

Refugees and immigrants

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The stalemate over 438 refugees rescued by a Norwegian freighter when their boat sank in Australian waters was due to end on September 03, 2001 after a "Pacific solution" was announced: the Australian government proposed that 150 be sent to New Zealand and the rest to the island of Nauru, via Papua New Guinea. On arrival at the two locations, their refugee status would be assessed. Thereafter, those judged to be genuine refugees would be accommodated in Australia, New Zealand and Norway. The resolution of the crisis was delayed by the legal intervention of an Australian civil rights group. The group has been pleading on behalf of the refugees. It is of the view that since the refugees are already in Australian territorial waters they must be allowed to disembark on Australian soil and their refugee status must be determined there. As Australia struggles to keep these Afghan refugees off its soil, the Afghan government is holding a group of eight foreigners, including two Australians, working for a charity called Shelter International. They have been accused of proselytizing. Sixteen Afghans accused of converting to Christianity are also in prison. The Australian governments' frantic efforts to keep Afghan refugees off its soil are in contrast to its concern for the two Australian citizens sitting in a prison in Afghanistan.

One of the most tragic byproducts of war, political oppression and economic instability is the refugee. The number of political refugees, victims of ethnic conflict and civil strife in the world, grew from 8 million towards the end of the 1970's to about 20 million during the early 1990's. The term "refugee" covers those who have crossed international borders—the reason for doing so may be different in various cases and in different parts of the world. Every day an estimated 10,000 people in various parts of the world are forced to flee from their countries for political reasons. An equal number are now believed to be fleeing for reasons that are not political. Those deprived of opportunities for gainful employment and social support within their own countries for political, ethnic or reasons other than lack of competence, are non-persons for the state. In an effort to change their circumstances they may try to relocate. Their condition merits attention but the international community appears to believe that the level of distress in such situations is bearable and does not warrant refugee status. It is estimated that two out of every 130 persons on the face of the earth have been forced to leave their permanent place of residence. About 26 million people are known to have been forced to leave their homes and displaced but are not registered as refugees, since they have not crossed international borders. Others are not registered because their country of origin would consider their registration as refugees a hostile move.

About 35 million people have emigrated, and continue to emigrate, at the rate of about a million a year, from less developed countries to the prosperous industrialized countries. These people are now referred to as "economic refugees". Some travel through legal channels, such as the 79,000 that left Pakistan during the year 2000. Many more take the clandestine route: on September 02, 2001 the Channel tunnel was closed when a group of persons, believed to be illegal immigrants, were found at one end of the tunnel. On the same day a group of forty

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illegal immigrants were found concealed in a container of furniture that was examined when it came off a ferry at a British port. In most countries these economic refugees do not qualify for assistance since they are fleeing a condition that is not considered life threatening and unlikely to be eased in the foreseeable future—poverty. There has been a marked increase in racial tension in many parts of the world when asylum seekers have been confined to small communities prior to processing for refugee status.

The traditional focus of the activities of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) continues to be on securing the right of refugees to asylum. The agency acknowledges that the countries that were proud to grant asylum to those seeking refuge from persecution are now less keen to do so. Many of these countries say they want to guard their frontiers from what they perceive to be "eco-

vention the international community gives authority to use force to create order within national boundaries of sovereign states, reluctantly and in extreme cases.

When the policy of containment of displaced persons within national borders was first introduced in 1993-1994 there was confusion and dismay amongst thousands of Afghans who had previously just walked across to safety in Pakistan whenever fighting erupted. Fewer people were permitted to cross the border during outbreaks of hostility between rival groups in Afghanistan once safe areas were designated within the country and UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross began to work there. But the number of internally displaced people increased dramatically. In 1996 fighting displaced about 800,000 who ran from one part of their own country to another in search of safety. The majority of Afghans displaced then, and earlier, during the war of the 1980's are still languishing in refugee camps or wandering around South Asia, looking for routes to greener pastures.

The international community has been encouraging the resettlement of Afghans in Pakistan and Iran. In encouraging the resettlement of Afghans in Pakistan and Iran the international community is seduced by the possibility of creating a force in nearby territories that could eventually be equipped to displace the Taliban. Otherwise there would not be so much pressure to accommodate Afghan refugees outside national boundaries rather than within Afghanistan, in internationally supervised camps for the displaced. It would be foolish in the extreme for both Iran and Pakistan to fall in with such plans.

Assistance to maintain refugee camps has, more or less, dried up. United Nations appeals for donations for Afghan refugees bring in less than 5 percent of

what is being asked for. On the other hand, international pressure on Pakistan and Iran to accommodate and maintain refugees has increased. The pressure is being resisted because the arguments and strategies that have been used by the international community to deal with the humanitarian consequences of political conflict and war are no longer producing the expected results. The social, cultural and political environment of the world has changed. This has created the need for a new set of values in order to formulate workable solutions when dealing with humanitarian issues. Such solutions have to be based on research and profound intellectual activity, rather than the public relations exercises United Nations agencies have become used to conducting from time to time.

The global economy is slowing down. It will be a long while before the effects of economic growth and globalization trickle down to the poor. Economic and social surveys for Asia and the Pacific make depressing reading. They indicate that poverty, slow economic growth, lack of political stability and unemployment will continue to force populations to seek greener pastures outside national borders. These greener pastures may be in hard-pressed, economically weak countries like Pakistan and Iran for the Afghans and in Britain and the United States etc., for East Europeans, Central Asians as well as others.

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nomic refugees", rather than political refugees, and have passed legislation to plug loopholes that allowed such refugees in. A number of countries are of the view that it is becoming more difficult to differentiate between those under political attack, those who are the victims of injustice and those who are merely subject to generally prevalent social and economic distress. The latter, according to the books, do not merit asylum.

While insisting on the right to asylum of all those in danger UNHCR is now also involved in trying to protect internally displaced people by seeking to remove, through negotiations with national governments, the causes of their displacement. These negotiations include efforts to persuade national governments to secure basic human rights within their borders and to take the responsibility for maintaining law and order where groups of the population are pitted against each other. This strategy aims to contain displaced people within their country of origin in an effort to prevent them from becoming refugees in the technical sense of the word. Operations to contain displaced persons within national borders can require the provision of a full range of services, from the establishment of safe areas and military intervention through the deployment of multinational forces operating under mandates given by the United Nations Security Council, to the provision of clean drinking water, food, clothing and shelter. Often it is a case of too little too late. Due to the far-reaching political implications of such inter-