

# The case for freeing the refugees

**Refugees arriving in Australia without visas are fleeing persecution by some of the most brutal regimes in the world. But when they get here, they are locked up in remote and inhospitable detention centres surrounded by razor wire fences and with few facilities — what the Bishop of Perth has rightly called “concentration camps”.**

There they wait for months or even years while their applications are processed. Hundreds of children suffer the same fate. The result is often great psychological damage and suffering for many people who are fleeing torture and repression in their countries of origin.

To justify its cruel treatment of refugees, the federal government has spin-doctored a campaign of misinformation and vilification. Refugees have been depicted as “queue jumpers”, “criminals”, and accused of “sponging” off charities and the government.

Yet a massive report on the detention of asylum seekers in Australia, published two years ago by Australia’s Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC), found major human rights abuses. HREOC said that:

- Detention itself constituted a major breach of human rights. Most countries allow asylum seekers to live in the community while their claims are assessed. This was the system in Australia until 1989 when the Labor Government changed the rules.
- The way new asylum-seekers are initially assessed involves segregation in observation rooms, 22 hours a day, with almost no exercise, frequent room searches and little human contact. HREOC said this was similar to what had happened to many refugees just before they were tortured.
- The government’s system of “screening out” sees large numbers of genuine refugees prevented from even applying for refugee status and being quickly deported.

No wonder attempted suicide, hunger strikes and demonstrations are common. Asylum seekers have no idea how long they will be locked up and fear they will sent back to face



persecution or death.

In the detention camps, asylum seekers are not called by their name, but by a three letter code and number, like something out of Orwell’s 1984.

Since 1999, the government has refused to give most genuine refugees permanent residency, limiting them to three-year “protection visas”, so traumatised and persecuted people live with the fear of being sent back at the end of the three years.

It means they cannot bring their families to live with them. And they are denied English classes and other assistance to settle here properly.

Early in 2000, people around the world were shocked when TV images showed the Russian authorities injecting the distressed mother of a sailor from the Kursk submarine, to quieten her down. According to HREOC, asylum seekers have been repeatedly and forcibly injected with

powerful anti-psychotic drugs, simply to pacify them. Now the government wants to give untrained detention staff the right to do this at will.

Since management of detention centres was privatised to the American multinational, ACM, things have got even worse. Violence against any protest is common.

Refugees released from detention have been dumped in backpacker hostels with a few dollars and no government support. Charities supporting them have been threatened with loss of funding.

To prevent international exposure of Australia’s worsening human rights record, the government has now blocked UN human rights inspections.

We will all pay a terrible price if society tolerates such official brutality and human rights abuses. We must raise our voices and protest loudly to...

**Free the refugees!**

**We answer...**

# The myths about Australia's refugees

## **MYTH: Boat people are "illegal" immigrants**

**FACT:** It is absolutely legal to enter Australia on a leaky boat without a visa if you can prove you are a refugee. That is written into Australian law.

And the overwhelming majority of the people arriving in boats over the past few years have been granted refugee status by the government.

In 1999, 86 boats arrived carrying asylum seekers. On 26 boats, every single person was given either full refugee status or the government's new Temporary Protection Visa (TPV). On a further 29 boats, more than three quarters of asylum seekers got visas.

Of the 3740 people who arrived by boat that year, 2708 got full refugee status or TPVs; while just 703 were deported – less than 20% – and this number included many real refugees. Over 300 are still in detention.

Last year, 2945 arrived and two-thirds are still in detention. But of the 1114 arrivals about whom a decision was made, almost 90% got some kind of visa.

## **MYTH: Refugees are queue jumpers**

**FACT:** There is no queue. A queue is a place where we line up for something. Those who arrive first, are served first.

Refugees the government brings in are not the people who have waited longest in refugee camps. Nor are they, like patients at a hospital, chosen on the basis of the most urgent need. They are those the government believes will most easily settle into Australia.

There is a bias favouring those with powerful connections in their own country, and those who have some existing contacts in Australia.

This has nothing in common with a queue; it is far more like the old system on the wharves where labourers had to turn up every day in the hope of being picked; and where those given work most often were the strongest, and those with "contacts" in management.

## **What is a refugee?**

This is the official United Nations definition; written into Australian Law in section 3 of the Migration Act 1994.

**Refugees are persons who are outside their country of nationality or their usual country of residence and unable or unwilling to return to or to seek the protection of that country because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.**

For most of the world's refugees, there is no way of even getting into Australia's Special and Humanitarian Program. Persecuted Hazaras in Afghanistan cannot phone or send letters to the Australian Embassy, nor can they safely travel there and apply.

