

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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

Newsletter 67 December 2013

The Project aims to:

- * provide hospitality and practical support for asylum seekers
- * actively network with like-minded individuals and groups who are working for justice for asylum seekers
- * promote advocacy for the rights of asylum seekers
- * raise awareness of asylum seeker issues and concerns through a range of activities

Fifty years ago, on August 28, 1963, some 250,000 people converged on Washington in a march calling for jobs, social justice, and equal rights. At the capital's Lincoln Memorial, they listened to civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his "I Have A Dream" speech -- imagining a day when people "will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character." King's 15-minute speech has come to be seen as one of the most powerful, inspiring calls for justice in history.

Shirin Ebadi, 66, an Iranian lawyer and rights activist, became the first Iranian and the first Muslim woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. She said in words that seem amazingly evocative for us:

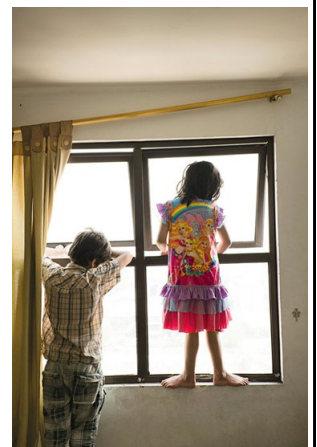
"I have a dream. My dream is for the human heart to be globalized...in such a way that every individual could feel the pain and sorrow of the other as if it were her own pain and sorrow. Instead of globalizing trade and economics, globalize humanity!"

"I have a dream that instead of separating humanity, borders could connect human beings to one another. I have a dream that instead of schism and animosity, religions could summon people to empathy and consensus."

"I know that in today's trembling world this dream may appear far from us. But let's not forget that many of humanity's achievements started with dreams. For instance, 200 years ago, India's independence and the abolition of slavery were just dreams. But today those dreams have been realized. It is our task now to think in terms of dreams and to act in terms of reality. Then it won't be too long before my dream, too, will come true."

A right of every human being is to have a dream for the future. But we leave no room for dreams for the thousands of people seeking from the Australian community a chance to be free and safe.

As a nation, we have reduced enterprising and courageous human beings into resigned and fearful people because we have taken hope from them. We have refused to accept that these people are the human face of forces not of their making. Every time we make a small change to let someone dream again we act for humanity.



Anoush and Shahla, two young refugees from Iran, in a safe house in Jakarta. From THE DREAM BOAT By LUKE MOGELSON published in New York Times Nov 15, 2013

Treatment of Tamil Asylum Seekers

Concerns about Sri Lankan human rights abuses dominated the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Sri Lanka. At the CHOGM gathering the British Prime Minister David Cameron delivered searing criticism and India and Canada boycotted the meeting. But when Tony Abbott was pressed on his view he said (referring to torture) "sometimes in difficult circumstances, difficult things happen". This is a very sad indictment on Australia's commitment to human rights. It also throws light on our treatment of Tamil asylum seekers coming to Australia.

Since October 27 last year, more than 1,070 Sri Lankan boat arrivals (mainly Tamils) have been returned to their home country.

Australia's obligations

The United Nation's Refugee Convention prohibits states parties (of which Australia is one) from sending a refugee to any place where they would be exposed to persecution (unless certain limited exceptions can be invoked). This obligation is owed to any person who falls within the Convention definition of "refugee", regardless of whether they have been recognised as such by a state or other authority. A breach of this obligation is described as refoulement.

Australia is also party to other UN treaties such as the Convention against Torture and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which impose non-refoulement obligations. These obligations are not subject to exceptions, and apply to anyone who may face serious harm upon their repatriation, including those who do not qualify as refugees.

If a state wishes to avoid breaching its non-refoulement obligations, it must act on the presumption that a person seeking its protection is entitled to such protection unless and until a contrary determination has been made pursuant to a reliable process.

So, did the repatriation of the Sri Lankans only take place after they were reliably found to not warrant protection from Australia? The short answer is no. Rather, they were repatriated after being "screened-out", or rejected, in a process labelled "enhanced screening".

