

On 22 October 2001 world news services reported that a boat carrying about 400 asylum seekers headed for Australian shores had sunk off the coast of Java, Indonesia. 353 people drowned. The refugees, mostly from Iraq but also from Iran and Afghanistan were hoping to reach Christmas Island, a small island off the coast of northwest Australia. The conditions under which this tragedy took place have subsequently been the subject of an Australian Government inquiry, the findings of which are inconclusive at best.

However, this was not the first time that such a boat had sunk trying to make this journey. On 26 August of the same year 438 people, mostly Afghan refugees, were rescued by a passing Norwegian freighter as their poorly equipped ferry sank. What followed has been described as one of the darkest chapters in recent Australian history.

Rather than providing shelter to these clearly desperate people the Australian Government refused the Norwegian ship (The Tampa) the right to dock in Australian waters. A diplomatic and humanitarian stand off ensued as conditions on the Tampa worsened. The situation was only resolved when 49 troops from the Australian SAS boarded the Norwegian Ship and took control. The Australian Government's domestic approval rating soared as Prime Minister John Howard declared that "these people will never set foot on Australian soil". That the majority of "these people" were proven in time to be legitimate asylum seekers and that large numbers have since settled, however precariously, in Australia seems to matter little, for the damage has been done.

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/engasa120092002>
<http://sievx.com>