

REFUGEES IN AUSTRALIA – BACKGROUND

Australia has been welcoming refugees for at least 170 years and, since Federation, at least 740,000 refugees and humanitarian entrants have settled here.

In the wake of the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of refugees from eastern and central Europe arrived in Australia. These included refugees from war-torn Poland, Hungary and the Baltic states. Roughly 35,000 Jewish refugees who had fled Nazi persecution were also welcomed here between 1933 and 1955. Major international crises at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s brought further European refugees to our shores.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Australia accepted more than 100,000 refugees from Vietnam and neighbouring countries who were escaping from situations of conflict in south-east Asia.

The introduction of the Special Humanitarian Program in 1981 meant that people who had suffered serious discrimination and human rights abuses but did not meet the strict refugee definition, from places like the Middle East, Africa and South America, were also able to find asylum here.

In more recent years, Australia has welcomed refugees fleeing conflict and persecution from countries as diverse as Sudan, Burma, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

As a signatory of the Refugee Convention, Australia shares a global responsibility to protect the world's most vulnerable people. There are currently 11.4 million refugees and 26 million internally displaced persons around the world, according to UNHCR (the United Nations refugee agency). In 2009-10, Australia will resettle 6,000 of these and a further 7,750 people on Special Humanitarian Program visas (resettled from outside Australia) and on Protection Visas (granted asylum in Australia).

Refugees have made both individual and collective contributions to Australia's cultural, civic and economic life. They have found success in every field of endeavour. By definition, refugees are survivors and they bring their valuable courage, ingenuity and creativity with them to Australia. Most are also driven by a desire to give something back to their new country.

A roll call of successful refugees and their descendents who have made a contribution would include giants of industry and business (such as Frank Lowy); household media names (such as Les Murray and Anh Do); respected artists and authors (such as Judy Cassab and Nam Le); people who have given both to Australia's intellectual life (such as Peter Singer and Karl Kruszelnicki) and helped shape Australia's civic culture (such as Jerzey Toeplitz); and popular sportspeople (such as Alex Jesaulenko, Million Butshire and Michael Klim), as well as many others.

In addition, refugees make significant contributions to the Australian economy, as both employees and consumers, especially in the context of Australia's aging labour force. Such contributions are particularly felt in regional communities. We celebrate these and others during Refugee Week.

For more information please call the Refugee Council of Australia on (02) 9211-9333 or visit <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au>