Enhanced Screening

The former Labor government introduced enhanced screening last October to deal with the increased influx of Sri Lankan boat arrivals. It built on the immigration department's "normal" border screening procedures, which were introduced in July 1998.

Under the enhanced screening procedure, Sri Lankan boat arrivals are individually interviewed by immigration department officers (with experience in protection decision-making) shortly after arrival. If found by this one interview not to be refugees they are sent back to Sri Lanka. We know that a number end up in Negombo prison, a place of state-sanctioned abuse including beatings, imprisonment and torture .

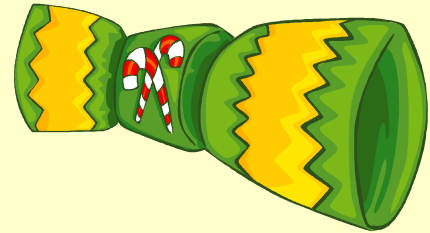
All this asks many questions about "sometimes in difficult circumstances, difficult things happen".

You are all invited to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Christmas party on Sunday 15th December.

Venue: 52 Beaconsfield Pde, Albert Park

Time: 5pm onwards

We would love to see anyone who has helped BASP or is connected to the Project in any way. It is a chance to meet other people who share a commitment to justice in this area as well as meet some of those who have been helped by the Project.



You are all important to us as we try together to build a safer and more just situation for asylum seekers.

Farewell to Mary Kingsbury

We say goodbye to Mary who is leaving us before Christmas. Mary has been working with BASP for some years. She was the Coordinator of the women's house in Albert Park and more recently began working for the overall program.



We will miss Mary so much. She is a great organiser, a most patient person, totally focussed and above all she has huge empathy for asylum seekers.

Mary has such an eye for making things homely on a shoe string budget. This was a great boon in setting up 60 Beaconsfield Pde as a place for women. She has been a wonderful friend to the women in the house and they will miss her a lot. We put photos here of Mary and some of her 'girls'. This seems typical of her care—celebrating a birthday and farewelling someone who is moving on.

Mary has managed to organise a lot of volunteer assistance for BASP. Mary's friendliness and empathy with everyone has been appreciated by many people, both volunteers and those newly arrived in Australia.

Nowhere was Mary's ability to network and manage things so evident than in the really intense time of providing furniture and household goods to families just released from detention.



Mary is returning to New Zealand to live. We will often wish she was here to follow up some urgent situations. We wish her well and hope that she will come back for many visits.

THE CAR

A couple of years ago a very kind benefactor of BASP gave us a car to use in any way to help asylum seekers. This friend did the roadworthy and registration and handed it over to us. It was used to help a couple of men and then given to Kamir* to help him get to work. It actually helped him regain a little of his confidence and feeling of self-worth. Fairly recently it was registered in Kamir's name. Then Kamir's Bridging Visa expired and currently no Bridging Visas are being renewed. So Kamir, (along with hundreds of others), is technically living illegally in Australia.

Kamir now has no work rights, (a zealous employer has said he can't work until he has a Bridging Visa), a daughter to support and a wife and two sons in Quetta to worry about.

A couple of weeks ago Kamir was clearly distressed. More distressed than he has been since he was in detention for more than three years and feared for his sanity.

So, after several weeks of no work, he asked for a meeting to review his situation and asked for ASAS funding via Red Cross. Present at the meeting were his daughter Fahima*, his daughter's Red Cross case worker and the representative of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP). Fahima and Kamir left the meeting in tears.

Talking about the interview, he says several times, referring to the DIBP representative, "She said to sell the car. I will never sell the car. I told her the Sisters gave me the car. She said if I could afford a car I didn't need any ASAS money. I told her the Sisters registered the car and gave it to me."

THE CAR has become a symbol for Kamir of the inequities of the whole situation. "I said I didn't buy the car. The Brigidine Project gave it to me. They are the only ones I have to help me. I will never sell the car."

And the little red car keeps going.



* names have been changed

Right way ... Wrong way?

At a recent function organised by the Darebin City Council, two recently arrived asylums seekers spoke briefly to the gathering and both apologised for 'coming the wrong way', referring to their coming on a boat. It seems a terrible thing that we have so maligned boat arrivals that they feel obliged to apologise to us.

