

A Snapshot - People Seeking Asylum in Australia

Introduction

While it is important to acknowledge the positive contribution Australia has made in settling people who have sought asylum here (after coming via visa or other official channels), we also recognize that the story includes much harshness and denial of human rights to those who come by boat.

Before written history

So much about the thousands of years in this land before 1788 is unknown to many of us: perhaps they included the arrival of some people seeking safety.

Late 18th and early 19th centuries

Clearly most of the people who came during this period came by force. Many of them, and others who came of their own accord, were coming from abject poverty and oppression: situations that could not be resolved in their own lands. Given it was colonized by Britain these people came mostly from the British Isles.

19th Century

Later, people came from other places largely because of their religious status. The first among those were Lutherans who came to South Australia from 1839 because of the Prussian restrictions on their right to worship. Following that, others including Hungarians, Italians and Poles, came as a result of religious and political persecution.

After Federation

The Immigration (Restriction) Act 1901 meant that, while refugees were still allowed to settle, they had to meet the restrictions placed on them by the 'White Australia' policy. (This remained in place until 1973.)

In the following three decades, small numbers of Russian, Greek, Bulgarian, Armenian, Assyrian and Jewish refugees settled. Between 1933 and 1939, more than 7000 Jews fleeing Nazi Germany were settled.

In 1937, with Australian government support, the Australian Jewish Welfare Society pioneered the first refugee settlement support services.

Post World War II to 1975

After the war, a much larger refugee program was commenced as Australia launched an ambitious immigration program to meet labour shortages in a growing economy. Australia of course through the war had lost via deaths, injury or illness, tens of thousands of people, mostly men, who would have been in the paid workforce. Thus, there is a shift of focus - to the needs of both the refugees and the Australian nation.

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| July 1947 | Australia enters agreement with the International Refugee Organisation to settle displaced people from camps in Europe. |
| 1947 - 53 | Australia welcomed more than 170,000 refugees, mostly from Poland, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. |
| 1953 - 73 | Most were Eastern Europeans fleeing persecution in Soviet Bloc countries. A substantial increase followed the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and the invasion of (former) Czechoslovakia in 1968. |
| 1972 | Refugee intake began to diversify. 198 Asians expelled by Uganda's President Idi Amin were settled. |
| 1973 | Humanitarian settlement from Chile commenced after the Allende Government was deposed. |
| 1974 | Cypriot refugees began arriving after the Turkish invasion of Northern Cyprus. |
| 1975 | The war in East Timor brought 2500 evacuees to Darwin. |

Late 1970's

The fall of Saigon April 1975 resulted in a mass exodus and Australia joined an international response: over the next twenty years 100,000 Vietnamese refugees arrived - some by boat, but most claims were processed by Australia in Malaysian and other camps.

By 1977 policies were put in place including

- procedures for designated refugee situations,
- a series of strategies to involve voluntary agencies in resettlement programs and
- plans to allow the settlement of people who did not fall within the UNHCR mandate or Refugee Convention definitions.

1980's

In the early 1980's the annual intake was up to 22 000 and included mainly Vietnamese but also refugees from Laos, Cambodia and Eastern Europe, smaller groups of Soviet Jews, Chileans, El Salvadorians, Cubans and Iraqi ethnic minorities - Assyrians, Armenians and Chaldeans. 106 Ethiopians in 1984 were the first significant group of Africans.

As the number of Indochinese refugees began to decline in the mid 1980's there was an increase in people from Eastern Europe (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania), the Middle East (Lebanon and Iran), Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, East Timor and Latin America (El Salvador and Chile).

1990's

From 1975 to 1997, 185,700 Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians were resettled. During that time a number of changes to procedures were made by the respective governments. In 1992 the then Labour Government introduced migration acts to detain people automatically if they did not hold a valid visa. Those laws remain the foundation of our detention policies today: even a challenge in the High Court was unsuccessful.

The next wave in this decade was people arriving by boat from Iraq and Afghanistan via Indonesia. One of the policy responses in 1999 was the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV).

To the present

Until 1999 and from 2002 to 2009 automatic detention mainly affected people overstaying their visas, but otherwise it has involved people arriving by boat. This policy has basically been maintained despite declarations from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity that it breaches Australia's human rights obligations and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In 2001, to prevent people having any hope of settlement in Australia and to "absolve" Australia from having to process applications for arrivals there, territories were excised, "off-shore" processing began (moving people to Nauru or Manus Island) and boats were turned back.

The preoccupation of governments over recent decades has been to prevent further influxes, and apart from a temporary easing from 2008, the situation became more and more restrictive. People were detained offshore with little hope of any other future.

- they were admitted to Australia only temporarily in the case of medical needs
- some were being accepted into USA or returned home
- Border Force were turning back any boats
- Ongoing overnment policy changes meant support was restricted further, and conditions more precarious.

From 2022, some significant changes were promised and are gradually being progressed, though other policies like turning back boats remain in place. People on temporary visas are being given permanency, no one is detained on Nauru and the men who remain in PNG are not in prison. Other promises were in regard to improving procedures: progress there is not clear at this point.

Conclusion

So many have sought asylum over earlier decades and been supported, albeit imperfectly at times. There was then, and there still is, negative feeling in the Australian population. The situation for many people seeking asylum is still dire, given the damage they have suffered and inadequate support they have received. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of people care about them and work to ensure a better future, one in which they have a way to live that is in keeping with their dignity and their needs.

Links

The following links were used for this snapshot.

<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/asylum-policies/4/>

<https://legalanswers.sl.nsw.gov.au/hot-topics-77-refugees/australias-refugee-program>

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/a-brief-history-of-immigration-to-australia>

https://www.aph.gov.au/about_parliament/parliamentary_departments/parliamentary_library/pubs/bn/2012-2013/boatarrivals

https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/AsylumFacts

<https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/projects/history-australian-refugee-policy>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indochina_refugee_crisis

for Robinson, W. Courtland *Terms of Refuge* United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, London: Zed Books, 1998 p. 270, 276, Appendix 2; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 23, 1978, p. 20