People in desperate fear of their lives do not have time to join a queue—even if there was one.

## **MYTH: Australia is facing a flood of illegal immigrants**

**FACT:** From July 1989 to January 2001, just 10,156 people arrived by boat without visas on Australia's shore.

By comparison, in 2000, nearly 5 million people entered Australia as tourists – that's more tourists every day than boat people in ten years!

Australia gets a tiny number of the world's 22 million refugees. Iran has two million, Pakistan over a million. In 1998, 57,700 people applied for asylum in Britain and 98,644 in Germany.

## **MYTH: Australia faces danger from criminals and terrorists coming illegally by boat**

**FACT:** This is pure hypocrisy. In fact, most of the proven war criminals who have come to Australia as refugees (and there are only a few) have come via the

government's official system, because it favours those with official connections.

Remember, too, that Phillip Ruddock offered to admit 200 former members of the South Lebanese Army. This army was financed and supplied by Israel as part of its occupation of southern Lebanon.

## **MYTH: People smugglers are creating the problem simply to make money**

**FACT:** So-called people smugglers are more successful than the government at bringing the most desperate refugees to the safety of Australia.

Oskar Schindler was a "people smuggler", and he too did it for money.

Meanwhile the government wants *business people* to buy their way in. All it takes is an investment of \$750,000 and some English language ability. Last year, 6,260 people got entry in this way.

## **MYTH: If Australia goes soft, we will be swamped with people seeking asylum**

**FACT:** Most refugees want to stay near their homes and wait for things to change. Only a small minority seek permanent resettlement in the west, and the vast majority of those prefer Germany, Britain and America.

## **Shouldn't we be solving the problem at its source?**

THERE would be fewer refugees if the west had not gone to war with Iraq in 1990; if the US had objected to its ally, Pakistan, building up the Taliban who now rule Afghanistan; and if the US had not backed Iraq's war against Iran in the 1980s.

Countries like Australia and America should contribute more to helping support refugees in other countries. Iran gets just \$12 per year from the United Nations to support each refugee; and Pakistan \$17.

But dealing with the problem at its source can be no excuse for locking up asylum seekers in concentration camps.

# Inside Australia's concentration camps

## Woomera

The camp accommodates 1700 people. It has 40 showers and 40 toilets. Each room contains 18 people with only enough room for them to sit on their beds. The rooms have no fans or air-conditioning and in summer the temperature got as high as 55 degrees.

In winter the temperature plummets but after 30 people use the showers there is no hot water.

At lunchtime the inmates queue for up to 2½ to 3 hours in the sun but lunch is only served for two hours. Those who have not been served are sent away. The rice they are fed is undercooked. Meat is served twice a week and is also served partially cooked. Almost all the food used in the kitchen is passed its expiry date. When they eat the guards taunt them.

To supplement their diet the inmates are allowed to work in the detention centre, cleaning, washing dishes etc. For eight hours a day, seven days a week, they are paid \$25. Some buy biscuits to feed themselves and their children.

At night there is a curfew from midnight and at random times between then and dawn the guards come round to shake refugees awake and ask for identification.

All this takes a toll, and sickness is rife within the camp. When the inmates ask for medical care or to see a doctor they are told to drink water and sometimes given panadol.

— from an interview with Afghan refugees

## What eyewitnesses say

This woman was required to wash her clothes every night, hang them up and wear them the next morning. Many detainees claimed that what we saw on them was what they possessed.

— Roger Price, Labor MP

I do not condone rioters or encourage hunger strikers, but I have always found that they genuinely riot about



## Deportation

**Tape was placed over his mouth and he was able to push the tape off with his tongue, and he was crying and he began to scream in the aeroplane.**

— Mandy McNulty, Immigration Agent, describing the deportation of an Algerian asylum seeker

something...

A hunger striker was flown with his three-year-old son to Juliet block [the Port Hedland punishment block]. It is dim, it is dark and there are locks on every door... The toilets were disgusting – filthy – as were the showers... They were kept locked up in these cells 23 hours a day.

— Roger Price, Labor MP

Crowded conditions and poor sanitation caused a diarrhoea outbreak affecting 40 people.

— news report about Villawood Detention Centre (Sydney)

In Curtin, department officials tell refugees that they are hated by Australians. They tell the refugees that Australians believe they are all fundamentalist Muslims and don't want them here.

— Dr Muhamed Al-Jabiri, refugee lawyer

Riot police and detention centre security broke down the doors, gassed the hunger strikers, put them in steel handcuffs and threw them like animals into waiting trucks to be taken away.