Currently there is a constant reiteration by people working for the Department of Immigration that asylum seekers should think about the option of returning to their home country. This is very disheartening and reinforces for them that the prevailing view in Australia is that they have come the wrong way.



Wanted

A few people to pack up hampers on Thursday 12th December and a few drivers to deliver these hampers on the next day, Friday 13th,

If anyone can help can you text or ring Mary on 0413716983 or email bssc@cyberspace.net.au.

These are hampers mainly for families released into the community with no work rights and a very low amount of money to live on.



My experience as a nurse on Christmas Island changed the core of my being: Emma Hunter

(published in online Guardian Nov 2013)

Last year I joined a company contracted to provide healthcare to asylum seekers. I made the jump from my old job with hopes of adventure and challenges which would not only make me a better nurse, but also a better person.

Little did I know how much it would change the core of my being.

I first worked on Christmas Island as a mental health nurse. It was a real culture shock. I had always referred to the people I cared for as "patients", now I had to learn to call them "clients". I was quick to realise that the clients were often not even called by their names – they were instead called by the boat number displayed on their photo ID card, which had to remain on them at all times. "673/RYP/039!". The practice reminded me of stories from concentration camps in the second world war.

Things got worse as I took on other responsibilities across the island. One of the saddest places I worked at was referred to as "the induction shed". This is where asylum seekers are first led to after stepping onto the island's jetty. Once there they sit and wait, sometimes for hours, without any food or water. Once the bureaucratic paperwork is completed, and after they've answered questions by the department of immigration and signed consent forms, they're sent to meet someone like me.

As a mental health nurse, I would ask a series of questions outlined for us by the immigration department. These forms often asked unnecessary questions and avoided vital ones – we were told to "stick to the script". Time is of the essence, so we had to mill through the clients as quickly as possible.

It was there that I heard some of the most horrific and tragic of stories. Every day, I would be reminded of how evil humans can be to one another. I talked to a young Afghan man who was a Hazara ethnic minority. He has fled his country after a home invasion, where he witnessed his brother and father being murdered in front of him. He escaped, made it to a relative's home, and started his journey to Australia the next day. After experiencing numerous beatings and being shot at along the way he arrived in Indonesia, boarded a boat and took his chances. He was one of the lucky ones – he made it alive.

Another man I interviewed was from Somalia. Rebels had attacked his village one morning, burning houses down, beating and shooting people. He saw his mother being sexually assaulted before being murdered. The rebels then lined people up and shot every second person – the man's best friend was standing next to him. The rebels told the remaining survivors to spread the word: it was their land now, and they would come back to finish what they had started if they didn't flee.

The man's eyes welled up with tears as he told me his story. I asked him what made him happy, he replied "singing". So I asked him to sing – he interpreted an hymn, beautifully. Fellow asylum seekers from his boat were standing outside the room and started singing with him. Soon the hallway was alive with rich, raw and beautiful voices. Surprisingly, my days spent in the induction shed were always the most desirable, because although you'd hear extremely sad stories, you would also be reminded of the strength of the human spirit to overcome tragedy and fight to survive. I often found myself in awe of the sheer tenacity on display. My "clients" were always so grateful to have made the boat journey, grateful to have a hot meal, shelter or water, and grateful to finally be safe from harm. The hardest day of my career occurred early on during my time on the island. At the time, the Australian government was returning Tamils to Sri Lanka [through a fast track process](#). This process only targeted Sri Lankans – no one else. They would arrive on a boat from Sri Lanka or India after spending up to 47 days on board, often running out of food. Upon arriving, they would be "fast tracked" through the induction process, which involved completing only a fraction of the medical tests. The next day, the "clients" would be woken up early in the morning, often around 4am, and told they would return to Sri Lanka that day before sundown.

The process was abhorrent. The asylum seekers would have no access to legal representation, and basic questions

regarding persecution, torture and trauma were not properly investigated. This further frustrated me as I educated myself by reading about the Sri Lankan civil war and the mass killings which took place at the tail end of the 2009 war. I read [Amnesty International reports](#) and [UNHCR reports](#) detailing crimes against human rights: people going missing, civilians being sexually assaulted, imprisoned, beaten and murdered – all of which still happens to this day. The fast track process was a disgusting deal with the devil.

