



REFUGEES: THE FACTS

Who counts as a refugee?

The **1951 UN Refugee Convention**, which Australia has signed, defines a refugee as someone who has a **wellfounded fear of persecution** in their own country, because of their race, religion, nationality, or political or social affiliation. In other words, refugees are **ordinary people trying to escape war, persecution and horror**.

Where do refugees to Australia come from?

In 2013-14 Australia granted refugee visas to 11,016 people who were overseas and in need of protection. More than half were from just three countries:

Afghanistan, Iran and Burma. In the same year, 545 visas were granted to people who arrived in Australia by boat. The majority of these were from **Afghanistan, Iran and Sri Lanka**, places where people live in constant fear of violence, death and torture, and suffer from severe repression for their ethnic, religious, political, or sexual affiliation. Refugees are often fleeing war, or brutal regimes like the Taliban.

Are conditions really so bad in refugees' countries of origin?

Yes. People only become refugees as a last resort. Consider the most recent facts:

- **Afghanistan**: 2014 was the **deadliest** year yet for civilians in the war against the Taliban, with at least **3,188 killed** and 6,429 injured. Since the U.N. began tracking civilian casualties in 2009, a total of 17,252 civilian deaths and 29,536 injuries have been recorded. **Women, children, schools and clinics** are often targeted. Gross human rights abusers often hold public office.

- **Iran**: Thousands of people, including many **democracy activists**, were unjustly imprisoned following the illegitimate June 2009 Presidential election. Many remain behind bars. At least **9 political dissidents** have been **executed** since 2009. Torture of political prisoners is common. Members of ethnic and religious minorities are subject to brutal repression. Student organizations are often banned and their leaders imprisoned. Iran executes more prisoners than any country except China. In 2011, for instance, the Islamic Republic of Iran executed 660 people.

- **Iraq**: Violence kills or injures hundreds of civilians each month. More than **17,000 civilians died** from violence 2014. Government forces and armed militias continued to commit gross human rights abuses. Torture of prisoners is rife. Thousands of displaced people live in temporary settlements without access to clean water, electricity, or sanitation. Many are widows, who are forced into sex-trafficking and prostitution.

- **Sri Lanka**: **Persecution of ethnic Tamils remains ongoing**, with ethnic cleansing of Tamil farmland and fishing areas. Enforced disappearances carried out by the government have increased since the end of the civil war. The most recent UN report lists **5676 "outstanding cases" of enforced or involuntary disappearances** in

Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government has refused to cooperate with United Nations war crimes enquiries.

Why do refugees come by boat?

A boat is often the **only way to reach safety**. In war, or when persecuted by a repressive regime, refugees simply cannot get the travel documents they need in order to come by plane. The fact that refugees are ready to sell everything they have to buy a place on a treacherous ocean crossing shows how desperate they are. Refugees often cannot swim, and hundreds have died in the attempt to reach Australia by sea.

Is it legal to come by boat?

Yes. Under Australian law, **it is never illegal to apply for refugee status here**, no matter how you arrive.

Talk of 'illegal' or 'unauthorized' boat arrivals or 'illegal immigrants' is prejudicial and wrong in law. The Australian Press Council specifically recommended in 2009 that the media not use these descriptions of refugees.

What about people smugglers?

Refugees have **no choice** but to use "people smugglers". The people who actually crew refugee boats are usually impoverished Indonesian fishermen. Under current laws, many famous figures from the past would face prosecution as people smugglers, like **Oskar Schindler**, who saved more than 1000 Jews during the Holocaust. No one calls Qantas managers 'people smugglers', but they also take money to bring asylum seekers here by plane.

How many people come here seeking asylum?

Very few. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates there were 16.7 million refugees and another 1.2 million asylum seekers worldwide at the end of 2013. At the start of 2017 **Pakistan** hosted **1.3 million refugees** and **Turkey 3 million**. **Lebanon** had **1.1 million refugees** from Syria, equal to almost a third of its population. Even the exceptional number of boat arrivals in Australia in 2013, around 21,000, was equal to **only 9% of Australia's total annual migration** intake of 230,000 that year. Other Western countries receive far more than we do: in 2012 there were 83,400 new applications in the US and 64,500 in Germany.

How does Australia's refugee intake compare?

Australia takes **far fewer refugees** than other countries. In 2015-16, Australia made just 13,750 visas available for refugees, which will increase only to 18,750 over the next four years. Globally, Australia ranked 22nd overall for recognising and resettling refugees in 2014, and 27th on a per capita basis.

How many migrants to Australia come in as refugees?

Most new migrants here are not refugees. The annual refugee intake is currently around 7% of the places in

our overall permanent immigration program. In the early 1980s, refugee and humanitarian intake averaged 20% of immigration, creating the Australia we know today.

