REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW
Rarely do refugees have the chance to make plans for their departure: to pack their belongings, to say farewell to their friends and families... Some refugees have to flee with no prior notice, taking with them only the clothes on their backs. Others, like the family that pretends to be going on a weekend break, have to keep their plans a secret from all around them in case they are discovered.

Refugees often have little idea about where they are going. They are running away, not running to. Those who come to Australia often have scant understanding about our country and the nature of society here. They have had no opportunity to prepare themselves physically or psychologically for their new life in Australia. A significant proportion of refugees have experienced severe trauma. Many have been tortured.

So, why should we help?

First up, Australia has committed to the rights of asylum seekers as a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and other international conventions.

Second, Christians generally, and The Salvation Army specifically are called to meet the needs of the most marginalised in our society, and in our world. While geographical and political boundaries may provide some separation between you, and the rest of the world, our adoption as children of God means our brothers and sisters can be found in any country. And when they are in need, we must advocate and serve despite the obstacles holding us back. Refugees are fleeing incredible persecution, and with boundless plains to share, we must support the resettlement of those in need.

We must advocate for the development of proactive, compassionate and appropriate human rights focused policies in relation to all asylum seekers, based on an amended Migration Act. It is imperative that Australia demonstrates a commitment to international human rights through the enactment of appropriate domestic legislation that upholds and promotes those rights and ensures minimum standards of treatment and conditions for detainees in line with the relevant international conventions.
Refugees?

If any person has a well-founded fear of being persecuted, whether because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and if they are outside the country of their nationality and if they are unable, or owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, they are deemed a refugee. If a person is found to be a refugee, Australia is obliged under international law to offer support and to ensure that the person is not sent back unwillingly to the country of origin.

Asylum seekers:

For some of the world’s refugee population it is either impractical or impossible to go first to a neighbouring country and then to seek resettlement from there. This could be because the neighbouring countries are not signatories to the international laws that would ensure their protection in these countries (few countries in Australia’s region, for instance, are signatories to the Refugee Convention). It could also be because they would not be safe in a neighbouring country, in particular if that country was sympathetic to the persecutory regime. In these cases, individuals may choose to try to go directly to a country, such as Australia, where they can seek protection. Such people are called asylum seekers. Those who come to Australia have usually entered with a visitors’, student or other temporary visa. Some arrive with no documents or with false documents.

The act of recognition of refugee status does not make someone a refugee. He/she has been a refugee all along; the granting of status merely makes it official. This is why it is important to presume that asylum seekers are refugees until proven otherwise. Failure to do this can mean that a country does not meet its legal obligations to genuine refugees.
No documents?

Arriving without papers should not be seen as an attempt to defraud the system. Nor should it be called ‘illegal’. By definition, refugees are people who are at risk of persecution. In most cases, the main source of persecution is their government. Applying for a passport and/or an exit visa can be far too dangerous for some refugees; so too can be an approach to an Australian Embassy for a visa. These actions can put their lives, and those of their families, at risk. In such cases refugees may have to travel on forged documents or bypass regular migration channels and arrive without papers.

If a person enters without a valid visa or passport, he/she is initially detained while health, security and character checks are conducted. Asylum seekers in detention receive assistance to lodge their claims for refugee status. If a person is assessed as having fulfilled refugee asylum criteria they are given a permanent protection visa.

Persons with documents

If a person enters Australia with documents (usually by air) and applies for asylum, they are given a Bridging Visa that allows them to remain legally in the community while their application for refugee status is being considered. If their application was not made within 45 days of arrival, they are neither eligible for a work permit nor Medicare. Welfare Support for asylum seekers is limited and is provided through a small number of community agencies who receive little or no funding from the Government.

What do we need to do about it?

The Salvation Army respects the Government’s right to take reasonable measures to control and regulate entry into Australia. Issues of border security and eradication of people smuggling are important, but need to be separated from the fair and compassionate treatment of asylum seekers.

- Offshore and onshore processing of ‘Irregular Maritime Arrivals’
There are 4 immigration detention centres on the Australian mainland:

- Villawood (Sydney, NSW)
- Maribyrnong (Melbourne, Vic)
- Perth (WA)
- Northern Immigration Detention Centre (Darwin, NT)

In addition, there is an immigration and reception and processing centre on Christmas Island, which is south of the Indonesian island of Java. This centre is primarily for people who arrive unauthorised by boat.

