

extra

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Lost and forsaken

These people were among 97 who were on a boat that vanished between Indonesia and Australia six months ago. Their families are devastated that no officials seem to care what happened to them.



Peter FitzSimons

How Malcolm Turnbull trumped David Oldfield



Marty Wilson

Mums need to end their conspiracy of silence

The boat that vanished

A ship with 97 people on board left Indonesia for Australia 175 days ago but there has been no contact with it since, writes **Natalie O'Brien**.

SHAFIQA HAMID last spoke with her brother Abdul Hai Rahmani on November 13 last year. He, his cousin Abdul Wadud Rahmani and friend Zeiaullah Sediqi were on an Indonesian boat about to set out for Australia.

In that conversation, her brother told her the boat was due to leave in 15 or 20 minutes.

"He has called me from the boat and told me that he feels a bit sick and that there are many families with children," says Hamid, who now lives in Germany.

Abdul told her he had been staying in Jakarta while waiting for the boat to be arranged and had given her the Indonesian mobile phone number of Pakistani people smuggler Mohammed Ali, who arranged his trip.

That was the last she heard of him. She tried to make inquiries but was told that "he is probably in Australia now and that he is also accepted".

Hamid has since tried calling Mohammed Ali, but the number has been disconnected.

Today will be 175 days since there has been any contact with them and the 97 people thought to have been aboard that boat.

The Sun-Herald first raised the alarm about the missing boat in December, after worried relatives began calling advocates in Australia trying to find out if it had arrived. Those on the boat had promised to phone when they reached Christmas Island. The Department of Immigration gives all new arrivals access to phones to let their families know that they are safe.

Kareem Othman, who lives at Blackett in Sydney's north-west, has been waiting for news of his brother Ahmed Hadadd Mohammed Othman. He has rung every detention centre in Australia. His brother, 43, who is married with four children, was last heard from on the same date as the others.

Also desperate for news is Umm Hamed, the mother of 17-year-old Hamed Ebrahimi from the Daykundi province of Afghanistan, who was also on the boat.

Every few weeks, she emails this newspaper.

"I really worry about my son ... he is just 17 years old and he is so young. I can't help crying please help me," she writes.

"Life was bitter for me. I cry day and night. Please help me.

"Any information that you have the fate of them tell me.

"Whether their boat sunk?"

Azita, an Iranian woman now living in Melbourne, has been waiting for her childhood friend Mohammed Rezai. He, too, told her he was on his way to Australia and leaving on November 13. She says he was to call her when he arrived at Christmas Island. The call never came.

From what *The Sun-Herald* has been able to establish, it seems the boat had a mix of Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers. The stories are consistent regarding the last time the asylum seekers were heard from, November 13, and the names of the smugglers involved: Lais from Algeria; Anwar Makasar from Indonesia; an Iranian called Ali Kurdi or Ali Hamid; and three middlemen from Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Chotay, Abdul Sendi and Ismail.

Sydney lawyer George Newhouse wrote to Minister for Home Affairs Brendan O'Connor, asking for help on behalf of the families. O'Connor wrote back, saying "neither Border Protection Command nor the



Desperate ... Kareem Othman's brother Ahmad was on the boat that disappeared on its way from Indonesia to Christmas Island. Photo: Jacky Ghossein

Australian Maritime Safety Authority have any information relating to a venture that matches the details provided in your correspondence".

His office did not offer to make any inquiries with other agencies or to raise the matter with Indonesia.

The United Nations refugee agency UNHCR has been similarly unhelpful. The office has not responded to requests for an interview or for help in raising the issue of the missing boat.

Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young says she is troubled that after six months there is still no updated news from Australian or Indonesian authorities. She says this would undoubtedly cause anguish to the family members who already fear the worst. Ms Hanson-Young says the case showed the government "cannot have it both ways on its approach to asylum seekers".

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I really worry about my son ... he is just 17. Please help.

Umm Hamed, mother

"The Prime Minister has repeatedly said there must be a regional answer to a regional problem. For that to happen with the problem of people movement, especially of those seeking asylum, cases like these need full and rapid responses from Australian authorities together with our regional neighbours. Buck passing cannot be used to simply suit authorities at the time."