It was on one of these fast track days that I was called in to give support to a young man who had been told he was returning to Sri Lanka. I went into the room to find a young man hunched over the table, sobbing. Two burly security guards stood aside him with their arms crossed, steely faced.

He looked at me with desperation and told his story. He was 20 year old, from North East Sri Lanka. He had only arrived the previous day following a long boat journey. He told me that his distant uncle had been a fighter for the Tamil Tigers in the civil war. As a result, his father was harassed, targeted and eventually killed, shot in the family's front garden by government police. He heard his mother scream, and heard the police enter the house. He ran and hid in a kitchen cupboard, where through the slats he witnessed his mother being sexually assaulted. They then slit her throat. The young man sold his deceased parents' property for enough money to get on a boat to Australia.

I will never forget the young man's eyes as he told me his story. He had suffered enormous trauma and immense pain at the hands of others. He was asking for safety, pleading for it. As a nurse I found it extremely difficult to comfort him. I couldn't change the decision the department had made; in fact I was completely powerless. All I could offer was to listen to him, to validate him as a human being. To show that I had compassion for him. I told him to hold onto his faith, and that he was an extremely resilient person to have made it through this far. I told him that I cared, that I would pray for him.

When he looked up from his hands, I saw a face which will forever haunt me. It was the face of hopelessness. He was empty, numb with despair. He said "I am going to die. I did nothing wrong and now I am going to die. All I wanted was for Australia to give me safety". The boy was led away onto a bus to transport him to a plane bound to Sri Lanka, where he would be handed over to government officials.

I often have thought about that day and asked myself how I can come to terms with my role in this process. The way I see it, if I wasn't here doing this work, then who would show these people compassion? Who will listen to their story? Who will validate them as a person, and not a number? As horrible as the process is, I'm proud of what I have been able to offer the people.

Since returning from Christmas Island, my friends from school often ask me about my experience while at the pub. "Are you still helping support those bomb throwers?" they ask, adding that refugees are "taking our jobs". I feel a strong burning inside each time, and want to scream at them for showing such ignorance. But instead I tell them the story about the guy from Somalia, or the boy from Afghanistan. And when they listen, they see what I see. I give them information and facts, and it makes them think. That's all I ask of people when it comes to the asylum seeker issue: just think about it, read more about it. Don't take for granted that the government is doing the best thing.

I am by no means naive enough to believe that every person I met is a genuine refugee. I have seen my fair share of people whose motivations I have questioned. But the huge majority of the asylum seekers I have interviewed have gone through horrific trauma and torture, and have fled or been driven out of their own country. They come here to save their children or themselves, only asking for safety.

I truly believe that most Australians would show much more compassion and understanding if they experienced what I have. I have never been ashamed to be Australian until I was thrown in this process. I have also never been so thankful to have won the lottery: to be born in this country, free from war and terror.

- The writer is using a pseudonym



This task force is an initiative of the National Council of Churches in Australia. Brigid is a patron of the group.

Baby Ferouz made headlines earlier this month when Fairfax Media revealed he was being kept in Brisbane's Mater Hospital alone, while his mother Latifar was locked up for 18 hours a day in detention.

The Task Force took a strong stand in the recent case where the Chair, Dr Peter Catt and the Executive Officer, Misha Coleman, spoke out strongly not only about Ferouz but about all children in detention.



31-year-old Rohingya woman Latifar with her sick newborn baby, Ferouz (from Brisbane Times)

The court negotiations have since resulted in a deal with the immigration department, that they will not be removed from Australia without two days notice. Their lawyers could then challenge their removal. It is a limited victory. However it gave members of the Task Force an opportunity to argue strongly about children in detention.

Dr Catt said “The evidence from the UNHCR of the appalling conditions on Nauru clearly demonstrates that the detention centre is no place for any child let alone a three week old baby with Ferouz’s health problems.

