

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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

Newsletter 68 March 2014

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

Recently a young woman who is seeking protection in Australia said sadly, 'Maybe we should not have come to Australia'. She was referring to herself and her small son. When reassured that those of us who knew her wanted her to be here she replied sadly, 'No but the Australian government does not want us' and after a moment she added 'And our government doesn't want us either'.

How does one respond to such a comment from a very defenceless woman and child?

A lot of people are asking questions about the direction our leaders are taking this country.

How have we become the oppressors?

How did we become the people who break hearts?

How can we have got to the stage when we imprison people without justification?

How did protection of Australia's borders become so important that we would do anything to protect it, even if this means turning away genuine refugees?

When did we begin persecuting the persecuted?

Robert Frost in his well known lines may be echoing what collectively many of us are hoping:

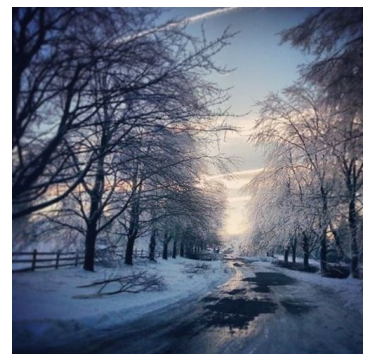
I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

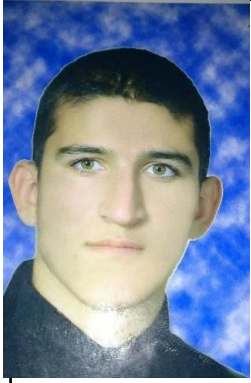
Two roads diverged in a wood and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.



We have a sense that many Australians are saying 'there must be a different road to follow'. As we awaken as a nation from what feels like an evil night into the mystery of a new day, perhaps we will be able to say, "We will repair the damage of what has happened by working as a community to extend empathy and understanding to all who seek our help."



Recently Richard Franklin talked about the young man killed on Manus Island in a talk he gave to conclude the Writers Festival in Perth:

A group of Manus Island contractors sent a statement to the Guardian Australia describing Reza Barati as a “gentle giant”. “We read him children’s books such as fairy tales and Reza always waited and looked forward to meeting with us and reading with him. He studied a lot,” they said.

“He used to always pick up bugs and moths off the ground and put them back in the garden, worried that someone would step on them. The guys used to feed the moths to cane toads around the compound for fun ... There wasn’t much else to do .. He used to try and stop them.”

They continued: “Reza also always helped staff hand out medical slips and appointment slips to those in the same compound as him. He wanted to keep busy to avoid boredom and keep his mind active.”

There are no more fairy stories. The cane toads grow fatter. And Reza Barati’s corpse lies in a Port Moresby morgue with a large hole in the back of its head as inexplicable, as shameful as what our country has done.



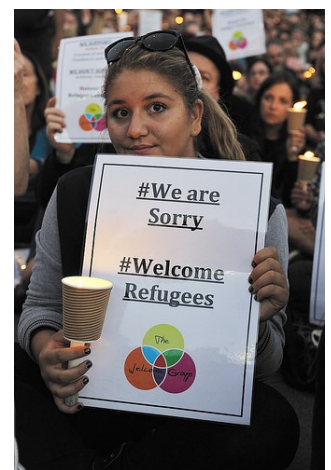
It is a terrible indictment on our political leaders when they respond to a horrific event by statements such as the following from the Minister for Immigration, Scott Morrison:

‘There will naturally, and by definition, be a tension in these centres because people don’t want to be there in the first place.’ And the morning after Reza’s murder ‘The camp is calm. Breakfast is being served’ and ‘There has been very little damage.’

A human life is more important than property surely and many others have been totally traumatised and hurt—refugees and staff. Yet it seemed that none of this mattered. Indeed the Minister blamed the poor dead man for bringing about his own death. ‘When people engage in violent acts and in disorderly behaviour and breach fences and get involved in that sort of behaviour and go to the other side of the fence, well they will be subject to law enforcement as applies in Papua New Guinea.’ Apart from insulting PNG by assuming that their law enforcement would condone killing an unarmed man, this statement implies that Reza Barati had brought his fate on himself by running away.

