thought that they would be rescued, none of them came to the rescue, when night came, the two ships turned flood lights and projectors on the people, one felt as if the light was so close that it was next to him (when the night came), we were very close to Australian waters.' According to him, the Indonesian fishing boats that rescued them told them that the ships they saw were Australian border protection ships.

According to Hussein, '(when) I asked them how they knew that we were here, they said that they had seen our luggage and this is why they came looking for survivors. They also told us that they never go this far to fish because of the sharks and whales in this area.' What is oddly strange about this is that how can luggage wash at shore so far so quickly? Could they have been notified by the Australian ships that shone their lights at them and never bothered to rescue them that previous night? There were initially around 120 people who survived the sinking of the boat, could have the number of casualties been reduced if the Australian boat rescued those who

were clinging to few debris on the surface of the ocean? Many questions still remain unanswered.

On Tuesday, 23rd October 2001, Prime Minister John Howard states that the disaster has nothing to do with Australia because the boat sank in ' Indonesian waters.' This statement was later reported to be false and that the boat sank in international waters that were under the surveillance of the Australian government. So, is Australia's hands clean of this devastating disaster? No.

According to Australia's Jakarta correspondent, Don Greenlees's October 24 report: ' Australian authorities had been monitoring the departure of the boat people from Indonesia. Unaware of the tragedy at sea on Saturday, search and rescue officials in Australia issued an overdue notice on Monday morning (22nd October).'

The sinking of SIEV-X sent a frightening deterrent message to all asylum seekers, ' If you try to smuggle yourself into Australia, you will die trying. This message was felt clearly as asylum boats temporarily seized action. This turning point caused him to win the 2001 election campaign as well as his campaign to stop SIEVs coming.

However, questions still linger in many people's minds: if Australia already knew about the departure of the doomed SIEV-X vessel, how much more did they really know about the departure of the boat? Australia needs to know about the boats that are coming to its territories, however, the cruel, inhumane acts of coward and neglect should be avoided by all Australian

authorities. As well as using this as an excuse to deter any asylum seekers into Australia, Australian authorities need to use this case as a way to improve the way they treat boat people. It is utterly disgraceful that Australian authorities would watch a deteriorating situation and do nothing but wait. Wait for other people to clean up the mess they executed.