

More Trouble over Subs for Najib
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By John Berthelsen

INDONESIAN Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa has directly repudiated comments last week by Australia's opposition that the relationship between the two countries had become "dysfunctional" over the asylum seeker issue.

"I disagree with that," Mr Natalegawa said after meetings with Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr in Jakarta yesterday.

"The asylum issue is only a third dimension in our bilateral relations, and I'm certainly not going to allow this issue to define the nature of our relations," Mr Natalegawa said. Shadow immigration minister Scott Morrison said on Friday that, "the relationship ... has become so dysfunctional that we find ourselves in the situation where we bear the full burden [of rescuing asylum seeker boats]".

Mr Morrison's comments came after Opposition Leader Tony Abbott claimed he would improve relations and make the country his first overseas visit if he is elected prime minister next year.

But Mr Natalegawa said the two countries had been getting the relationship right, and that it was "practically impossible for me to over-exaggerate the importance we attach to [it]".

"I think it's in a good way. I think it's fair to say it's in a very robust and a very healthy state," Mr Natalegawa said.

Asked if he wished Australia would sort out its policy on asylum seekers to reduce the number of refugees waiting in Indonesia, he said, "we are past the stage of apportioning blame ... to any other single party".

Senator Carr also ridiculed Mr Abbott's claim that his first visit as prime minister would improve the relationship.

"It won't achieve a miraculous result that enables him to say the relationship's now so good I can start having the Australian Navy tow back refugee boats and let them loose in Indonesian waters," he said.

Mr Abbott's proposal to turn back asylum boats was briefly discussed in the meetings, Senator Carr said, and "both governments disagree with that approach".

Both leaders were keen to emphasise they had talked about more than just people smuggling, with subjects including regional co-operation over Burma and within ASEAN, the cattle industry, the response to disasters, infrastructure and ocean search and rescues.

Senator Carr said Mr Natalegawa had agreed it would be "useful to have more transparency" about West Papua, where the Indonesian government bans journalists and non-government organisations.

He also welcomed an announcement by Indonesia of more navy patrols in the Sunda Strait, and confirmed Australia was offering communications and other help to Indonesia to improve the performance of its search and rescue agency, Basarnas.

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