



On the ground with the West Papuan asylum seekers

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By Corey Bousen, Editor of Torres News (Pictures by Damian Baker)

The Howard government's efforts to dehumanise the issue of "boat people" were seen to their full effect yesterday when 43 West Papuan asylum seekers fleeing from Indonesian oppression were quickly rounded up by Australian authorities hell-bent on preventing the media from covering their arrival on remote Cape York after five days at sea.

After the West Papuans were spotted by authorities, a 32 km "no fly-zone" was immediately established surrounding the region where the refugees landed. Fortunately, as our helicopter pilot had checked special aviation notices along with the weather earlier in the day, we were able to twice fly over the refugees and their boat while taking photos and then land because we didn't know about the newly enacted restrictions. Our pilot says he would never have flown us down to the asylum seekers' landing site had he known about the restrictions.

While I attracted the attention of two police heading towards our helicopter, *Torres News* photojournalist Damian Baker made a covert dash up the beach, but was prevented from approaching the refugees by a third police officer. The Queensland police officers, who were also from our home base of Thursday Island, about 200km north of the landing site, wouldn't say much, but were quick to pass the buck to Australian Customs as the "lead agency" preventing us from speaking to the refugees.

We asked the police what they would do if we approached the refugees, who were about 50 metres away. After some consideration, we were told we would be arrested. When pressed on what charge, after some further consideration we were informed that it would be for "failing to following the directions of a police officer."

After secreting his camera's primary memory card in our helicopter, Baker said he was going to make a dash towards the refugees. I asked him not to do that because I didn't want to face subsequent legal bills that could prove onerous for a weekly newspaper of our modest size.

We can report, however, that the Papuan refugees all appeared to be in good health after their

five-day ordeal: they were all able to get up and move away from the view of our camera after being instructed to do so by the Quarantine and Customs officials keeping a close eye on them. We're told that the asylum seekers' landing site about 30km north of Weipa was exactly where they were planning to come ashore. This was a great job of seamanship and navigation, given the antiquated state of their outrigger and the tricky weather conditions they faced.

As an aside, during our trip down to the landing site we also spotted an illegal Indonesian fishing boat 56 kilometres south of Thursday Island, the crew of which was obviously just heading back out to sea after camping out on the mainland. So while the authorities were able to quickly locate and detain 43 asylum seekers, they didn't appear to be too concerned about the illegal fisherman who, I must say, were obviously enjoying their time in Australia given their big smiles and enthusiastic waves at our helicopter. We used our chopper's radio to immediately report our sighting of the Indonesian fishing boat to our friends at Customs.

Thanks to the *Cairns Post* for paying for our interesting helicopter ride and a double, one-fingered salute to the Commonwealth Government and its bureaucratic minions who were unable to prevent us from getting the pics of the asylum seekers and putting human faces to the plight of these refugees fleeing Indonesian repression.

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