

Project SafeCom Inc. - Information Sheet 7

Iraq's refugees seek shelter from the storm....

As we go to print, the threat of military conflict in Iraq is increasing. In any conflict, there are grave threats to the civilian population in and around the war zone, including those who flee to the borders to seek refuge. Millions may turn to neighbouring countries like Iran and Turkey for help.

Whatever the political or strategic outcomes of an invasion of Iraq, and whatever possible long-term outcomes for the human rights situation there, it is certain that the immediate future will be grim for the millions caught between Baghdad and the borders.

Estimates vary, but there are approximately 300,000 Iraqi refugees around the world - over 200,000 of these are in Iran. This number would increase dramatically if the bombing starts, and neighbouring countries will face massive influxes of fleeing people.

Iran has publicly stated that it will close its borders and establish refugee camps in Iraqi territory to prevent an influx of refugees into Iran. Turkey's reaction is complicated by possible military roles in any action against Iraq, particularly the use of airbases, and the perceived threat of a Kurdish uprising in northern Iraq spilling over into Kurdish areas of eastern Turkey. The Turkish border will also be closed, and preparations are under way to establish 111 camps in northern Iraq and, under strict supervision, inside Turkey. Syria has already said that they are willing to provide safety and shelter for Iraqi refugees fleeing any conflict. But how and where this will take place is not yet clear. Jordan is in the midst of making preparations for camps on the Iraqi side of the Jordanian border, but it will be closed to all except those in transit or requiring medical assistance. Kuwait has said it will close its borders, although preparations are reportedly under way, with the assistance of international agencies, to accommodate refugees inside Kuwait.

From the Amnesty International Australia's March 2003 Bulletin

But Howard won't change anything....

The Prime Minister John Howard says there will be no change to the Government's refugee policy due to Australian involvement in Iraq. Mr Howard says Australia will play its part and accept a number of refugees along with the rest of the international community. But he says there will be no change to the admission rules.

"There's no change to our policy and that is that people seek admission to Australia as a refugee they have to go through the channels, and I'm quite certain that if there is a refugee surge which I doubt will occur it will be in the other direction I really do," he said. In the last three years just over 4,000 Iraqis have been granted temporary protection visas in Australia. [Source: ABC News]

Howard's so-called "proper processes"

by Marilyn Shepherd, 19 March 2003

And today Howard has compounded this cruel, illegitimate war on the Iraqi people by saying "our refugee policy will not change. Refugees will have to wait and go through the proper processes."

So let's explore those processes. **Jordan** will open its borders in the short term, but is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention on Refugees, and Australia has withdrawn almost the entire staff of the embassy. Jordan in its own right has atrocious human rights records.

Syria will likewise open its borders temporarily but like Jordan is not a signatory to the Convention and its human rights record is as bad as Hussein's. **Iran** will be forced to open its borders but is also guilty of gross human rights violations, hangings, stonings, disappearances and other atrocities. They have signed the convention but rarely have they treated refugees with respect. In fact they have created conditions just as harsh as those in Afghanistan and Iraq, with denial of work rights, social security, education and other benefits which make a subsistence possible let alone the right or ability to create a life.

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The important point to remember is that every Iraqi will be "illegally" in the territories listed above, but the Convention makes this "illegality" a legitimate exercise in human rights. **The Kurds** will be left to their own devices while the Turks invade their autonomous region in the north, the anglo-troika will not help them one jot.

And then we come to Australia. Howard "will not change his policy".

What that means is genocide at both ends of the spectrum . If asylum seekers are unsafe in Jordan, Syria and Iran they will be forced to move on. Some might turn up here and ask for our help.

What they will get is a warship firing at them in the middle of the ocean, they will be transported to Nauru or Manus Island or they will be turned back to Indonesia, which likewise is no a signatory to the Geneva Convention on refugees. They will be branded as queue jumpers, baby killers and illegals at the same time as we are ignoring processes and illegally blowing up their country to "liberate" them.

Something in Howard's mind has become so twisted, so hateful, so distorted and plain bloody wrong that he has become the epitome of the pissant politician. And the terrible thing is that so many of my fellow Australians who don't support this war will cry out loud "turn them away, we didn't invite them" and never understand that they didn't invite us to blow them up, thus forcing them to be refugees.

A Statement from detainees in Baxter IDC, Port Augusta

In good faith we would like to express our deep concern about our miserable situation. For a long time we have been stuck in detention. We are of different races, different nationalities, different languages. All of us escaped our countries because of persecution or war. Unfortunately, our applications for protection visas have failed. The government policy is so hard, so tough - they don't want to grant us protection, even on humanitarian grounds.

At the same time they are threatening to deport us to our countries of origin. If we return to our countries, it will put our lives in great danger. But after death, we cannot talk to any social organisations such as Amnesty International or the Red Cross. Only our dead bodies can prove that we have been persecuted.

We are so confused, we don't know what we can do. We came to Australia for protection but we have got only detention. If we remain in Australia, we will be productive citizens in the future. We will never regret, never look back. We will live in harmony.

We are humbly requesting the Australian people: **Please help us. Consider us as human beings. Solve our ordeal. We will be grateful to you forever.**

Don't think that we are illegal in Australia. We are legal . When we came to your waters, we knocked on your door. We informed the government that we were asylum seekers; that we wanted to enter your country.

So by order of the Government, naval forces brought us to the mainland. So we are not illegal. Of course, when we entered your country, most of us had no legal papers. You should understand that people who are really refugees, it is not possible for them to access passports or any legal documentation.

Everywhere, when a refugee goes to any country, they cannot go the "proper" way. Look at Europe - refugees cross borders without papers, always from third world countries. In their country they cannot stay for fear of persecution. So they have to move without papers. If anyone can access legal documents and a passport, and use them to cross through immigration and customs, they have no problems. That's why original refugees come without papers.

If you look in our eyes you will see naked pain. We are treated very harshly. They humiliate us every waking moment. They harass us. Sometimes they even bash us, use teargas on us. It was beyond our imagination that such a civilised liberal democratic country could do this to us. It is our desperate desire, by any means, to be released from this detention.

Baxter Detention Centre, March 2003

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