

Three years on, asylum horror refuses to fade

EXCLUSIVE

DEBORAH CASSRELS

"It was like a horror movie, but I haven't seen anything this bad in the movies. I still don't believe I was there."

Speaking from his Brisbane home, Iranian refugee Yaser Naseri is recounting his ordeal after surviving one of the worst asylum-seeker disasters, in which more than 200 people drowned en route to Christmas Island.

It was the morning of December 17, 2011, when an overcrowded boat sank 40 nautical miles off east Java. Three years on, Mr Naseri, one of 47 survivors, remains haunted by the tragedy. Marking it today, he says the men, women and children who died — mainly from Afghanistan and Iran — deserve to be remembered.

Some drowned while asleep. Others escaped the vessel only to be enveloped by 5m-high seas. Etched in Mr Naseri's mind are harrowing images of frantic passengers begging for help. Then a macabre scene as he pushed through dead bodies in his struggle to stay afloat.

"Everyone was screaming, calling God, Jesus, Allah, begging for help, crying and wailing," Mr Naseri says. "People couldn't swim. Parents were watching their children drown in front of them. After a few hours there were many dead bodies. I could swim, that's the reason I'm alive. And I wasn't sleeping."

Last year the ABC reported that Australia and Indonesia were aware of the sinking about eight hours after it occurred. It said the official incident timeline, which Fairfax obtained under Freedom of Information laws, revealed that Indonesia's search and rescue agency had asked the Australian Maritime Safety Authority to coordinate the rescue response but AMSA refused.

On December 19, after Jakarta asked again, AMSA dispatched naval and Customs resources. But it was too late.

Mr Naseri, 32, still suffers nightmares, with images of lifeless faces and bloated bodies flashing before his eyes. "I cannot go to the beach or a pool without it flashing back. I cannot forget it."

Australian policy changes, including turning back asylum boats and offshore processing, are responsible for stemming the flow



Iranian refugee Yaser Naseri in Brisbane this week. 'My question today is: why did I survive?'

GLENN HUNT



AMY ROSSBACH

Asylum-seekers cling to the wreckage of a doomed boat

of boats, he believes. The main deterrent was the fear of ending up in Nauru or PNG.

Despite that, people-smugglers remain on standby, he says, as 10,500 asylum-seekers and refugees stranded in Indonesia desperately await resettlement. "Most people have problems in their own country and cannot

return," Mr Naseri says. "They will wait in Jakarta. There are always desperate people who want to go on boats, so they risk drowning. If the boats start again there will be more drownings because the smugglers don't care, they just want the money."

Mr Naseri flew to Brisbane from Jakarta in June after receiving

refugee status last December. He counts himself lucky to be among the last refugees to be granted permanent protection. Yet he's optimistic his family in Iran will be allowed to join him.

In a tough stance which he claims is based on stopping the boats, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison has banned refugees who applied through the UN agency in Indonesia for resettlement after July 1.

Three years on, the tragedy is never far from Mr Naseri's thoughts. "I was totally lost and scared. I was shaking. Some were crying and looking for their loved ones," he says.

About five hours later, he was one of 34 who swam to a passing fishing boat. Reaching land, the group begged immigration officials and police to search for more survivors. Three days later, only 13, bedraggled and barely alive, were rescued. They reported hundreds remained at sea.

The survivors, most of whom

had lost family, were transferred to a Surabaya detention centre. "We were locked in a room, people were crying, shouting, mourning, beating their heads against the wall. Children had lost parents. One Iranian man lost 11 family members, his wife and kids, and his brother and kids. He was beating himself, he went crazy."

A political refugee who had feared for his life, Mr Naseri tried five times to reach Australia by boat. He was arrested before boarding all but the ill-fated 2011 passage for which he paid \$US6000. "My question today is: why did I survive? Sometimes I feel guilty. I have a responsibility to do something good with my new life."

Currently studying English, Mr Naseri, an industrial electrician, aims to graduate in business. Relishing the freedom he only dreamt about in Iran, he says: "It was not easy to get here. I love Australia, you have a beautiful country."

From page 8 The Nation
The Australian, Wednesday, December 17, 2014
theaustralian.com.au