

Julie Bishop tells Jakarta to fix borders

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Julie Bishop has delivered a stinging rebuke to Jakarta over allegations that Australian officials paid people-smugglers to turn a boat around, with the Foreign Minister suggesting Indonesia was to blame for failing to enforce sovereignty over its own borders.

In an exclusive interview with *The Australian*, Ms Bishop said: “I look forward to hearing the full results of Indonesia’s investigation of the people-smuggling crimes committed in Indonesia, including any breaches of passport and visa laws, and establishing whether the captains and crews of these boats are part of people-smuggling syndicates or are paid by them.

“The best way for Indonesia to resolve any concerns it has about Operation Sovereign Borders is for Indonesia to enforce sovereignty over its borders.

“Operation Sovereign Borders is necessary because Indonesian boats with Indonesian crews are leaving Indonesia with the express intention of breaching our sovereignty, facilitated by illegal people-smuggling syndicates.”

Her blistering response is likely to further strain the relationship between Canberra and Jakarta, and provoke a strong reaction in Indonesia where the government claims to be acutely concerned over its own sovereignty.

Ms Bishop’s intervention is also a circuit-breaker after Tony Abbott refused to deny or confirm the allegations that Australian border-protection officers paid the crew of a people-smuggling vessel to turn back to Indonesia. The Prime Minister is maintaining his resolve not to comment on the inner workings of the Coalition’s Operation Sovereign Borders in order to prevent people-smugglers adapting to Australia’s tactics.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi has sought a formal explanation of claims that six people-smugglers were paid \$US30,000 to reverse course last month.

Australian officials are believed to be shocked by the actions and words of Ms Marsudi, particularly the aggressive tone taken with the Australian ambassador to Jakarta, Paul Grigson.

They are understood to be confident that no Australian breached any law at sea, and that the Australians involved behaved with a primary concern for the safety of those involved.

There is a sense of frustration within the Abbott government over the apparent disinformation and public criticism which Indonesian officials are engaged in.

The Abbott government has been subject to relentless criticism for not stating exactly what happened in this incident.

The UN refugee agency has interviewed the boat's 65 passengers, who have backed claims by Indonesian police that the people-smugglers "received a payment" after they were intercepted in waters north of Australia.

Labor judges Mr Abbott's silence as a political miscalculation which has allowed it to score points on the government's policy strength of border protection.

Bill Shorten yesterday accused Immigration Minister Peter Dutton of "lurching from crisis to crisis". "It is now time for Mr Abbott to make it clear; has taxpayers' money ... been paid by the Abbott government to criminal people-smugglers or not? Australians deserve that answer," the Opposition Leader said.

Labor immigration spokesman Richard Marles said Mr Dutton was "either lying or incompetent".

Speaking in Brisbane, Mr Dutton said: "The government will always do the right thing by the Australian people and will act within the law and will act within our international obligations, but from day one we have not commented on specific operations."

Ms Bishop's comments to *The Australian* effectively highlight the role of Indonesian officials in co-operating with the breach of their own sovereignty. *The Australian* has many times been told by well-informed sources, not Ms Bishop, that Indonesian police are involved in people-smuggling.

If Indonesian police were corruptly involved with the boat in question it would explain much of the public huffing and puffing that has gone on subsequently.

Fairfax Media quoted an Indonesian police official as saying that Indonesia's concern was always for the safety of the individuals involved.

This seems to be inconsistent with the behaviour in this case of the Indonesian officials involved.

In past incidents the behaviour of Australian sailors and Customs officials intercepting boats at sea has been to protect lives. It has also been shown to be within the law.

In the past, the Abbott government has sustained criticism at home rather than reveal information embarrassing to Jakarta. It is likely the facts of this incident will eventually become known. They are unlikely to show Indonesian officials in a flattering light.

The furore and its implications for Australia's relationship with Indonesia threaten to overshadow the last sitting fortnight of parliament before the winter break, distracting from the passage of tax breaks for small businesses and the introduction of laws to strip suspected dual-national jihadists of their Australian citizenship.

Additional reporting: Jared Owens