

Building Our Future Together!

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET?

This sheet focuses on the breakdown of the international refugee protection system, which has led to over 7 million refugees being left for over 10 years in refugee camps with little hope for a normal life. It also looks at why refugees are forced to leave these camps in search of 'effective protection' and seek safety in other countries like Australia. It suggests how countries, groups and individuals can respond to build a better future for refugees.

Read this information sheet together with the personal stories in this kit to:

- Find out more about refugees
- lead a group discussion
- take action to help build relationships with refugees
- Download and share these and other resources: www.ncca.org.au/cws/refugees

WHO ARE REFUGEES?

- Most people have a mental picture of a refugee as a poor, homeless, uneducated person who decides to come to Australia for a better life. But the truth is very different.
- Refugees flee in fear of being persecuted due to their race, religion, nationality, gender or political opinion. Unlike migrants, refugees are forced to flee and cannot return home.
- Refugees are people like you and me that are targeted for abuse because of who they are or their beliefs. In danger from, or unable to be protected by, their own government, they are forced to flee to escape attacks, imprisonment, torture or even death.
- Many refugees have been tortured, imprisoned, raped or seen their family killed. Most have had to leave everything behind, including family and friends.

DURABLE SOLUTIONS?

Most people who flee persecution stay in their 'country of origin' and become 'Internally Displaced People' (IDPs) or cross borders in search of protection in a nearby state and become 'refugees'. What kind of durable solutions exist for refugees after they flee their country?

1. **Voluntary Repatriation** – refugees can return home if conditions back home change enough to make it safe for them to return.
2. **Local Integration** – when it is too dangerous to return home, refugees may be allowed to stay and live in the country to which they fled.
3. **Resettlement** in another country when none of the above options are available.

Questions: Which of these solutions do you think is the best? What would happen if this system broke down? Where would refugees go and who would protect them?

WAREHOUSING REFUGEES

Although this system sounds ideal, the reality for two-thirds of the world's 12 million refugees is somewhat different. Instead of being repatriated, integrated or resettled, they have been left in remote refugee camps and often forgotten by the international community.

The *US Committee for Refugees* now estimates that over 7 million refugees have spent longer than 10 years in refugee camps with little prospect of any solution.

Shelved Refugee Populations:

- Over the course of 25 years, two million Afghans have been in exile in Pakistan and Iran. Although Iran provided generous support at first, when the international community failed to properly assist, Iran withdrew much of its support and became increasingly strict, preventing refugees from working and confining them to camps.
- Half a million Burmese refugees have lived in Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia and India for up to 20 years. Most are confined to refugee camps and are denied the right to work and travel. They live in terrible conditions.
- Half a million Sudanese refugees are stuck in camps or segregated settlements that have been operating for 20 years.
- For 53 years, two million forcibly uprooted Palestinian refugees have lived in camps and urban slums deprived of their rights.

Source: *World Refugee Survey 2004*

How Many Did You Say?

Refugees and Asylum Seekers.....11.9 Million
Internally Displaced Persons.....23.6 Million
New Refugees and Asylum Seekers.....1.12 Million
New Internally Displaced Persons.....5.28 Million
Refugees Warehoused 10 years or more...7.35 Million

LIFE IN A REFUGEE CAMP

Picture fleeing your home with few possessions and arriving at a remote refugee camp just inside a neighbouring country's border:

- The Government or group who persecuted you may operate across the border and continue to harass you in the refugee camp you arrive in.
- You might find that the Government of the country you arrived in does not give you any legal recognition as a refugee residing in the country. You might live under the threat of being harassed by the local authorities as an 'illegal'.
- You may not be allowed to work and then you may be arrested or detained because you were forced to work illegally to support your family.
- The refugee camp you have been placed in may have a cholera or typhoid outbreak and you fear for your family's health.
- You may live in fear of being rounded up and deported back to the country that you fled.
- Discriminatory restrictions may prevent you from obtaining health care, housing and education.
- You may apply to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for resettlement only to realise that you may have to wait years for a place and suffer the injustices mentioned above (less than 2% of the world's refugees are resettled each year).

These are common problems for people living in refugee camps. They are also the reasons why many refugees try to leave the camps and find safer countries in which to seek asylum.

