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Australian navy turns back asylum seeker boat to Indonesia after loading three extra people

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- UPDATE: Asylum seekers combined onto one boat for turn-back
- Ex-Manus workers report beatings, rapes of asylum seekers

The asylum seeker boat that allegedly deterred Tony Abbott from meeting Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono this week has been found in Indonesia after the Australian navy reportedly put three extra people on board and then turned it back.

People on board the wooden boat have told authorities in Indonesia that the Australian navy loaded two Albanians and one Indonesian onto the boat before sending it back to a remote island in eastern Indonesia.

There is no further information about the extra passengers.

A spokesman for Immigration Minister Scott Morrison would not comment on operations. However, responding to early speculation that two men loaded onto the boat may have been those who were treated medically on Christmas Island in February, the spokesman quoted earlier information that those two men had already been transferred to Nauru.

A statement released by the Indonesian navy late on Monday night said 18 asylum seekers — 16 Indians and two Nepalese — had set out on April 26 from South Sulawesi. They were intercepted by Operation Sovereign Borders vessels on May 1 near Ashmore Reef, an Australian territory in the ocean west of Darwin.

The asylum seekers told the Indonesian naval officers the Australian vessels then escorted their wooden boat closer to Indonesia where, on Sunday, the three extra men — two Albanians and an Indonesian — were put on board.

The wooden boat was then left on the ocean and directed towards Indonesian territory. It ran out of fuel at an island in Indonesia's remote eastern province, where the men were stranded, then found by Indonesian navy personnel.

It is the eighth confirmed Australian turn-back operation since the first boat arrived on December 19.

In early February, about 34 refugees from Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal were returned in one of Australia's unsinkable orange lifeboats. Those people said that two of their number had been ill and had been taken away by the Australian navy.

Mr Morrison confirmed that two people had been taken to Christmas Island with health issues, one at least for "urgent medical treatment with a heart condition".

No further information about the two has been released.

Mr Abbott had made plans to accept the invitation of the Indonesian president to meet on the sidelines of an "open government" conference in Bali this week to try to smooth tensions over recent spying revelations.

However, Mr Abbott cancelled those plans late on Friday, citing the pre-budget period and the release of the Commission of Audit. The Indonesian president's spokesman Teuku Faizasyah said Dr Yudhoyono accepted that explanation at face value.

The arrival of this boat, however, raises the question about whether the real reason for the cancellation was to save embarrassment on both sides.

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