



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 well-founded 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?

74% of refugees to Australia come from just four countries: **Afghanistan, Iran, Sri Lanka and Iraq**, 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 facts in 2010/2011:

- **Afghanistan:** civilian casualties rose **31%** to **3268** in the first half of 2010, as armed conflict with the Taliban escalated. Nine boys under 12 were gunned down by a US helicopter while gathering wood. **Women, children, schools and clinics** were 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. Members of **ethnic and religious minorities** are subject to **brutal repression**. **Torture** of political prisoners is common.
- **Sri Lanka:** **300 000 Tamils** were **displaced by conflict** and **detained in government camps**. The government continued to carry out **enforced disappearances and torture**. Human rights defenders and journalists are killed, assaulted and jailed.
- **Iraq:** Far more than **4000 civilians** were **violently killed** in 2010 or **seriously injured in suicide and other bomb attacks**. Government forces and armed militias continued to commit **gross human rights abuses**. **Torture** of prisoners is rife.

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 bosses 'people smugglers', but they also take money to bring asylum seekers here by plane.

How many refugees come here?

Very few. It would take **20 years** to fill the **MCG** with the number of refugees who come to Australia. The United Nations Refugee Agency, the UNHCR, estimates that there were 10.4 million refugees worldwide at the start of 2011. In 2009–2010, Australia's refugee intake was just 13770 people, **less than 0.14%**.

How does Australia's refugee intake compare to other countries?

Australia has **far fewer refugees than other countries**. **Pakistan** has 1 740 711 refugees, **Iran** 1 070 488, and **Syria** 1 054 466. Other Western countries take far more refugees per head of population than we do: the **UK** had 269 363 in 2010; **Germany** had **more than half a million** (593 799).

How many migrants to Australia come in as refugees?

Most new migrants here are not refugees. As of July 2010, boat arrivals constituted less than 2% of Australia's total migration program numbers, and

much less than 1% of the increase to the Australian population by birth and migration in a given year. Refugees currently make up just 6.6% 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. For security reasons, the location of the Australian embassy in Afghanistan is not even made public. There is no way to join a 'queue' there.

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

Very few countries between Australia and Sri Lanka or Afghanistan have signed the Refugee Convention, meaning there is no right of asylum there. Terrible abuses have been recorded of asylum seekers detained in places like Indonesia. Anyone trying to escape persecution would choose to come to Australia if they could.

Are asylum seekers a security risk?

No. No terrorist has ever entered Australia as a refugee. Refugees are fleeing extremism and violence, not wanting to bring it with them. Refugees have made many contributions to our community. The champion weightlifter Abebe Fekadu, who represented Australia at the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games, was a refugee from Ethiopia. Jamal Elishe, the 2010 election Liberal candidate for McMahon, came here as a refugee from Iraq.

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 and how long do they spend there?

As of February 2011, there were **6659** refugees in detention, including **1027 children**. When it came to office in 2007 the government promised that detention would be capped at 90 days. But as of February 2011, **78% of detainees** have

been behind razor wire **for 3 months or more**. **Almost half** have been detained **between 6 and 12 months**. Incredibly, Australian law allows for **asylum seekers to be locked up for ever**.

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 out of their home countries. Indefinite detention only **brutalizes** them **more**. **Suicide, hunger-strikes, and self-harm** are common. Children in detention scream at night in their sleep. In 2010 teenagers detained in Darwin started cutting themselves in desperation. Between September and December 2010 there were **three suicides** in Villawood detention centre in Sydney alone.

What do the experts say about mandatory detention?

Mandatory detention has been **condemned** by **Amnesty International Australia, leading 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, Refugee Campaign Coordinator for Amnesty, has described Australia's mandatory detention policy as **'inhumane', 'unacceptable', 'cruel' and 'degrading'**. He says it **'defies logic'** and is **'a system that is failing the people it is supposed to protect.'** Professor Patrick McGorry, psychiatrist and 2010 Australian of the year, has compared detention centres to **'factories for mental illness'**.

How do other countries treat refugees?

Mandatory detention was only introduced here 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** budgeted in 2010 for border protection – enough to run **five major 420-bed hospitals**.

Prepared by the **Refugee Action Coalition, refugeeaction.org.au** | **Sources:** Amnesty International Australia, Asylum Seekers Resource Centre, UNHCR, Refugee Council of Australia, Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australian Press Council, Refugee Action Coalition, Commonwealth Ombudsman, NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard, Iraq Body Count, Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *The Sydney Morning Herald, The Age, The Australian, The Daily Telegraph, ABC.*

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