This is another watershed moment in Australia’s history. Will we accept that a man died while in the supposed protection of this country? And will we absolutely reject lies and obfuscations being used that are at the expense of those seeking our protection? Have we learned anything from the Children Overboard Saga?

[photos from the vigil courtesy Paul Dunn]



Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project

Discussion Night 1 - 2014

Thursday March 27th 2014

**An update on asylum seeker policies and
advocacy that is being undertaken**

An opportunity to take some action

Guest speaker: Pamela Curr

Pamela is the Refugee Rights Coordinator
Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

Time: 7.30 – 9.30p.m

Venue:

St Joseph's Hall

(beside the bluestone church)

274 Rouse St



Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project

Contact: 03 96962107

The cruelty of the new regulations around family reunion

Ali was a young Hazara man living in a small village in Oruzghan Province in Afghanistan. The Hazara people welcomed the foreign troops from Australia, hoping that they would rid their country of the Taliban. For many long years the Hazara had suffered persecution and massacres at their hands. There was nothing the local authorities could or would do to protect the Hazara, who lived in constant fear.

Ali was a carpenter and when he was asked to assist in the building of a school for the children of the village to attend, he agreed. He was very afraid because he knew that the Taliban would target him and his family for assisting 'the enemy', the Australian soldiers. But he wanted to help with the construction of the school and he needed the income desperately. His children had never been allowed to attend school and he was hoping for a better life for them.

He was careful to do most of the work at his home, and then transfer the completed windows and doors to the site. However he was soon sent a 'night letter' which was posted in the local market. This letter from the Taliban stated that he was an enemy of the people and was collaborating with the enemy. He would be killed.

He was very afraid and went into hiding. The Taliban came to his home, and because he was not there, they killed his father and his ten year old brother. They told his wife that they would seek him out and kill him. He managed to sell his business and fled to Quetta in Pakistan, taking his wife and three young children. From Quetta he travelled to Indonesia and then to Australia by boat. His wife and family stayed in Quetta with some friends who had travelled there earlier from his village.

When he arrived in Australia in 2010 he was put into detention on Christmas Island. He was then transferred to Darwin, and eventually Melbourne where he was in the Maribyrnong Detention centre and then the Melbourne Immigration Transit Centre at Broadmeadows. After 2 years in detention his case was finally heard and he was found to be a refugee.

He found work, travelling long distances every day and working long hours. He sent money to his family in Quetta and worried all the time about them in such a dangerous place. His children could not go to school and his wife could not leave the house. There were attacks on Hazara people every day.

He finally made enough money to pay for the Spouse Visa application to bring his family to Australia. He obtained all the necessary documents, paid for the medical checks, the DNA checks and other costs. Finally after waiting for over a year he believed that his family would soon be with him. Their hopes and dreams would be fulfilled and they could live in safety.



From Eureka Street 21st Jan 2014

Then in January this year he received a letter from the Immigration Department. This informed him that applications for family reunion by refugees who arrived by boat would be placed at the bottom of the pile for processing- which effectively means they will never be processed. All the money he had paid would not be refunded. There was no appeal, this was a decision and directive of the minister. He will never be reunited with his family.

WALK for JUSTICE for REFUGEES PALM SUNDAY MARCH 2pm, April 13, State Library corner Swanston & La Trobe Sts Melbourne

organised by
Refugee
Advocacy
Network
endorsed by:



act for peace
AFU
JESUIT SOCIAL SERVICES
Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce
UNSW
ST MICHAEL'S
Uniting Church in Australia
writers for refugees
ASTEE & PACE
African Think Tank Inc.

call Chris 0403 013 183 or Marie 0409 252 673 for more info - refugeeadvocacynetwork.org

Please try to get thousands to walk. BASP will have a banner so if you feel inclined join us—or you may be able to organise another group to walk together. This is a great opportunity to show solidarity in the cause of justice.