The current practice of detaining asylum seekers who arrive by boat on excised territory severely restricts their access to basic rights and services, including legal representation, education, translators, and advocacy and health services. This approach impacts on the mental, physical and emotional health of asylum seekers and lacks compassion and dignity.

**We want:**

- All asylum seekers to be received on Australian soil and not accommodated in off-shore facilities.
- The excising of Australian islands for the purpose of the Migration Act to be stopped.
- All claims to be commenced promptly and completed within the shortest possible timeframes through increasing funding for health, character and security checks.
- Provision of increased funding for community support as the primary response for asylum seekers. This involves funding and enabling community agencies to provide comprehensive support regardless of visa status.
- All bridging (A-E) visas, while awaiting determination or final review of protection visa applications, to include the right to work and the access to full medical support.

Information on alternative models to mandatory detention can be found at [http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/current/alternatives.html](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/current/alternatives.html)
What will happen if we let them come?

Asylum seekers and refugees can and do make as valuable a contribution to the nation as other migrants. They should be welcomed with respect and compassion. Given Australia’s ongoing programme of migration, and the increasing need for the resettlement of people displaced by conflict, The Salvation Army urges the Australian Government to increase the proportion of refugee and humanitarian migration into Australia; to a level comparable with other industrialised countries.

The UNHCR report highlights that most of the world’s refugees are being protected in countries much poorer than Australia. Of the 10.4 million refugees under UNHCR’s mandate, the largest numbers were being hosted by Pakistan (1,740,711), Iran (1,070,488), Syria (1,054,466), Germany (593,799), Jordan (450,756), Kenya (358,928), Chad (338,495) and China (300,989).

By contrast, Australia was ranked 47th, hosting 22,548 refugees (0.2% of the global total). Australia was 68th on a per capita basis and 91st relative to national wealth.

We want the government to:

• Increase the intake of refugees and asylum seekers in addition to the overall migration intake.
• Increase the support and opportunities provided to enable refugees and asylum seekers to fully participate in the social and economic life of Australia.
What can you do?

1. Get educated! Read about the issue and get information from the refugee support groups. You can sign up to their email list. Groups you can contact.
   c. http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au

2. Pay attention to the media and what is being said about current policy, do you agree or not? If you are unsure find out more and if you disagree get busy advocating.

3. Advocate with refugee groups. This can be through supporting the Refugee Council, Migrant groups or similar services in your local area.

4. Talk to your Divisional Social Programme Secretary about contacting your MP. You will be able to find out what your MP knows about these issues and what they are prepared to do to help.

5. Do you have any refugees in your community? Find out! Can you support them by inviting them to church or community events?

6. Hold a cultural awareness night and educate your school, community group or church about who refugees are and how they are currently being treated in Australia.

7. If you attend an educational institution do an assignment, speech or presentation on this issue.

8. Send a care package to a detention centre, for a man or woman who maybe waiting for their VISA to be processed.

9. Pray for refugees who are waiting all around the world to be placed in a new destination.
Prayer and reflection

“Do not take advantage of foreigners who live among you in your land. Treat them like native-born (Australians), and love them as you love yourself. Remember that you were once foreigners living in the land of (England/Ireland/Italy/…)” Leviticus 19:33-34

Almighty and merciful God,
whose Son became a refugee and had no place to call his own;
look with mercy on those who today are fleeing from danger, homeless and hungry.

Bless those who work to bring them relief; inspire generosity and compassion in all our hearts; and guide the nations of the world towards that day when all will rejoice in your Kingdom of justice and of peace;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(prayer from http://www.invitationtoprayer.org/prayers_refugees.html)

Questions for reflection:

- Imagine you were forced to leave Australia. What would you do? Where would you go? Who and what would you take? What would you expect when you arrived in the new country?
- How would you live differently now if you knew you could be forced out of your county at any minute.
- How would you feel being ‘detained’ if you had committed no crime?
- How do we determine who has a ‘right’ to live in Australia?

This information was provided by the Refugee Council of Australia
The Salvation Army Election Guide 2010