

Restoring Hope: Refugee Week 2014

Refugees do not choose to become refugees. They become refugees out of compulsion. Once people become refugees, they face the toughest of times. There's the separation from loved ones, starvation, discrimination, fear, trauma, indefinite incarceration and worst of all the demonisation of their human dignity.

Their hope for survival, for a peaceful and decent life free from persecution and discrimination, their hope for education and equal opportunity fades away. And when refugees make it to a safe refuge, it is very hard for them to restore their hope by themselves.

I am a former Hazara refugee from Afghanistan, a community native to Afghanistan who continue to be persecuted on the basis of their ethnicity, religion and status in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. Inside Afghanistan, the Taliban continues to persecute Hazaras. In Pakistan, the Hazaras continue to be targeted for killings and mass murder by extremist religious organisations. Hazara refugees also suffer from discrimination and harassment by the authorities in Iran.

In 2001, I fled Afghanistan and arrived in Australia by boat as an asylum seeker, aged 17. After arriving on Christmas Island, I was detained for nearly three months before being released on a Temporary Protection Visa. Three years later, I was finally granted a permanent protection visa which allowed me to start resettling in this beloved country.

Australia can be very proud of the services it provides to resettle refugees. It's a critical investment to help refugees learn English, find housing, education, employment and health services. Without this initial support, refugees would face enormous challenges living in a new and unfamiliar country.

The task of settling into Australia is made easier too thanks to our tolerance, democracy, equal opportunity and the community values that respect and celebrate cultural diversity. Another valuable support is the community. We cannot underestimate the support of charity organisations and others who help not just refugees, but also other less-fortunate members of our community.

I was very fortunate to have such support from my teachers at Holroyd High School in Sydney and at Coorparoo Secondary College in Brisbane. The support and encouragement from my teachers and Holroyd principal Dorothy Hoddinott has been so invaluable to me, as it has been for many refugee students, allowing them to navigate their way to tertiary education and realising our dreams.

Despite this community support, both sides of politics in Australia have failed to treat asylum seekers in a way that is consistent with Australia's reputation as a country that honors its legal obligations under international human rights conventions. Both sides of politics have used asylum seekers for political gain and asylum policy has lost its human face.

Asylum seekers are treated as a threat to Australia's national security and are dealt with under a military operation, Operation Sovereign Borders. How dumb is it to seek a military solution for a humanitarian issue? This does not mean that I am critical of the Australian army but rather the Australian Government that uses the army to solve a humanitarian issue.

In many parts of the world like Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, governments' use of military institutions to enforce a public policy has often produced more refugees. Military

solutions have caused more trauma, suffering, cruelty, human right violations and hopelessness. More secrecy and less transparency are the defining features of military solutions. Such a cruel policy crushes even the tiniest of hopes that the asylum seekers carry with them.

What makes this policy even more inhumane is the recent negotiation between our country and Cambodia to transfer and resettle asylum seekers from detention centres in Nauru and Manus Island to Cambodia, a country with a deplorable human rights record.

These policies diminish Australia's hard-fought global reputations for its treatment of refugees.

And by reducing our refugee intake from 20,000 to 13,750, we also miss out on the many benefits that refugees and asylum seekers bring with them to this country. We miss out on the skills, knowledge, strengths and labor of the people that desperately want to restart their lives and repay the country that can help them restore their hope.

Irrespective of where they come from, whether they have fled the horrors of Second World War, Nazi concentration camps, persecution and war in Indo China and the many modern conflicts of today, refugees and asylum seekers are part of the Australian story. They have made their mark in the everyday life in Australia from business, education, entertainment, the sciences, sport, community work, politics, media and the law.

It's important that Australians make that connection between the refugees who have helped build Australia and the asylum seekers and refugees of today. We must continue to advocate for and defend the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, by talking publicly about their plight, engaging in conversations with the wider community and raising awareness at a time when secrecy keeps the public in the dark about Australia's treatment of asylum seekers.

We do so because we believe in the Australian values of freedom, fairness, compassion and humanity.

This is an edited version of Ali Ali's speech at the Sydney launch of Refugee Week. Ali Ali arrived in Australia in 2001 as a 17-year-old asylum seeker. He lives in Western Sydney.