

Tired of refugees, Australia moves to bar the door;

One of the region's richest and largest nations, it is now being strongly criticized for turning its back on those in need.

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Australia has a long tradition of immigration, dating to the 18th century, when it was used as a dumping ground for boatloads of British criminals.

It is about the size of the continental United States but has a population of only about 19 million - about 7 percent of the U.S. total.

So why is this country, **one** of the **richest** in the Asia-Pacific region, fighting so hard to keep out **one** cargo ship of **refugees**?

Prime Minister John Howard sparked a diplomatic wrangle with Norway and Indonesia after refusing a Norwegian ship permission to enter Australian waters with its cargo of about 460 **refugees**, mostly Afghans, who were picked up Monday from a sinking Indonesian ferry.

Yesterday, the **refugees** sweated out a fourth day on the deck of the Norwegian ship off **Australia**'s Christmas Island, their fate uncertain.

"We simply cannot allow a situation to develop where **Australia** is seen around the world as a country of easy destination" for asylum seekers, Howard said in explaining his decision.

In May, the government estimated the cost of dealing with unauthorized arrivals would reach \$127 million a year by 2002.

While **backing** Howard's tough stance, the opposition Labor Party has accused him of playing up to voters who are increasingly unhappy about the rising tide of asylum seekers. Elections take place in November or December, and Howard is trailing Labor in most major opinion polls.

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Surveys of people calling Australian talk-radio shows to discuss the impasse indicate that nearly 80 percent support Howard. But the government also has been **strongly criticized** by human-rights groups for its harsh treatment of asylum seekers, who are held here in detention camps, sometimes for years.

The attitude toward accepting new immigrants has undergone wide swings in **Australia**.

The so-called White **Australia** policy to keep out Asians and other non-Europeans was passed by the Australian parliament in 1901, and was not abolished until the 1960s.

However, since the 1970s there has been a **large** influx of Asians, including tens of thousands of Vietnamese and Cambodian "boat people" fleeing political persecution or poverty.

In recent years, the mood of the **nation** has been less welcoming. Despite its size, **Australia** receives far fewer asylum seekers than most other countries.

Marissa Bandharangshi, a spokeswoman for the U.N. High Commissioner for **Refugees** in **Australia**, said that in the first three months of the year, 2,386 people applied for asylum, compared with 21,054 in Germany, 15,000 in the United States, and 17,000 in Britain.

Some seeking refuge in **Australia** arrive by air, but most are believed to come on boats operated by illegal human-smuggling gangs.

The boats set off from Indonesia and make a perilous crossing to either Christmas Island, where the current **refugee** drama is unfolding, or to the northwestern tip of mainland **Australia**.

In the year that ended June 30, 2001, 54 boats carrying 4,141 people - increasingly from Afghanistan - arrived in **Australia**.

Yusuf Hassan, spokesman for the UNHCR in Islamabad, Pakistan, said the "humanitarian catastrophe" in war-torn Afghanistan had caused more than 400,000 Afghans to flee the country in the last 12 months. Many pay smugglers up to \$14,000 for passage to Europe or **Australia**.

In the last 18 months, **Australia**'s treatment of asylum seekers has drawn condemnation from international and local human-rights groups, churches, and even a bipartisan parliamentary committee.

The asylum seekers are held in detention centers until authorities establish whether they are legitimate **refugees** - a process that can take months or years.

Civil rights groups have compared the facilities to concentration camps, denouncing especially the detention of children and women, some of whom have been held for more than three years.

In recent months, detainees have staged riots and breakouts to protest conditions and the length of time taken to process their applications.

The government has tried a variety of plans to stem the flow of **refugees**, including agreements with countries such as Indonesia to coordinate efforts to stop the boats.

At **one** point, immigration officials even produced a video warning would-be migrants they would face natural hazards - including snakes, spiders and crocodiles - should they survive the perilous sea crossing to **Australia**.

Graphic

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PHOTO;

Associated Press

Prime Minister John Howard said he couldn't allow **Australia** to be seen as an "easy destination" for seekers of asylum.

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