Questions: *What would it be like to flee your home and be stuck in a remote refugee camp? What would you do if you could not find effective protection in a camp or a durable solution?*

Read the refugee stories in this kit. There are more stories and resources on our website: www.ncca.org.au/cws/refugees

EFFECTIVE PROTECTION

Under international law, refugees are permitted to cross borders in search of asylum even without a visa. However, once they find protection, they must stay in that country. Yet, many refugees who flee their homes and cross into neighbouring countries often find these governments are unwilling or unable to offer 'effective protection'. In this situation, refugees are often forced to move on in search of a 'safe country'. This is why many refugees have made their way across vast tracks of open sea to Australia.



WHY THE BREAKDOWN?

In the 1960s and 70s, refugees were often the result of anti-colonial and national liberation struggles and regional states were often more willing to help them. Greater prosperity in newly-independent states and smaller refugees numbers also made the burden easier.

In the 1980s, however, refugee influxes increased and international aid declined as Western states became less interested in helping refugees fleeing Communist states. Many countries that were promised aid to shelter refugees were neglected after emergency periods subsided and media attention shifted. As refugee numbers increased and aid declined and unemployment and economic decline set in, political parties began exploiting nationalistic sentiment by demonising refugees as job-takers and illegal immigrants.

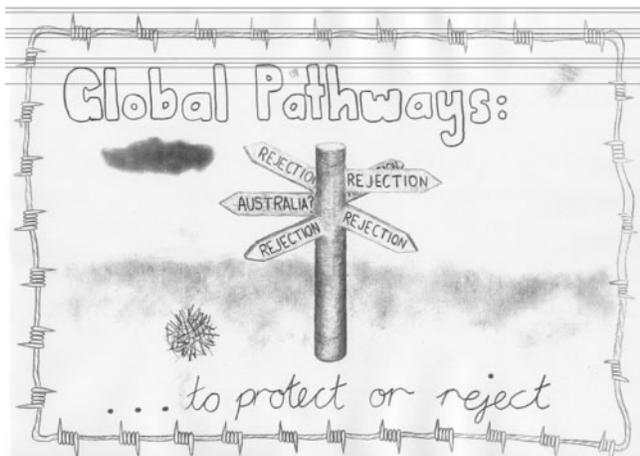
As protection broke down in places like Pakistan and Iran, refugees increasingly began to move in search of protection to developed countries, who responded with stricter border controls, rather than on resolving these underlying causes. This increased demand for people smuggling.

10 WAYS YOU CAN HELP:

1. Urge the government to provide more resources for those in refugee camps. In 2002, UNHCR had only \$US40 a year per refugee to provide protection, food, shelter, medical care, water, sanitation, education and community services.
2. Urge the government to make greater efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts.
3. Work for sustainable peace when peace agreements are signed.
4. Be informed, know the facts and inform others of world events that force refugees to flee. Call your state ecumenical council or the Aust. Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office to find out more.
5. Lobby politicians on legislation, human rights, conditions of refugee camps and detention. Read the Better Way (www.thebetterway.info), an alternative to the present detention system
6. Use talkback radio to have your say. For hints, see our website or "Instant Savvy - Talk Radio" at www.hootville.com
7. Join a support or action group. Contact your state ecumenical council for groups and ideas!
8. Make a contribution - financial, phone cards, housing, food, clothing & skills.
9. Be a mentor and friend to a refugee
10. Encourage others to participate and pray.

"A refugee's flight only ends when 'effective protection' is found"

- Erika Feller, UNHCR Department of International Protection



Katrina McNamee, Year 9, St Mary Star of the Sea 2003
Refugee Sunday Poster Competition Entry

HOW DID AUSTRALIA RESPOND?

As the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq intensified and refugee protection increasing broke down in countries like Pakistan and Iran, the number of refugees arriving without visas in Australia increased from around 1,000 to about 4,000 a year in the late 1990s. Although the numbers were small compared to Europe, which receives hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers each year, the Federal Government likened the situation to a 'mass influx' and campaigned on the issue of 'border protection'. The focus soon shifted to whether they had visas instead of whether they needed protection as refugees. Misleading official statements stated that they were migrants making a conscious choice to move in search of a better lifestyle rather than refugees forced to flee persecution. However, the Government's own figures show that it found 90% of all asylum seekers entering Australia without a visa for the three years to June 2002 were refugees who had fled persecution and had genuine protection needs.

