



*I was a stranger and you
made me welcome ...*

BRIGIDINE ASYLUM SEEKERS' PROJECT

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As

members of the Brigidine Asylum Seekers' Project, we talk to many asylum seekers, both in Immigration Detention Centres and in the community. They tell us the reasons why they have left their countries and their families to find a safe place to live. These reasons always include fear of being tortured, imprisoned and killed, and lack of basic human rights for themselves and their children. When they flee from their own country, they face new dangers in countries where they are considered illegal and where it is still impossible for them to live safely. As we listen to individuals' stories and try in some ways to assist them, we constantly marvel at how any human beings can suffer so much and still survive.

Some of this suffering is in Immigration Detention Centres. We witness this suffering almost on a daily basis as we visit people in these centres. We watch people losing their mind and often driven to despair. We see all manner of self harm. If this treatment and its consequences have not deterred people from coming to Australia to seek protection nothing else we can dream up will.

It is essential to begin with the premiss that people who suffer persecution have a right to seek protection. It is a tragedy that many have died in the perilous journey from Indonesia to Australia in search of that protection.

We believe that it is impossible to save people from drowning on these trips unless we address the issues that made them get on boats in the first place.

To imagine that asylum seekers get on boats without weighing up safer options beggars belief.

A few facts put this into perspective. Less than 10% of those found to be refugees by UNHCR in Malaysia are resettled anywhere in the world. The rest are forced to survive illegally in countries where human rights abuses are rampant and where safety is impossible. Families are separated (for years) as husbands and fathers seek a place where they can ensure a reasonable life for their loved ones.

The number of asylum seekers accepted by Australia is a small and arbitrary number. It could be doubled or tripled and still not be large by global standards. We **recommend** an immediate increase in the current annual number from 13750 to 25000. We also **recommend** immediately offering places to 5000 asylum seekers registered with UNHCR who are waiting indefinitely in Indonesia and Malaysia.

If, as an Australian community, we really want to contribute to the safety of asylum seekers at sea, we should immediately put more resources into maritime rescue operations. We **recommend** negotiation

with Indonesia about how both countries can cooperate to save lives. We **recommend** that the bulk of the resources needed come from Australia because we are the more affluent country.

Of particular interest to us is the need to improve the whole processing of protection claims here in Australia. Part of this is drastically decreasing the time people spend in detention. We have visited detention centres for eleven years on a regular basis and we see no need for detention while claims are being processed.

We **recommend** that the money currently spent on detention and the numbers of rejections and subsequent appeals, be used to manage an increased flow of asylum seekers. We could, in cooperation with Indonesia and UNHCR, establish some offices for processing claims and fund this with the money saved.

We believe there is capacity in Australia to accept the numbers mentioned above. We have not seriously tried to engage the community in caring for asylum seekers. There are many local groups – from churches to Rotary groups to local councils who have indicated a willingness to help but the pathways have not been clear. We need leadership at a national level to ensure this hospitality. We **recommend** a working party be established with government and NGO membership to explore the potential for community involvement in offering care and support to asylum seekers. We also **recommend** a serious exploration of rural and regional job opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees. Our admittedly fairly small experience in this area has convinced us that there is a real opportunity for employment for asylum seekers and refugees outside large cities.

Finally, there is a lot of confusion in the community and in the Parliament about why the boat tragedies are happening. We reject the idea that we can effectively deter desperate people from getting on boats by punishing those who do. The passion to find a safe place for those in desperate need should be our top priority.

Brigid Arthur

(for Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project)

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