— Former Villawood inmate, Maqsood Alshams, describing how a non-violent hunger strike was broken up at Villawood

Bedding, food, treatment by the staff are all inhumane.

— Zeinab Al-Turkey, former refugee

I think we were in prison.

— Former detainee on Four Corners

These people did not know what was going to happen to them. In this respect it was much harder than, for example, working with somebody in jail.

— Kevin O'Sullivan, former ACM psychologist

The group's so desperate some sewed their lips together with cotton thread.

— news report about Villawood

He said to me, "You are animal, we will deal with you like animal."

— Naser Zuway, former detainee, Villawood

When the nurse come, I explain to her that I am pregnant, I am bleeding, I can't eat and I have this back pain. I can't sleep. I was crying – I told her, "Look at myself. I am dying. I need some attention." And she go – She didn't do anything for me.

— Former detainee, Villawood

# Why people become refugees

## Three bad changes to Australia's migration legislation since 1999

1. A **Safe Haven Visa** only allows refugees temporary protection during armed conflict in their homeland. It does not give them the right to apply for asylum if they still fear persecution once the violence is "ended".
2. **Temporary Protection Visas** entitle refugees who enter without proper documentation to stay in Australia for three years. After that, they have to reapply to determine whether they still face persecution. They have reduced access to social services, including English classes, and no family reunion.
3. Under the **Border Protection Act**, a person has to take all possible steps to enter or reside in the first country they have access to after they leave their own country. Countries like China are regarded as "safe" for refugees, despite the Australian government campaigning against China getting the Olympics because of its human rights record.

## Volunteer worker supporting refugees after release, WA:

I have met refugees from both countries [Afghanistan and Iraq] who have been beaten on their feet, whose brother, male cousin, father, son has been abducted and disappeared or shot, sometimes in front of them and one man whose three little children were murdered in front of him.

I have met young men whose father and brothers have disappeared, presumed murdered and whose mothers have found the money to ensure the safety of their last son.

I have met men who escaped to live in caves without food or water and men who have been imprisoned in caves with bodies and/or skeletons in an effort to break them.

I have met men who have had electrodes attached to their ears or scrotum and whose arms have been cut with glass. I have met village men who have resisted conscription or orders to kill their own, and educated men

whose crime has been to protest or to speak against injustice, all of whom have had to escape for their lives.

Many bear the physical evidence of inflicted injuries from beatings and increasingly the psychological pain of torture, humiliation, grief and loss are becoming obvious.

## Afghan refugee:

I'm from Kurdlar Kandy village in the Fizuli Region. I was one of the last ones to leave. At first, I thought that the soldiers outside my house were our own. Then I saw them start shooting at the houses and I knew I had made a terrible mistake.

I gathered my family and we ran for the car. When we were a little distant from our town, we stopped, looked back, and saw the entire village going up in flames. There was no resistance or any sign of defense anywhere. Everything has been destroyed. Even if our hometowns were freed tomorrow, we have nowhere to go.

# Join the campaign for refugee rights

This fact sheet was prepared by the Refugee Action Committee, Canberra and published in March 2001. We would like to thank HREOC, CARAD, Amnesty International, Dr William Maley, individual refugees and community activists for the material in this leaflet. Contact us for extra copies.

**CONTACT RAC:** tel: 0415 752 012; write LPO Box A287, ANU, ACT 2601  
email [refugees\\_act@hotmail.com](mailto:refugees_act@hotmail.com)  
or check out our new website [www.refugeeaction.org](http://www.refugeeaction.org) from March 10

## Please send me more information

Name .....

Address .....

Email .....

Home phone ..... Work phone .....

I would/would not like to be involved in campaign

I enclose a donation of \$..... (cheques to Refugee Action Committee)

Clip & post to: Refugee Action Committee, LPO Box A287, ANU, ACT 2601

## Our demands

RAC's focus is campaigning for political change to Australia's treatment of refugees. We have organised a public meeting to welcome refugees to Canberra, and a series of protests. We have links to refugee action groups in other cities.

Our demands include:

- All asylum seekers to be released into the community while their claim is being assessed, and the detention centres closed;
- The three-year protection visas to be scrapped, in favour of permanent protection for all given refugee status;
- Asylum seekers and refugees to be given access to English classes, the same social security allowances as permanent residents, and the same right to family reunion;
- Australia to readmit United Nations human rights inspectors; and
- An end to racism and the vilification of refugees by the government and other political parties.