We have leaflets and posters to distribute to advertise this walk. You can get them from us.

All the churches (and all the major humanitarian groups) have spoken against the current policies informing Australia's treatment of asylum seekers. Most of these statements go fairly much ignored.

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE COUNCIL

24 – 32 O'RIORDAN STREET ALEXANDRIA NSW 2015

Tel: +61 (0) 2 8306 3499 Fax: +61 (0) 2 8306 3498

Email: admin@acsjc.org.au Website: www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au

23 January 2014

MEDIA RELEASE

Refugee policy a 'campaign of cruelty': Bishop

The Australian government is in effect conducting a campaign of cruelty towards asylum seekers, the Chairman of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, Bishop Christopher Saunders, said today.

'The government's campaign, like that of its predecessors, has only one purpose: to deter desperate men, women and children from seeking protection from persecution and danger', Bishop Saunders said.

'The government claims that it is fighting a war', Bishop Saunders said. 'If it is a war, then it is being fought against wretched and defenceless people.'

'We are ignoring the most important issue: the millions of people in our region and around the world who need protection and security.'

'The only hope for a solution to the refugee problem is international cooperation', Bishop Saunders said.

'Australia's policies are undermining and destroying that hope by angering the very nations we need to work with.'

'It seems that friendly relationships with our neighbours are becoming collateral damage in pursuit of an aggressive and callous policy', Bishop Saunders continued.

'Can we be surprised if Indonesia is offended when Australian naval ships stray into its waters, or when we ignore its protests and force boats to turn back to their sovereign territory?'

Bishop Saunders quoted recent words of Pope Francis, who said: 'Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity'. The Pope called for us all to move away from 'attitudes of defensiveness and fear'.

'It is time for the Australian government to act in accordance with its responsibilities under the Refugee Convention and to exercise compassion towards those who come to our shores justly seeking a new life in peace', Bishop Saunders said.

For further information:

Bishop Christopher Saunders
Chairman, ACSJC

Tel: 0418 260 155

John Ferguson, David Brennan, ACSJC

Tel: 02 8306 3499

What impact do asylum seekers have on Australia's migration?

(For those who like figures)

Acknowledgment to ID blog which presents an analysis of information from "Asylum Trends, Australia", published by the Department of Immigration and Border Control each year.

The following is data relating to asylum seeker arrivals in 2012-13. During this time, a total of 26,427 people sought asylum in Australia. This was a significant increase on the previous year and the number has been increasing each year since 2007-8, when it was only 4,008 people. Based on the numbers above, however, it still only represents about 0.16% of world refugees.

Of the 26,427 arrivals, 18,119 (68%) were Irregular Maritime Arrivals (IMAs) arriving by boat, while 8,308 (32%) were non-IMAs arriving by plane. Both these measures have been in an uptrend for the past 10 years, but boat arrivals more so, more than doubling in the last year. Going back to the early 2000s, there were far fewer arrivals in total, with around 90% arriving by plane.

What countries are asylum seekers from?

Generally, arrivals by boat and arrivals by plane come from different countries. The boat arrivals are mainly from three countries – Sri Lanka (27%), Iran (24%) and Afghanistan (20%) in 2012-13. Smaller numbers were from Pakistan and Iraq.

Plane arrivals were more of a mixed bunch, with the highest percentage from China (13.7%) and India (11.9%), and also quite a few from Egypt, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia and Burma.

What is the age profile of asylum seekers?

Asylum seekers, like most migrants, tend to be young, with between 60-70% under the age of 30 (the median age for Australia's population is 37). This is a common argument for migration as it helps offset the aging population. Migration overall (not just refugees) was responsible for a big increase in Australia's population aged 25-29 in the last Census.

In 2012-13, decisions were made on 5,274 arrivals by plane, of which about half (48.4%) were granted protection visas, becoming refugees in Australia's migration intake. Interestingly, while there were only 4,949 final decisions made for boat arrivals (about a quarter of the number who arrived by boat in this year), the likelihood that they would be approved was far higher, at 88%. This is mainly due to the country of origin of boat arrivals – Asylum seekers arriving from Iran and Afghanistan had grant rates around 90% regardless of the mode of transport. The grant rate for Sri Lanka was lower, however.

