Understanding the ‘boat people’

As I write, I am saddened and shocked by the breaking news of another tragedy involving the so-called ‘boat people’: ‘Christmas Island residents heard children and babies screaming for help but could only watch them drown after a boat carrying asylum seekers was smashed against the island’s jagged coastline in rough seas yesterday morning, killing at least 27’ (ninemsn, 16/12/10).

But who are these ‘boat people’? What is the true story behind the faceless images portrayed by some of our politicians and media? What are the facts and what are our fears?

A ‘refugee’ is defined by the United Nations as any person who is outside their country of nationality and is unable to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951).

The United Nations Refugee Convention (to which Australia is a signatory) recognises that refugees have a lawful right to enter a country for the purposes of seeking asylum, regardless of how they arrive or whether they hold valid travel or identity documents. According to the Convention, entering a country without a visa, which is usually considered an illegal action, should not be treated as illegal if a person is seeking asylum. Therefore, it is incorrect to refer to asylum seekers who arrive without authorisation as ‘illegal’ as they do in fact have a lawful right to enter Australia to seek asylum. They may or may not be found to be genuine refugees, but seeking asylum is not illegal under Australian or international law.

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), there were approximately 42 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2008. This includes 15.2 million refugees, 827,000 asylum-seekers (pending cases) and 26 million internally displaced persons.

Afghanistan has been the leading country of origin of refugees for the past three decades. One out of four refugees in the world is Afghan, with a total number of 2,887,100 refugees, followed by Iraq with 1,785,200 refugees, and Somalia with 678,300 refugees.

Only 1% of refugees are re-settled in Western countries such as Australia. In fact, developing countries host 80% of the world’s refugees, with Pakistan hosting the largest refugee population of over 1.8 million, followed by Syria hosting over 1.1 million refugees. Iran has the third highest numbers with around 1 million (UNHCR, 2009).

Australia provides 13,750 places each year in total for refugee and humanitarian entrants to Australia. This is just 0.03% of the World’s refugees and includes all people we receive onshore, offshore and by boat.

The vast majority of asylum seekers arrive in Australia by air. Last year, of the 13,500 people granted asylum in Australia only 206 of those who arrived without visas came by boat, while over 90% (2,291) came by plane (GetUp!, www.getup.org.au). The boat arrivals are mainly from Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq and Iran, which reflects the massive human right violations and devastation happening in those countries.

 Australians are increasingly polarized about asylum seekers. Where some are sympathetic, others are terrified of allowing them into our society. The negative images of asylum seekers presented in the media, coupled with statements such as ‘stop the boats’ by our top politicians create a hostile climate towards refugees. We often hear people referring to asylum seekers as ‘queue jumpers’, ‘terrorists’ and ‘economic migrants’ who are ‘invading’ our country.

Some politicians and commentators claim that the abolition of detention debt (August 2009) and temporary protection visas (August 2008) have made Australia a ‘soft target’. However, since temporary protection visas (TPVs) were introduced in 1999, they have had limited impact on the number of people seeking asylum in Australia. In the two years following their introduction, over 8,455 asylum seekers arrived in Australia by boat, compared to the 2,504 people this year (www.getup.org.au).

Asylum seeker flows are affected primarily by war, unrest, violence and human rights violation, and not by domestic policies in refugee-hosting countries. According to the UNHCR, there has been a global increase in asylum seekers, with a 10% increase in applications for asylum during the first six months of 2009 compared to the same period in 2008. European countries have experienced a 13% increase in asylum seekers compared to this last year (www.refugeecouncil.org.au).

Most people do not wish to leave their homelands, families, friends, customary lifestyle and everything that is known and familiar to them. No one wishes to travel on a tiny leaky boat on a prolonged and unsafe journey. For refugees fleeing persecution, torture and the threat of death, even the most punitive methods imposed by Australia will be preferable to the conditions they have left behind. It is not a new practice to escape from a war-torn country with the help of smugglers. Escaping to neighbouring countries with the help of smugglers was often the only option for millions of Africans (including myself); smugglers are chosen for their knowledge of travelling routes and their ability to interact between the government and opposition groups.

