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Helen Clark proud of Tampa move

Tracy Watkins and Shabnam Dastgheib · 17:00, Aug 12 2011

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HELEN CLARK: Said this week that the decision to take the Tampa refugees was a highlight of her time as prime minister.

Helen Clark says New Zealand's decision to accept Afghan refugees from the container ship Tampa was one of her proudest moments as prime minister.

For one of those refugees, Mohammad Amiri, it was the most important decision of his life.

This month marks the 10th anniversary of a humanitarian crisis that played out in the Indian Ocean when Australia refused to accept a boatload of asylum seekers. The Afghan people had been plucked from a sinking fishing boat by the Norwegian container ship Tampa.

A three-day standoff sparked a diplomatic row between Australia and Norway and focused international attention on the plight of the refugees.

Mr Amiri now lives in Wellington. His parents and six younger siblings joined him in January – some of the 253 relatives of the original Tampa refugees subsequently reunited in New Zealand.

Mr Amiri remains in regular contact with Tampa's captain, Arne Rinnan, whom he credits with saving his life.

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Miss Clark said this week that the decision to take the Tampa refugees was a highlight of her time as prime minister. "I've always thought it was one of the best decisions I ever made."

The prospect of New Zealand taking on the refugees sent "shockwaves and palpitations" through the bureaucracy, she says.

She never doubted it was the right thing to do – and her faith was borne out when public opinion swung in favour of the refugees once their stories were told.

"I personally think it showed the good heart of New Zealand."

In the years that followed, she has kept in touch with the Tampa refugees.

"I went to the Tampa reunions for years and years as prime minister. I still run across the Tampa families ... there's people who run stalls in

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