

4 May 2013

The Hon. Brendan O'Connor
Minister for Immigration & Citizenship
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Dear Minister

Re: Howard Government's questionable figures on the numbers of asylum seeker boats that allegedly went missing in the year 2000

I am writing to ask if your department holds any substantive evidence that three asylum seeker vessels travelling towards Australia from Indonesia went missing without trace in March-April 2000.

I own and operate the public interest website sievx.com and have been researching asylum seeker drownings at sea since 2002. I have gradually formed the view over many years of research that SIEVX in October 2001 was in fact the first mass drowning event of asylum seekers on route to Australia. However, the Department of Immigration often made the claim back in 2000 that there were three asylum seeker vessels that went missing on the way to Australia with an estimated 360 to 380 lives lost (see enclosures).

Despite my best efforts I have not been able to find any convincing evidence to support these claims that three vessels carrying more than 350 people in total disappeared without trace in early 2000. There have never been any published interviews with relatives of the alleged drowned asylum seekers who went down on these alleged missing boats. This is in stark contrast to the boats that have gone missing in recent years where family members of missing asylum seekers draw public attention to their loss.

Ghassan Nakhoul in his book *Overboard* describes the Howard government's haste in declaring these boats missing as 'a wishful sinking fantasy' and describes how he (Nakhoul) was challenged at the time by one of his most reliable sources from the Arabic-speaking community regarding the veracity of the claims that the boats from early 2000 were actually missing. Nakhoul quotes his source as saying:

'Suppose that a couple of hundred of boat people really drowned while trying to get here... Why haven't we heard anything from the community... Believe me... if something like this happens it'll be a big mess here. There will be wailing and mourning all over the place.' (Ghassan Nakhoul, *Overboard*, Dar Meera, 2011, pp.119-121)

A statistical analysis of mortality on asylum seeker voyages to Australia supports the hypothesis that these alleged missing boats are indeed a fantasy (see mortality table enclosed). This table shows quite clearly that if indeed there were three boats that went missing in early 2000 with upwards of 350 lives lost then the mortality rate for that year would eclipse all others. I believe it is significant that the 'Report of the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers' published last year contained a table of the Number of Deaths and Missing Persons at Sea from October 2001 to June 2012 which included reference to the missing boats of 2009 and 2010 but which did not include reference to the alleged three missing boats from the year 2000. If there was good evidence to support the claim that more than 350 people went missing on three boats in the year 2000 and were presumed drowned then it follows that the Expert Panel would have started their table from March 2000 and not October 2001 (see Expert Panel table enclosed).

The theory that the three alleged missing boats in the year 2000 were a 'wishful sinking fantasy' is also supported by the fact that later in the same year (December 2000) the then Minister for Immigration Phillip Ruddock, declared

another two boats had gone missing with all aboard presumed drowned. Both boats later arrived and the Minister retracted his assessment that mass drownings had occurred (see enclosures).

In the interests of clarity, transparency and public accountability I would be very grateful if you could check DIAC's records to determine if there is any reliable independently sourced evidentiary basis to the claims made by the Howard government that three asylum seeker vessels disappeared without trace in March-April 2000. Has the Department received many (or any) requests from family members of people who allegedly lost their lives on these missing boats? If there were enquiries did these reach a threshold level where you can confidently assert that on the basis of probability these boats actually existed and disappeared?

Thank you for your help in anticipation.

Yours sincerely

Marg Hutton

Enclosures:

'More than 250 Boat People believe drowned', DIMA Media Release, 13 April 2000

<http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/20000413DIMAMediaRelease.html>

Tony Wright, '220 boat people feared drowned', Age 12 April 2000

http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/20000412_Age.html

Andrew Clennell, 'Hopes fade for missing boat people', SMH, 13 April 2000

http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/20000413_SMH.html

Brendan Nicholson, 'Hundreds die tied up to hulks', Age, 23 July 2000

http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/20000723_Age.html

Marg Hutton, 'Mortality on Attempted Irregular Boat Voyages to Australia', sievx.com, 3 May 2013

<http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/Mortality.pdf>

Marg Hutton, 'Drownings on the public record of people attempting to enter Australia irregularly by boat since 1998', sievx.com,

<http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/DrowningsTable.pdf>

'Number of deaths and missing persons at Sea from October 2001 to June 2012', Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers (p.75)

http://www.sievx.com/articles/miscellaneous/2012/expert_panel_on_asylum_seekers_full_report.pdf

'Up to 163 Boat people feared drowned en route to Australia', DIMA Media Release, 13 December 2000

<http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/20001213DIMAMediaRelease.html>

Andrew Clennell, 'Not our job: no search as 160 boat people lost at sea', SMH, 14 December 2000

<http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/20001214NotOurJob.html>

Andrew Clennell, 'Minister's report of 500 deaths premature', SMH, 18 December 2000

<http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/20001218MinistersReportsPremature.html>

'Possible drownings highlight dangers of illegal travel', DIMA Media Release, 22 December 2000

<http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/20001222DIMAMediaRelease.html>

Answer to Question on Notice re Refugees: Boat Sinkings, Hansard, 6 February 2001

<http://www.sievx.com/articles/background/QoN-3241-20010206.pdf>