Asylum-seeker boats, known to the Customs and Border Protection Service as suspected irregular entry vessels (SIEV), usually take between two and four days to reach the waters around Christmas Island from Indonesia.

Government statistics show that there was a boat that arrived in Australia on December 2 with 97 people on board and three crew. But it was not the same boat.

Investigations into the whereabouts of the missing people have included the circulation of photographs and names to the Department of Immigration, refugee

advocates and people still in detention centres throughout Australia.

The Sun-Herald made inquiries in Indonesia and also asked the International Organisation for Migration there to check if the missing people had been arrested or detained in Indonesia.

"Unfortunately those names are nowhere to be found," said Jihan Labetubun, the organisation's information officer.

In previous cases in which asylum seekers have been arrested in Indonesia, they have been able to get word to their families.

A source at the Red Cross in Australia says it is concerned. "These missing asylum seekers are mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, aunts and uncles, and their families – who are thousands of miles away – are understandably desperate for news of their fate."

"We hope the government and its agencies, such as the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australian Customs and Border Protection and the Australian Maritime Safety Authority will use all the resources at their disposal and take all the necessary steps to help determine the fate of the boat and its occupants."

The fate of the missing vessel was brought into focus in December after the shipwreck on Christmas Island of the boat known as SIEV 221, in which about 50 asylum seekers died. Many of their bodies were lost at sea.

There have been previous tragedies involving asylum seekers, including in November 2009 when a boat capsized 350 nautical miles north-west of Cocos Island and 12 people were lost at sea.

The worst-known tragedy at sea involved the

Some of the missing ... (clockwise from top left) Abdul Wadud Rahmani; Abdul Hai Rahmani; Hamed Ebrahimi; Ali Hussein Enayat Bakhsh; Zeiaullah Sediqi; Ahmad Othman.

death of 146 children, 142 women and 65 men in 2001 when their boat, known as SIEV X, sank inside the Australian aerial border-protection surveillance zone.

But there may be many more cases in which the fate of the boats and their passengers remains unknown.

Dr Leanne Weber from Monash University, a senior lecturer in migration policing says: "This is not the first time that boats carrying large numbers of asylum seekers have disappeared en route from Indonesia."

"In October 2009, a vessel carrying 105 Afghans failed to arrive in Australia. As far as I am aware, no trace of them has ever been found."

"Lives lost at sea in these circumstances are not only individual tragedies, they reflect the hidden costs of border controls."

Weber says in other parts of the world, such as Europe, those attempting to count the deaths of irregular migrants at sea have estimated that only one in three bodies is ever recovered.

Calls to the Customs and Border Protection Service about the missing boat have failed to shed any light on the disappearance. A statement from the service said it had not received any calls in relation to a missing boat. But the service said that even though a powerful over-the-horizon radar system had been installed on border protection boats, it was still "very difficult" to detect small, unregistered wooden vessels.

But a submission to a parliamentary inquiry now under way into the December shipwreck of SIEV 221, questions whether there has been a deliberate attempt to cast doubt on the ability of the radar system.

Tony Kevin, a former Australian diplomat who was a witness at the inquiry into the 2001 SIEV X tragedy and wrote a book about it, has suggested that maritime officials have tried to cast such doubts.

"It suggests to me that there are people still in the system, as there was before, that don't care about what happens to the boats unless they arrive," Kevin says. "If they don't arrive they don't have to worry about it. It is a totally immoral position. We have the technology to monitor these boats, but we are only going to use it selectively."

Jawad Hazara, an asylum seeker advocate and blogger who has been co-ordinating family efforts to find the missing people, has lost hope of finding them alive.

He has also been involved in the search for the 105 Afghans on the boat that went missing in 2009 – nothing has been heard from them either.

Hazara says as time passes and there is still no news, "theories that they have been arrested or shipwrecked, or whatever, fade away".

"Based on past experiences, I believe they sank in international waters.

"That is why there is no trace of them."

