

Refugee Myths and Realities

PHOTO: ADRIAN HEKE



Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand seeks to foster a climate of tolerance, love and respect for all people, particularly those in need. We encourage public support for refugees living in our community. The practice of granting asylum to people fleeing persecution in foreign lands is recorded in texts written 3,500 years ago.

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me” Matthew 25:35

In simple terms, refugees are people who have fled their home country as a result of persecution (or a well-founded fear of persecution) because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or their political opinions.

The full definition is in the text of the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951

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REFUGEE FAMILY REUNIFICATION TRUST



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Myth:
Refugees are flooding into the country.

Reality

New Zealand accepts a small quota of 750 refugees for resettlement each year. These people have been identified, by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as among the most vulnerable of the world's many millions of refugees. They are seen to be in urgent need of international protection through resettlement because they cannot return to their homeland and their safety and welfare cannot be guaranteed in the country to which they first fled.

Less than one per cent of the world's 10 million+ refugees are ever resettled in third countries like New Zealand. Meanwhile, the average length of time spent in refugee camps by refugees waiting for some durable solution to their plight has recently risen to 17 years.

In 2006, a total of 71,500 refugees were resettled in the 15 countries that currently maintain resettlement programmes.

Refugee resettlement into a third country such as New Zealand is only one of three durable options recognised by the United Nations.

- **Voluntary repatriation** (returning home) is the preferred option. However refugees can only return home when conditions in their country change and their safety and security can once again be guaranteed.
- **Local integration** into the country of first asylum (usually a neighbouring country whose borders refugees have crossed seeking safety) can only occur where that country has the capacity and willingness to accept the integration of such people.
- **Resettlement** is generally reserved for those in greatest need of international protection or durable solution, and only occurs where the other two options are not feasible.

“Can a war criminal or terrorist be a refugee?”

*No. People who have participated in war crimes and violations of international humanitarian and human rights law – including acts of terrorism – are specifically excluded from the protection afforded to refugees.”**

Refugees flee their own countries to escape violence, persecution and terror – failure to get to a safe country could lead to torture or cost them their lives.

Myth: If you let one refugee into the country, they will bring 20 of their relatives.

Reality

The sad reality is that many families are separated when they flee danger, and it may take many years to find each other again. Often children become separated from their parents. Eventually these families need to be reunited in a safe place. If, for example, a mother has come to New Zealand without her children, she will understandably do her best to bring her children to join her here.

Wherever possible, entire dependent refugee families are included at the time of selection of the annual Refugee Quota of 750 places. If separated members of a refugee's immediate family are later located in a refugee situation, it would be normal for them to be included within a subsequent quota intake. They therefore do not add in any way to the annual figure of 750.

There is an additional quota of 300 places allocated annually in the new Refugee Family Support Category. This programme is intended to support the settlement outcomes of refugees who are particularly isolated or have no immediate family support in New Zealand. This programme operates on a queuing basis and has strict eligibility criteria.

Family reunion under the general immigration policy has extremely strict eligibility criteria and very few refugees are successful in bringing any family members to join them under this category.

Myth: Refugees are migrants and should be considered in the same way.

Reality

No. "Migrants and refugees are fundamentally different, and for that reason are treated very differently... even if they often travel in the same way."* Migrants choose to leave their country; refugees *do not choose* – they flee in response to a crisis. Migrants have time to prepare their emotions, their possessions, and their documents including passports and qualification records; refugees *are unprepared* and flee often secretly – unprepared emotionally for leaving, without saying goodbye to family, and without possessions or any documents whatsoever.

* UNHCR: *Protecting Refugees 2007-2008*

Myth: Refugees are unskilled and go straight on the unemployment benefit.

Reality: International protection involves more than just physical safety: refugees who are accepted into New Zealand should receive at least the same basic rights and assistance as anyone else who is a legal resident, including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Refugees may need a period of time to re-train, or to have their skills recognised. Refugees want to work, participate, and be involved – just like other New Zealanders. New Zealanders value the opportunity to learn and thrive in educational institutions – so do refugees.

Myth: Refugees can bring health problems into the country.

Reality: New Zealand accepts its international responsibilities by accepting a broad range of refugee cases. These include complex and vulnerable cases such as those with illnesses and disabilities. Refugees coming to New Zealand under the UNHCR refugee quota programme spend their first six weeks at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre in Auckland. The medical clinic there provides health screening (including HIV screening) and management of any problems.

Myth: The number of refugees is decreasing and the problem is almost solved.

Reality: In 2007, the number of people of concern to the UNHCR was a record 32.9 million, including refugees and internally displaced people. For the first time in five years, the global refugee population increased by over one million people. These numbers put into context New Zealand's acceptance of 750 refugees annually.

What about asylum seekers?

Asylum seekers are people who arrive independently (usually at our international airports and rarely via seaports) and declare that they are seeking refugee status. The claims of such people are then very closely scrutinised by Government.

Asylum seekers must meet exactly the same eligibility requirements as other refugees – as defined in the Convention. If their claim is found to be genuine, New Zealand is obligated to grant them refugee status and protection. If not, they may be returned to their country of origin or former residence unless there are compelling humanitarian reasons that this should not be done.