Despite the small numbers arriving and the high refugee percentage, the government introduced harsh measures to prevent and deter people seeking asylum in Australia. These include: a restrictive refugee definition; airline fines; mandatory detention; temporary protection visas; restrictions on appealing asylum decisions; naval interception, forced removal and detention in the Pacific and denying welfare and work rights for asylum applicants.

The NCCA has called on the Federal Government to address the real causes of increased refugee flows instead of using expensive interception and deterrence measures that simply 'bottle-up' the problem and push the responsibility onto other countries. It has asked that more resources be devoted to addressing the root causes of refugee flows (conflict and human rights violations) and strengthening the ability of regional states to deal with refugee arrivals.

HOW ARE AUSTRALIANS RESPONDING?

All over Australia, however, people from different walks of life have responded to the plight of refugees in a very different way. Instead of fearing refugees, they have reached out and found both good friends and help:

"We've had 90 refugees on temporary visas living in Young for the past three years. Most of them have been working in the local abattoir. A study released by Sydney University has shown they have contributed more than \$2.5 million over 18 months to our local economy. For a small town like Young, it would be a huge economic loss if they were sent back. If the government was serious about helping country Australia, it would review these visas and make them permanent."

- John Walker, Mayor of Young in Central NSW

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

National Council of Churches in Australia – has more educational materials, plus statements, submissions to Parliament, briefing papers, policy documents and reports, see www.ncca.org.au/cws/refugees Also on our site:

- Read about the [Complementary Protection Model](#), which would provide protection for those who do not meet the strict refugee definition, but still need protection.
- Read about [The Better Way](#), an alternative to Australia's harsh mandatory detention system.

Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office: www.acmro.catholic.org.au – read the Catholic Bishops Conference statement on refugees and asylum seekers

Mercy Refugee Service: www.mercy.org.au

World Council of Churches: www.wcc-coe.org

Action by Churches Together Int'l: www.act-intl.org

Refugee Council of Australia has fact sheets, position papers, reports, submissions, an events page and key statistics - www.refugeecouncil.org.au

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission – has online study guide that covers children in detention and focuses on its recent report titled "A Last Resort". www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/children_detention_report/report/index.htm

UNHCR initiatives – to solve these problems: search www.unhcr.ch for the 'Agenda for Protection', 'Global Consultations', 'Convention Plus', or UNHCR 2004.

Human Rights Watch has a major report looking at Australia's treatment of refugees, detention and temporary visas. www.hrw.org/asia/australia.php

US Committee for Refugees' has the 2004 World Refugee Survey, a report on Australia's treatment of refugees and reports on internally displaced people in Afghanistan and refugees in Pakistan - www.refugees.org

The Witness Project For a comprehensive list of short videos you can watch online, visit: www.witness.org/



A Burmese refugee child shelters in the ruins of her house after soldiers destroyed their refugee camp

THE BURMA BORDER CONSORTIUM

For over 20 years, half a million Burmese refugees have lived in Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia and India. Most are confined to refugee camps and are denied the right to work and move from their camp. They live in terrible conditions.

For over a decade now, Christian World Service has been supporting Burmese refugees in Thailand through the Burma Border Consortium, which runs several refugee camps for 152,000 refugees on the Thai-Burma border.

"I was shocked. In January, 11,500 Karen refugees were moved to Mae La Oon camp. Only 2,500 thatched houses had been built. 500 houses were still needed for 2,000 families." - Charlie Ocampo, Manager of CWS International Programs, on his return from a 2004 visit to Mae La Oon and Mae Rama Luang refugee camps.

DONATE TO ASSIST REFUGEES:

Christian World Service
Locked Bag 199, Sydney NSW 1230
or phone 1800 025 101
or donate online www.ncca.org.au/cws

WHY REFUGEE AND MIGRANT SUNDAY?

You may have noticed that "Refugee Sunday" has been renamed "Refugee and Migrant Sunday". This broader focus allows us to take up the World Council of Churches' wider concerns on "uprooted people", which includes issues of "mixed flows", including people trafficked into forced labour or sexual servitude and the exploitation of vulnerable migrant workers. Given the strong Australian church and community concern for refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, however, the main focus will still be on refugees and asylum seekers. All of these groups are adversely affected by racism and xenophobia.

***"There is no greater sorrow
on earth than the loss of
one's native land"***

- Euripides 431 BC