Aren't they jumping a queue?

No. In most countries from which refugees come, there simply is no queue, and **no way to apply** for refugee status. In **war zones**, access to embassies or UNHCR offices is impossible. The Australian embassy in Afghanistan does not even make its address public. There is no way to join any queue there. Nor is there any real queue in refugee camps. Most there will never be resettled: **less than 1% of the world's refugees are resettled each year.** At current rates resettling refugees from the war in Syria alone would take over 25 years.

Why don't they stop in some other country on the way?

Very few countries between Australia and the Near East or Sri Lanka or Afghanistan have signed the **Refugee Convention**, meaning there is no right of asylum there. In places like Malaysia and Indonesia that refugees come through, there are not even refugee camps—they must simply fend for themselves in whatever housing they can get. **Terrible abuses** have been recorded of asylum seekers in SE Asia: in March 2012, there were shocking revelations of brutality at a detention centre in Indonesia, with a 28 year-old Afghan asylum seeker **tortured and beaten to death** by guards. Anyone trying to escape persecution would choose to come to Australia if they could.

Is it true that many aren't genuine refugees at all?

No. The government tries to discredit refugees by claiming that they are not genuine, but the **vast majority** of boat arrivals are **found to have a genuine claim to Australia's protection.** Government figures from 2013 show that over 90% of boat arrivals were found to be genuine refugees. This is consistent with acceptance rates over many years of between 70 and 97%. This is despite efforts under successive governments to tighten the rules.

Why don't we just send them to some other country to be processed, like PNG or Nauru?

Australia has a **legal and moral responsibility** towards the small numbers of refugees who ask us for help. We are the wealthiest and most stable state in the region, and best able to help refugees. No other country can give them the support they need.

What happens to refugees once they've arrived?

People who arrive in Australia by plane and seek refugee status are allowed to live in the community while their claims are assessed. Only people who come by boat are locked up in detention, in line with Australia's mandatory detention policy. This double standard is cruel to refugees, expensive for the taxpayer, and in contravention of both the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which Australia has signed.

How many people are in detention?

As of May 2017, there were **2586** asylum seekers in detention including those on Manus and Nauru. On the mainland over 60% of detainees have been behind razor wire for three months or more. Almost 40% have been

detained for more than a year. Incredibly, Australian law allows for asylum seekers to be locked up for ever.

Are there any children in detention?

In February 2015, the **Australian Human Rights Commission** released a report on children in detention, titled *The Forgotten Children*. The report provided evidence of the negative impact that prolonged immigration detention is having on the mental and physical health of children being held in detention. In June 2017 there were still 43 children in detention on Nauru as well as others on Nauru outside the camps who have been found to be refugees.

What are the consequences of detention?

Detention further **harms** already vulnerable people and **breaks lives.** Refugees need support after the tragedies that have forced them from home. Indefinite detention only brutalizes them more. Suicide, hunger-strikes, and self-harm are common. Detainees are regularly driven to self-harm and mutilation, such as swallowing glass light bulbs. There have been **multiple suicides and attempted suicides** in Darwin detention centres and at Villawood. The contract between the government and SERCO, the company that runs detention centres, reveals clinical depression is considered a "minor" incident. The SERCO training manual shows that new recruits are trained how to beat detainees. In March 2012 a 29-year old refugee had to be hospitalized after being beaten by guards at Villawood.

What do the experts say about mandatory detention?

Mandatory detention has been **condemned by Amnesty International** Australia, leading medical and mental health experts, churches, and many others. Aspects of Australia's refugee processing have been ruled illegal by the High Court, and the Commonwealth Ombudsman has criticized conditions on Christmas Island. Dr Graham Thom, former Refugee Campaign Coordinator for Amnesty, has described Australia's mandatory detention policy as 'inhumane', 'unacceptable', 'cruel' and 'degrading'. **Professor Patrick McGorry**, psychiatrist and 2010 Australian of the year, has compared detention centres to 'factories for mental illness'. The AMA has frequently called for refugees to be allowed to stay in the community while their claims are processed.

How do other countries treat refugees?

Mandatory detention was only introduced to Australia in 1992. Australia is the only Western country to lock refugees up in detention camps instead of allowing them to live in the community while their claims are processed. Community processing is not only humane and decent; it avoids the waste of much of the **\$1.2 billion a year cost of offshore detention.** Detaining a single asylum seeker on Manus or Nauru costs \$400,000 per year, and even detention in Australia costs \$239,000 a year.

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Contact Refugee Action Coalition

web www.refugeeaction.org.au

phone 0417 275 713

email refugeeactionsyd@gmail.com