What this means is that **a far higher proportion of those arriving by boat are assessed as genuine refugees than those arriving by plane. So if the aim of government policy is to discourage non-genuine refugees from seeking asylum (and therefore free up government resources to deal with the genuine cases of persecution), a policy of "stop the planes" would be significantly more effective than "stop the boats".**

How much of Australia's total migration is due to asylum seekers?

In this period 10,223 final protection visas were issued to asylum seekers, making them officially refugees. This was around a 50-50 split between plane and boat arrivals.

During this time, Australia's net overseas migration was approximately 243,000 made up of 495,000 arrivals, and 252,000 departures. So, of the 495,000 arrivals, the processed asylum seekers make up around 2.1%. Even if all the arrivals in this time had been processed and had visas granted, they have made up only 5.3% of total migration into Australia. In reality, the number of asylum seekers/refugees is dwarfed by the number of skilled migration and family visas granted every year, on a temporary and permanent basis.

So in 2012-13 asylum seekers had very little impact on Australia's population or migration intake relative to other types of migration. With a determined effort by the Government to stop the entry of asylum seekers by boat this impact will be reduced further.

Women caught up in global people movement

Maria* never wanted to leave Iran. She was very close to her mother and her sisters. With a small child she felt very supported by her family. However, Ali, her husband, had most of his family leaving over a matter of months. This included his mother who above all else was desperate to keep her family together. So Maria found herself in a strange country, caught up in her husband's family problems. Pregnant for a second time she was sick, lonely and somewhat unsure of what was happening. After being released from detention, she with husband and child moved from one state to another three times in fairly quick succession. Her husband's family are separated between Nauru, Iran, and two different Australian states.

Yamin * is a Burmese woman in Dandenong who has an eight year old daughter. After leaving a detention centre, she went to live with a relative. That family charges her more than half the expenses of rental. She has barely enough to buy food and basics. On the other side of the city, Rajad,* another Burmese woman with a small eighteen month old son, lives with her sister and brother in law in a two bedroom flat. All left detention at the same time mid 2013. The couple complain if the small boy cries, touches anything or impacts at all on their (limited) space. As much as possible, Rajad stays in her small room.



Zahra* a nineteen year old Afghani woman is in detention. She came to Australia by herself to escape a forced marriage to an 'old man'. She has been detained for nearly a year and a half. She is intelligent and gutsy but the experience is beginning to break her. Her hair is turning grey.

Jahila* is an Ethiopian mother whose three children are still in Ethiopia. She had no particular interest in politics, owned a couple of shops and had no intention of leaving her country. Her husband was involved in politics, was in prison for two years and then bribed his way out of jail. He went into hiding and the authorities then targeted Jahila in order to find him. She is desperate for her children.



Nauru

Alyaa* is a Syrian with two small boys and a family in the part of Damascus that is most at risk. She is a teacher and asks poignantly "Can I teach here?" With her own children she is such a brilliant teacher and has perfect English. She can't work here, let alone teach.

What has happened to decency?

As visitors at a detention centre, we are meeting asylum seeker parents fearful of what this government is willing to do to them and their children. They do not know if they and their families may be deported by force in the middle of the night to Nauru or Manus Island. Mothers have heard of the reports of violence on Manus, the risk of malaria on Manus and substandard living conditions on Nauru – they are afraid for their children.

A heavily pregnant woman has been given the chance to buy some baby clothes. Not an unusual scenario. However this woman looks among the clothes for a two year old boy. When questioned why she would not

start with clothes for a new born she said ‘My baby boy died nearly two years ago and on his birthday I want to give some new clothes to another family with a two year old boy’. Zhara* and her husband and their baby were on a boat that sank. They were among those rescued by the Indonesian authorities and eventually got to Christmas Island. They were only there for three days when they were sent to Nauru. Now they are in Melbourne in detention—and threatened with being returned to Nauru when the baby is born. Nauru where the temperature in the tents is 50degrees in the middle of the day, where there are four toilets for two hundred women, where there is insufficient running water for the population.

