

Debunking the Myths about Asylum Seekers in 2010

Myth 1: Australia is being inundated by people in boats.

Fact: This is false. Approximately 2000 boat people have sought asylum in Australia in 2009. This number is tiny when compared to other countries. Even given an increase in 2009, the annual average number of boat arrivals to Australia is tiny in comparison to the 50,000 people that overstay their visas each year, or when taking into account that on average 95% of asylum seekers actually arrive in Australia by plane.

Myth 2: The numbers coming to Australia are higher than other countries.

Fact: This is false. In 2008, 42 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced from their homes. During 2008, 88,800 refugees were resettled in various countries throughout the world including Australia, while another 839,000 applied for asylum. Only 4,750 of these claims were made in Australia: this is 0.57% of all asylum claims. In the same period France received 35,400 claims, the USA received 49,600 and South Africa 207,000.

Myth 3: Australia receives more refugees than most other countries.

Fact: This is untrue. The number of asylum seekers worldwide has increased significantly over the past two years. From 2007 to 2008 asylum seeker numbers rose by 122 per cent in Italy, 121 per cent in Norway, 89 per cent in the Netherlands, 70 per cent in Turkey, 53 per cent in Switzerland, 30 per cent in Canada and 20 per cent in France. In the same period, Australia had only a 19 per cent increase.

Myth 4: Australia hosts more refugees than most other countries.

Fact: Developing countries host four-fifths of the world's refugees. According to the UN's global statistics on asylum seekers the major refugee hosting countries at the end of 2008 were Pakistan (1,780,900); Syria (1,105,700); Iran (980,100); Germany (582,700); Jordan (500,400); Chad (330,500); Tanzania (321,900); Kenya (320,600); China (301,000) and the United Kingdom (292,100). Australia comes in 32nd out of 71 countries resettling refugees - slightly behind Kazakhstan, Guinea, and Djibouti.

Myth 5: More boats are coming because of a 'softening' of asylum seeker policy in Australia.

Fact: Asylum seeker numbers have increased in 2009 all over the world – not just in Australia. Australia has received far less applications than other countries. The reason for large increases internationally is not because countries have "gone soft", but because the violence in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and Sri Lanka has worsened. An increase in the number and intensity of worldwide "push factors" has forced many to flee.

Myth 6: Australia takes more asylum seekers now than ever before.

Fact: Wrong. Despite our recent increase, we still have far fewer asylum seekers now than we did in 2001 (when we received more than 5500 by boat) or in 2002 (about 3000).

Myth 7: Temporary protection visas and the 'Pacific Solution' stopped the boats.

Fact: Unauthorised boat arrivals to Australia increased after the introduction of temporary protection visas (TPV's) in 1999 (48 per cent more asylum seekers arrived by boat in 2001 than in 1999). Boat arrivals only started decreasing in 2003 when global asylum seeker numbers started dropping, not because of TPV's and the Pacific Solution.

Myth 8: People who come by boat are 'illegals'.

Fact: Anyone who comes to Australia seeking protection - regardless of whether they come on a boat or on a plane - has a right under international and Australian law to apply for that protection. As an asylum seeker, they have legal status.

Myth 9: Most asylum seekers come by boat.

Fact: Most asylum seekers come to Australia by plane. In 2008, more than 95 per cent of asylum seekers arrived by plane,

Myth 10: There are terrorists on the boats.

Fact: There is no evidence for this. All asylum seekers are subject to rigorous security checks upon arrival and they are held in detention. In the entire period of the Howard and Rudd Governments not one asylum seeker was found to be a security risk to the country. Anyone who has been charged with terror related activities was either born here or arrived on a plane with a valid visa.

Myth 11 : Now the war has ended in Sri Lanka it is perfectly safe to send asylum seekers back to where they came from.

Fact: The absence of war in Sri Lanka does not mean peace. The Government of Sri Lanka were a party to one of the most violent civil wars the world has seen. There are very few signs that the cycle of violence has been broken in Sri Lanka. According to international and Australian law, asylum seekers need to have their claims for protection assessed so that a correct determination can be made as to whether or not they are refugees. To send anyone back before processing is completed, not only is a breach of our international obligations, it runs the risk of sending legitimate refugees back to the very dangers they need to be protected from.

Myth 12: Only the Australian Government has the right to "decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come".

Fact: It is more complicated than this, because of the operation of international laws and customs. The application of International Humanitarian Law usually depends on whether a nation has ratified a particular convention, however some rights are universal. By ratifying the Refugee Convention in 1954 Australia gave any person with a well-founded fear of persecution the right to request protection in Australia – regardless of whether or not their legal travel documents are in order. In addition, through the UN, the international community recognises 'customary international law' which is based on international custom (often unwritten) rather than on treaties. Customary international law prohibits all countries from sending asylum seekers back into danger - known under the legal term "refoulement" - regardless of whether that country has signed the Refugee Convention.