Culture clash on a stormy sea

Tim Lindsey and Jeremy Kingsley

INDONESIAN fishermen have been arrested, jailed and their boats burned. But they keep coming. They damage and deplete our fisheries, and the size of the problem is staggering.

One of the largest illegal fishing boats captured last year had more than 600 tonnes of fish in its holds. And despite the Tampa crisis, sinking boats, the Pacific Solution and mandatory detention, asylum-seekers keep coming from the near north, too.

The Howard Government’s aggressive policies have cut the numbers using Indonesia as a jump-off point from 4175 in 1999-2000 to only sporadic arrivals last year. But they haven’t stopped the arrivals completely, and they never will.

Our northern boundaries are vast and largely uninhabited. There are thousands of islands, many uninhabited and ideal for hiding small boats, as pirates have known for centuries.

Our surveillance fleet intercepted more than 600 fishing boats crossing our porous borders in 2005, but no one thinks that this tally is anything more than a fraction of the total.

The problem is persistent because the waters to our north have a complex history that ignores modern borders. There have always been boats from Asia visiting Australian seas.

Buginese sailors from Indonesia have come south hunting sea cucumber, known as trepang, for centuries. Aboriginal communities once existed in South Sulawesi, and Indonesian words are still part of Aboriginal languages. Historical links and ancient patterns of trade are not easily erased.

Our legal system is prepared to tolerate some traditional fishing in Australian waters, but ruthless regional fishing conglomerates exploit this, using poor Indonesian fishermen as proxies.

Some of the fishing boats intercepted use traditional methods, but others have sophisticated GPS equipment and hi-tech nets. Some don’t know they have strayed into prohibited seas; others do so quite deliberately.

When Indonesian fishing boats are caught, the losers are the local fishermen and their families. Boats are burned and families lose livelihoods and plunge into debt, devastating whole villages. The big companies find another boatload of poor fishermen to exploit.

Crushing Indonesian sailors and their families does not always do much to stop illegal fishing.

SIMILARLY, Australia’s aggressive and punitive policies on asylum-seekers may slow the flow, but they also hurt desperate asylum-seekers fleeing persecution and political suppression.

It is easy to forget that of 421 passengers on the SIEV X, 353 drowned.

Remember the Tampa? After long detention in harsh conditions, most of its passengers have been accepted as legitimate refugees.

So, if harsh policies are hurting the wrong people, what should be done instead?

The first step is to accept that some ships will keep coming, regardless of what we do. A more sophisticated policy mix is needed, one that recognises links between our peoples and avoids brutalising people in leaky boats but that punishes exploitative fishing companies and organised gangs.

The key will be to work more effectively with regional security forces. Arrivals fell dramatically after we began cooperating with Indonesian police to focus on the people-traffickers after 2001.

The Australia-Indonesia security co-operation agreement being negotiated needs emphasis on coastguard issues as well as deeper intelligence and security co-operation on transnational crime in our region.

Whichever way you look at it, close co-operation with Indonesia will be part of any solution to illegal immigration, smuggling, piracy and illegal fishing.

And that needs Indonesia-literate Australians. Unfortunately, our Asian studies funding is evaporating and Indonesian language courses are collapsing across the country.

Memo Canberra: How does that help protect our northern borders?

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