Sazia* has a husband and three children in Kenya. She spent several years there with her family having had to flee from Somalia. Then she was targeted by some militant group in Kenya and, despite being pregnant, she had to leave her family and eventually ended up on Christmas Island and again she was sent to Nauru. Sazia is dignified and beautiful, kind and sensitive. It is a moving experience to spend time with her. Again she is being told she will have to return to Nauru when her baby is born.

Vimsa* from the age of 5 was a refugee in Iran having been born in Afghanistan. Her husband has the same refugee background. Vimsa says ‘my life has been ruined. I don’t want my kids lives to be like mine. I cam to Australia for my rights but there is no way they help me. My little girl is sick and we will have to go back to Christmas Island when her medicine is fixed up. A family we came with on the boat was sent to Nauru today. They have been on Christmas Island for seven months. I am frightened for my children’.

There are families who have been in detention for a year and half.

Tarek* is currently in detention with his cousin. Many people on the boat they arrived on were drowned. The people on the boat were mostly from Northern Lebanon where there is a lot of instability and it’s becoming increasingly difficulty to survive. Tarek and his cousin were rescued from the boat, taken to Christmas Island, then moved to Villawood in Sydney and finally brought down to Melbourne. His family back in Lebanon were aware of the accident involving the boat which he and his cousin were on. Although he contacted them, the news coverage of the accident was such that his family were sure he had not survived. He rang them but they kept saying: “We know he drowned”, “We know he died”. He was desperate to be able to talk to them on Skype so that he could see them and they could see him. BASP was able to arrange for him to Skype his family. His children were so excited. He was crying, his wife was crying but there was a great excitement that a husband and father had been spared.

*name changed

Some people appear to be arguing that advocates for asylum seekers did not object to policies that led to the drownings at sea and now still criticise the policy that has stopped boats coming and therefore has stopped the loss of life when boats sank. Advocates wanted the drowning stopped and put forward many proposals to achieve this. The present cruel practices are not a way of stopping the loss of life but constitute an attack on basic human rights.



Good News



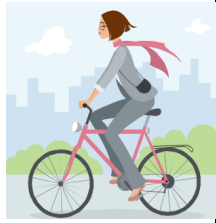
The Bike program

(From the Coordinator: Geoff Lowther)

If all the bikes promised to us arrive, we will have collected more than 400!!!! (we have already collected approximately 230 and given out 80)

We now have 6 volunteers working from their homes repairing bikes for us.

We also have entered into a loose partnership arrangement with the Department of Justice in Sunshine—they work with young offenders to repair bikes. They have agreed to supply their own bikes on our behalf to all the asylum seekers we nominate in the Western suburbs.



Christmas 2013

Christmas was wonderful due to the hard work and support of many. BASP had a party at Albert Park for a large gathering of supporters and those we seek to help.



BASP also had a party at MITA and Sonjeeta and a small group of helpers provided a gift for each of the people in detention. Then we had Christmas dinner with all of those who are in the accommodation provided by the Project.

Children are still children—and they have birthdays and explore new places—and are beautiful. It is poignant to look at them and wonder if they will still face an insecure future in the years to come.



Abbeyfield House

A house with nine bedrooms became available at least for six months for people being able to move in to the community. The Abbeyfield Housing group provide housing for low income elderly people. They are not keeping this house in East Malvern but the new owners will not take over for some time. In the meantime a Somalian family and three other Somalian women have moved in. It was wonderful

because the family had been separated in two different locations and they are now in the community and together. The people responsible for the house have been just wonderful.

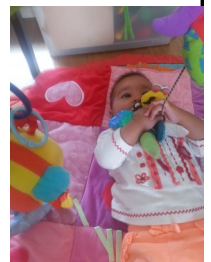
Thanks so much to Andrew and Lorna from Abbeyfield and Libby and others from BASP



In December, a family offered to share their home with an asylum seeker family for Christmas and asked the BASP to help organise this. The BASP knew of an asylum seeker family living in a home of one bedroom and one living area. The husband, wife and two children (including a new baby) were sleeping in the living room and a young twenty year old man was sleeping in the only bedroom. Their living situation was clearly very cramped the kind gesture of spending Christmas elsewhere was greatly appreciated.