.. Let us not forget .. That in the same detention centre here in Brisbane there are two three month old baby girls whose Catholic families fled religious persecution in Vietnam.

The Australian Churches Refugee Task Force calls on Prime Minister Abbott to release all children and their families from detention while their refugee applications are dealt with.

Dr Catt also called on Mr Scott Morrison to release the findings of the investigation he promised into why Latifar was separated from baby Ferouz while he was in hospital.

It has taken court orders, legal scrambles, media splashes and many hardworking advocates just to get procedural fairness. Surely this is a basic right in Australia?

Latifar and her husband are enduring all of this with a baby less than 4 weeks old, recovering from a cesarean and with two other children to care for and still detained.

Children in detention

There are currently over 1000 children in detention centres. 104 children are detained on Nauru.

They, with all the other people who arrived by boat after July 13 2013, will never be resettled in Australia, even if found to be refugees. Last week, families here in Melbourne in detention were advised that they could not expect any quick release. In fact there appears to be almost no movement out of detention centres.

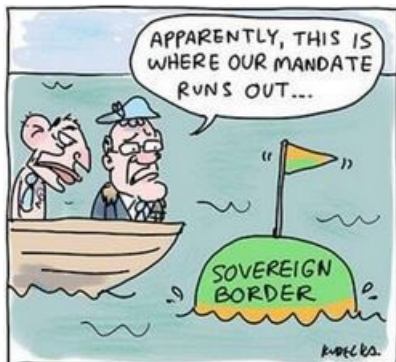
We know how much the Minister loves secrecy so here's a photo of little baby Erfan who was sent from Darwin to Christmas Island Detention Centre yesterday with his family.



From cartoonist: Jon Kudelka

The question which will not be answered without a whistleblower is, "How many vessels have been turned back without our knowledge?"

Opposite are the boat arrivals before and after the last election.



www.archiearchive.wordpress.com

Date	Boats	People
19th Jul/ 26th Jul	16	~1300
27th Jul/ 2nd Aug	4	362
3rd Aug/ 9th Aug	6	475
10th Aug/ 16th Aug	4	276
17th Aug/ 23rd Aug	3	441
24th Aug/ 30th Aug	6	362
31st Aug/ 6th Sep	3	184
ELECTION		
7th Sept/ 13th Sept	5	481
14th Sept/ 20th Sept	3	306
21st Sept/ 27th Spet	5	205
28th Sept/ Oct 4th	4	240
Oct 5th/ Oct 11th	2	153
Oct 12th/ Oct 18th	2	115
Oct 19th/ Oct 25th	2	170
Oct 26th/ Nov 1st	0	0
Nov 2nd/ Nov 8th	1	63
Nov 9th/ Nov 15th	3	150
Nov 16th/ Nov 22nd		

Lets see if we can do more of this?

From the Werribee Star Oct 2013

Creating a new green thumb

Payman Kooshi and his family were among those helped by the BASP to get established in a house in Werribee. Payman came to Australia from Iran nine months ago in the hope of creating a new life for his wife and two young daughters. But Visa restrictions have made it impossible for him to work and provide for his family. The following article was published in the Werribee Star.

While Payman waits for his situation to change, he has found a new sense of belonging and self-worth by volunteering at a local community garden. Mr Kooshi regularly visits the Werribee Environmental Community Garden (WECP) in Wyndham Vale where he maintains his own plot of blooming vegetables. He has chosen to grow beans and cabbages for the time being because they are what he is used to eating in Iran. Mr Kooshi said he enjoyed learning about vegetables he had never seen before and also taking home some new skills.

"I like it here because now I have new friends and I like to work in the garden very much," Mr Kooshi said.

"When I come here I enjoy it very much because at home I get very bored when I cannot work."

President of the WECP, Bob Fairclough, said Mr Kooshi had been embraced by his fellow gardeners and had developed a green thumb. He said members of the community were being shown different techniques, such as using companion plants like flowers to keep certain insects away from the vegetables.

"One of the ideas of the garden is to show people how to do different things and to also provide them with the opportunity to grow fresh and healthy vegetables for themselves," Mr Fairclough said.



