

The Australian

Boat arrivals almost all get visas

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ALMOST all asylum-seekers arriving in Australia waters over the past three years have had their refugee status applications approved, adding weight to claims that people-smugglers are taking advantage of the federal government's immigration policies.

Figures released under Freedom of Information laws show that the Immigration Department approved 94 per cent of all refugee status claims from people arriving illegally by boat, after initial assessments and independent merits reviews, between October 2008 and December 22 last year.

In stark contrast, the department approved only 39 per cent of protection visa requests for non-boat arrivals in the first half of this financial year, or 909 people from the 2321 people who applied.

Opposition immigration spokesman Scott Morrison said the figures proved asylum-seekers were more likely to be granted refugee status if they boarded a boat instead of a plane.

"So long as the bias remains to those arriving by boats, then the government can expect more to come and greater chaos in their asylum policies," he said. "The system bias pulls people into boats."

Mr Morrison said until the federal government changed its policies, the boats would continue.

The department refused 49 per cent of protection visa applications for non-boat arrivals in the 2009-10 financial year, or 2266 people, and 55 per cent the year before, or 2624 people.

A spokesman for Immigration Minister Chris Bowen said the recognition of asylum-seeker claims was made independently and on a case by case basis.

"Recognition rates do move around from time to time and have fallen since the beginning of 2010," he said.

"This government recognises the importance of a process that includes proper and robust assessment of asylum claims, in line with our obligations under the Refugee Convention, and then deals with those whose claims are rejected."

South Australian independent MP Bob Such, who lodged the FOI request, said the high number of successful refugee claims by people arriving by boat showed the federal government's detention policies were "flawed".

"Not only is the current policy costly and harmful to their mental state, it's costly to Australia," Dr Such said. "They're spending hundreds of millions . . . on detaining people who are no threat at all."

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre campaign co-ordinator Pamela Curr said the high number proved the legitimacy of those risking their lives to seek asylum, and denied it encouraged people-smugglers to target Australia.

She said the plane arrivals were more likely to be from countries such as China and India, where people could apply for legitimate visas. "They then seek asylum (on arrival), which is their right, and some of them are genuine refugees," Ms Curr said.

Boatpeople were likely to have come from countries where there were no means to apply for legitimate visas.

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