However, the father was concerned that the baby would wake at night and disturb the family but this was not an issue and so it was decided that the two families would spend the Christmas together.

Similar stories of other families offering their homes over the Christmas period show the generosity and concern felt amongst the Australian community for those less fortunate.



And more Good News



BASP has support from several church groups:

- Our Lady of Good Counsel, Deepdene and St Columbas, Elwood parishes has been bringing groceries for many years
- The Uniting Church parish of St Kilda sends groceries regularly
- The Parish in St Dominic's Camberwell is providing accommodation in a house they furnished and set up wonderfully for a family from Syria.
- St Josephs Malvern has set up a special and focussed fund-raising effort to assist people released into the community from detention
- St Thomas Blackburn have engaged in a very structured approach to assisting asylum seekers and as part of this they have brought a lot of groceries and cleaning items for us to give to families
- St Patricks Murrumbidgee brought many many presents for children all wrapped up and labelled them age specific for Christmas
- St Joan of Arc in Brighton bring groceries regularly.



Support for BASP

We have managed to 'snare' some absolutely wonderful support from volunteers.

Libby Saunders has taken on the role of Volunteer Support Coordinator. Libby has a wealth of experience as the CEO of Calvary Silver Circle .

Selvi is giving regular assistance to the Project mainly in administration at present.

The Family Support Through English Program is progressing. About twenty families are being assisted.

We have a number of people who assist with monitoring legal cases and advocacy. With this help we have kept monitoring the Hasara men who are in limbo with their cases. As a way of informing BASP about changes to government policies, legal cases and so on this group is invaluable.

For a long time now we have had the support of Noelle to keep the pantry and other donations in order so that they can be given to people in need.

A small group are exploring the establishment of a sewing group for women who are isolated in the 'no right to work, study' cohort.

Schools are amazing in their support. Brigidine schools continue to help in many ways. And there are a number of other schools who are great.

Over the Christmas week, a family living in Rye had to leave their house for a week. Julia Williams took them into her house for this period and gave them 'a Christmas time'.

A number of asylum seekers come into the office and help with phone calls, computer work and general tasks.

Needed Right now

We need a bar frig (or a small frig). We sometimes need furniture and household goods—but we can't store them so it is only when people are ready to move into a house that we need these. Then we are very grateful for assistance to move the goods!

Delivery

We have a small band of people willing to deliver goods and furniture. More 'deliverers' would be welcome.

Werribee

There are families with a need for support in the Werribee area. Is there anyone who may be able to assist?

How you can help ...

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**

Advocacy

Write to your local member of Parliament (or call in and see them) and ask for a more humane approach to asylum seekers

Food that is very welcome

Eggs, sugar, rice, flour, salt, two minute noodles, cooking oil, tea and coffee, long life milk, tuna, canned tomatoes, canned fruit, chick peas, canned beans

Other goods always in demand

Cleaning materials and dishwashing detergents, toilet paper. Currently we need some TV's (we can really only manage flat screen and up to medium size due to ease of transport).

Something Special

A voucher for Coles, Big W, Kmart or similar stores allows asylum seekers the independence to buy something they really want and need.

Things we can't take

We can't manage clothing. We do not have anywhere to store furniture or large items or other household goods.

THANK YOU

We want to thank all who have sent donations. We feel somewhat humbled by the number of people who donate to BASP.



We thank you on behalf of all those who are assisted by your generosity. We are able to maintain the accommodation we offer as part of the Project.

But as well, to be able to buy some clothes when necessary, give some money for a family stranded overseas because the breadwinner is here, to help pay expenses for a legal case which gives some people some hope or to help out the electricity bill in simply unmanageable—all these and more are possible with your help.

Brigid Arthur

Catherine Kelly