Tim Daniels, left, Peyman Kooshi and Bob Fairclough get to work in the garden. Picture: KRISTIAN SCOTT

Good News



Many of our supporters know Nurta. She has a flat courtesy of community housing in the city—not far from the Victoria Market.

Nurta loves the city and so, as a Permanent Visa holder, she is very happy.



The women in 60 Beaconsfield Pde enjoy each other's company!



Ilham and Arash arrived in Australia recently and are one of the 'no advantage' couples.

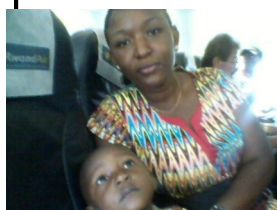
Ilham has a Science and Technology degree and is interested in art and dressmaking. Arash has qualifications in computer animation.

Mary from BASP had given Ilham a sewing machine. A kind woman, Jenni, who took some furniture to them and is an artist, has given Ilham fabric and the above piece is the result.



A wonderful bus driver, Geoff, has started supporting a two men, Mohammad and Alex, recently released from detention. Geoff takes Mohammad to the swimming pool and now has the men helping fix bikes to give out to asylum seekers.

A young Nigerian woman and child who had to move from Abuja to South Africa where she has a church group who will care for her. BASP and some other people in the community helped this to happen.



Sometimes we feel we are not able to do much but all these small ways of helping individuals and families add up to a better world for at least a few. One small boy and a vulnerable woman are safer we hope.

Family Support Through English program

We now have a number of volunteers in this program and are gradually beginning sessions with families—mainly in the northern suburbs at this stage. Our emphasis is on breaking down the isolation that many of these families face—exacerbated by no work rights, little money and in most cases little English.

The program has two coordinators: Phil Steele and Sue Woods. If you would like to volunteer contact Phil on 0419311582 or Sue on 95346366



Radushan is an eight year old boy who is here with his mother seeking protection. They are from Sri Lanka.

A very kind lady from Port Fairy has welcomed Radeshan and Dharshini into her home in Port Fairy.

Radeshan has started school at St Patrick's school. Last week he received this certificate from school. Radeshan has settled into school at St Patrick's and this is his spelling certificate. He is reputed to be a very keen student.

How you can help ...

Christmas Hampers

BASP would like to take some Christmas hampers to as many of the families who face their first Christmas in Australia with very little. If you can bring any goods that may help we would be grateful. Some small extras like lollies, biscuits, soft drink, decorations as well as the more practical tea, coffee, sugar, milk and so on would be good. Vouchers for places where fresh food can be bought can be included in the hampers.

Christmas party in Detention

BASP is working with some volunteers to give a party on the 22nd December to those in the Melbourne Immigration centre. We will use some donations for this party too.

Donations

Donations can be made by cheque to Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project, 52 Beaconsfield Pde, Albert Park or directly to **Brigidine Asylum Seekers Trust Account: bsb: 083-004; a/c: 56-924-6603**

Stop Press

Labor has voted with the Greens to block the Government's bid to bring back Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs). Thank you to all who lobbied Senators to achieve this result.

The Minister for Immigration and Border Control, Scott Morrison, has immediately said they will find another way to stop people already here in Australia from getting a Permanent Visa. It is hard to believe anyone could be so cruel. There is already a policy that says anyone arriving seeking protection now will never be settled in Australia. So from a policy point of view TPVs is a punitive measure directed at people who have been in Australia for some time, in some cases years, and whose applications have taken a long time to process.

THANK YOU

to the many people who have given money, vouchers, household goods, food or other assistance. Thank you, too, to all those who have written letters to MP's and others lobbying for justice.



BASP is only as useful in terms of making a difference for people as you, our supporters, make it. On behalf of all asylum seekers thank you. They often say "The Australian people are good". This extends even to remarking on car drivers giving way to each other in traffic. As we rail against cruel government policies (and we need to) perhaps we underestimate the practical good that can be done by us, ordinary citizens.

A happy Christmas to all. May you be blessed for your love and compassion. And we rejoice that your hospitality encompasses those vulnerable enough to have to seek new homes in distant places.

Brigid Arthur

Catherine Kelly

for the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project