

Time to tell the undiplomatic truth

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The key to the mystery of whether and what payments any Australians may have made to the Indonesian crew of an illegal people-smuggling boat lies not in Canberra but in Indonesia.

If Australians did make any payments such as this, they were probably trying to save people's lives in a desperate situation at sea.

Let's be quite blunt about all this and for a change tell the undiplomatic truth. Elements of the Indonesian police have routinely been corruptly involved in illegal people-smuggling ventures.

At the same time, it is hardly ever the case that the Indonesian navy, or any Indonesian agency, comes to the assistance of a distressed people-smuggling boat, no matter how close that boat may be to the Indonesian shore.

Indeed, a couple of years ago the Left in Australia indulged in an orgy of Australia-bashing because Australian sailors had been unable to save a boat which crashed on the shores of Indonesia itself, as though even the Indonesian coastline is somehow the responsibility of the Australian navy.

In counter-terrorism and counter-people-smuggling efforts in Southeast Asia, as in much police work around the world, money does sometimes change hands.

Police pay informers.

If the Australian Federal Police were ever to be able to pay for information which prevented a terrorist attack on Australian civilians, it would be well justified in doing so.

At the same time, it is not always possible for responsible governments to disclose all this publicly, especially when a treacherous and dangerous situation may be playing out even as comment is requested.

If there is a communications lesson out of all this for the government, it is that the “neither confirm nor deny” response, the response that says the government won’t discuss operational matters, is probably the right response, at least initially, in absolutely all conditions.

But the villain here is not the Abbott government. Even in the incident in hand, the Australian personnel involved were attempting to save lives and to stop an illegal people-smuggling venture which, if it had succeeded, would certainly have seen a revival of the people-smuggling boats, with all the deaths at sea and disaster for Australia’s immigration program that entails.

It remains the case that stopping the boats is not only a signal achievement for the Abbott government, but profoundly serves Australia’s national interests.