The vast majority of refugees do not leave their country with visa and passport in hand, nor do they plan their trip or have control over their journey and final destination. The immediate fear of persecution, torture, and even death at the hands of authorities and other groups leaves refugees with limited opportunity to say goodbye to their family and friends, or to take their possessions and documents with them.

The majority of STARTTS clients who have arrived by boat report that they had no idea of where they were going or how they were getting there. Some were told, “We will take you to a nice place”, while other smugglers kept silent during their journey so as not to create suspicions. Some were left in the middle of the sea, often in Indonesian or Australian waters; others were simply abandoned in the desert. During these journeys people often run out of food, medicine and water. Hundreds of people are often crowded into tiny boats, and people’s belongings are routinely stolen. A 38 year-old Afghan client who came to Australia by boat with her five children to join her husband in Australia describes her nine-day boat trip as “a horrifying nightmare that cannot be expressed in words”. She often avoided this aspect of her trauma as she found it unbearable to talk or think about.

In other words, no person would attempt such a journey unless there was no other choice.

Economic status has no bearing on refugee status. It makes no
difference whether a refugee is rich or poor, the point is that they are at risk of, or have experienced, persecution. An unaccompanied minor as young as nine years old was sent to Australia by boat so his life could be saved. His parents, who had already lost two other sons, sold all of their personal belongings and left their loved one in the hands of the smugglers. In another example, the mother of a 17 year old boy sold her kidney to save her only male-child, knowing that if he stayed in Iraq he would be killed, as his father and his three older brothers were imprisoned, tortured and killed. Many refugees who come to Australia are educated middle-class people, whose education, profession or political opinions have drawn them to the attention of the authorities and resulted in their persecution.

There is also the idea, suggested by some in politics and media, that arrivals of boats are likely to be a perfect cover for terrorists entering Australia. In fact, the threat of terrorists entering the country by boat has been described by counter-terrorism experts as minimal (www.getup.org.au). Asylum seekers arriving by boat may face years of delay before gaining entry into Australia, as opposed to those arriving by air. All asylum seekers arriving in Australia undergo thorough security checks from ASIO in conjunction with Indonesia. Comparisons with the US found that those involved in the terrorist activities of September 11 arrived on valid US visas.

Since 1992, when Australia introduced a policy of mandatory detention, over 20,000 people who arrived without documents have been detained. Not one person has ever been found to be a terrorist amongst these 20,000 people (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, www.asrc.org.au, June, 2010). The idea that boat people are ‘queue jumpers’ is based on misconceptions about how Australia’s Refugee Program and the international refugee resettlement system work. Australia’s Refugee Program has two components. The onshore component is for people who apply for refugee status after arriving in Australia. Most enter as visitors or students; some arrive without authorisation. The onshore component is a legal obligation which is part of Australia’s responsibilities as a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention. Applying for protection onshore is not a means of ‘jumping the queue’ or bypassing the ‘correct’ process of applying for protection. In fact, applying onshore is the standard procedure for seeking protection. Rules footballer Alex Jesaulenko (Refugee Council of Australia, www.refugeecouncil.org.au) and Garrido-Salgado; painter and restauranteur, Mirka Mora; actor, Henri Donaldson; politicians, Jennie George and Nick Greiner; poet, Juan Nam Le; academic, Associate Professor My-Van Tran; Dr Anita Szeps; broadcasters, Les Murray and Caroline Tran; and Australian Rules footballer Alex Jesaulenko (Refugee Council of Australia, www.refugeecouncil.org.au).

As health professionals and clinicians it is time to increase our awareness of refugees, reflect on their strength and resilience, and educate our children about the true story of the ‘boat people’. It may sometimes be difficult, but if we separate the facts from the ignorance and fear, we see people who deserve our attention, and our compassion.

Resources

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, www.asrc.org.au
Get Up!, www.getup.org.au
Refugee Council of Australia, www.refugeecouncil.org.au

Nooria Mehraby is senior clinician at the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS). Herself a refugee, Nooria has more than 20 years work experience with refugees both overseas and in Australia. nooriamehraby@gmail.com