HUMAN CARGO

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd condemns people smugglers as "the vilest form of human life" – parasites who feed off the misery of others, exploiting desperate people who want to escape their old lives for the promise of a new future in Australia. Mike Safe reports on the shadowy figures who operate this illegal trade and meets some of their human cargo who have settled here.

The people smuggler who promised Morteza Poorvardi's family safe passage to Australia had a photo of the boat that was supposed to carry them to their new life. It was a cruise ship, the kind you see in holiday brochures offering fun in the sun on a wide blue ocean. The reality turned out to be dangerously different.

What they eventually set sail on was a run-down 12-metre fishing boat packed with more than 200 other asylum seekers. "My mother was crying," says Morteza. "People were packed on the deck, on top of the cabin, in the engine room. It was so crowded, you couldn't move or stretch out your legs. There were families, single people … everyone just piled together.

"At night, everything was black. Everyone was scared. We were all wet because the boat was so weighed down. People were fainting, getting dehydrated … and then the water ran out. It was hell."

Today, nine years later, Morteza can at least manage an ironic smile about how his family was duped by the smuggler they thought was a friend. Yet the memory of the heartbreak that the then teenager, his parents and younger brother and sister endured on their journey – and the shock that awaited them on arrival in a country they knew nothing about – still cuts deeply.

Morteza, 25, who lives in Sydney with his Burmese wife and their four-year-old son, tells his story as yet another wave in a seemingly endless tide of asylum seekers readies itself to make passage to our shores.

As many as 3000 asylum seekers are looking southwards from Indonesia to a new life in Australia, while authorities have warned up to 10,000 others could be making their way down through Malaysia – many willing to place their fate in the hands of people smugglers. So serious is the anticipated exodus that the Prime Minister, Mr Rudd, recently visited Malaysia for talks aimed at stemming the tide. Indonesia, too, has been asked to act on the illegal people trade.

At present, 700 men, women and children are being held on Christmas Island while their cases are assessed. The

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Asylum seekers arriving by boat have become a major political issue in Australia and are frequently in the headlines.

trade's human cost is no better exemplified than the recent case of SIEV 36 (SIEV stands for Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel), which was allegedly set alight by some of the passengers and exploded, after being intercepted by the navy off Ashmore Reef, 800 kilometres west of Darwin, on April 16. Five of the 47 Afghans aboard died and at least two of the nine Australian Defence Force personnel who boarded the vessel have suffered mental breakdowns since and are unlikely to return to work.

The federal Opposition claims that the latest fleet of boats is due to the federal government going soft on border protection. However, refugee supporters argue that those coming here are the fallout from regional flashpoints, such as the heightened hostility between Taliban hardliners and Coalition forces in Afghanistan, with spillover into Pakistan, as well as the exodus caused by the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.

Morteza believes his ordeal is typical of many asylum seekers. Born to an Iraqi mother and Iranian father, he grew up in Abadan in Iran, a border city besieged during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. More than 500,000 Iraqis and Iranians died and, at the war's end in 1988, mistrust remained entrenched on both sides. By then, the family had fled to the capital, Tehran, where Morteza's father built an automotive technician business.

However, because of his mother's Iraqi heritage, she came under increasing harassment, leaving the family with no option but to flee at 24 hours' notice. It was December 1999 and, using false passports, they escaped to Turkey and made their way east to Malaysia.

"My father carried the weight of his family on his shoulders. For us children, he made as if he was treating us to a holiday, even though he did not know where we would end up."

Their hope was to reach England, where they had relatives, and this led to a series of people smugglers who moved them to Singapore, then Indonesia where they hid outside the capital, Jakarta, before being passed on to another smuggler.

Asked again where the family wanted to go, his father said England or even the US. The smuggler said this couldn't be done. Weary and uncertain, they asked to where they could be guaranteed safe >>>

Morteza Poorvadi, 25, with his Burmese wife, Jojo, 28, and their son, Alex, four. Inset: A 2001 photo of Morteza's brother and sister, whom he has not seen since they returned to the Middle East in 2002.

passage and were told, "Australia". "My father thought he said Austria," remembers Morteza. "No, Austra-lia," repeated the smuggler. The only thing the family knew about that mysterious place came from the 1960s TV program *Skippy*, often rerun on Middle Eastern television. Then the smuggler produced a photo of the cruise ship that, for a price of $20,000, would take the family to this promised land.

At night, they were ferried out to the "cruise ship" – the clapped-out fishing boat that they were ordered to board.

On the morning of the fourth day, the boat reached what turned out to be Australian territory – Christmas Island.

Four days later, they were flown to the mainland and the start of what, for Morteza, would be almost four years in detention. The family, who thought they were on their way to freedom, found themselves in the Woomera detention camp in South Australia's desert, followed by the Port Hedland facility in Western Australia and, finally, Villawood detention centre in Sydney.

By then, almost two-and-a-half years later, they were worn down by repeated failures to win asylum. After much agonising, his parents decided to take his younger brother and sister back to the Middle East – Morteza won't reveal where exactly to protect them. Yet he stayed because, by then, he was eligible for military service and facing severe punishment if apprehended by Iranian authorities. So, in May 2002, he watched as his family was driven to the airport. "It was the first time I ever saw my father cry," Morteza says. He has not seen them since.

Three days later, he met the woman who became his wife, a Burmese refugee, Ma Sein Win, now 28, whom he calls Jojo. She had fled that secretive country's military regime and also followed the asylum trail south. They fell in love, holding hands through the wire that divided their sections at Villawood. As well, Morteza converted to Christianity, a faith he says helped him through what were his darkest hours.

On Jojo's release, she continued to support him through those low times – a hunger strike and suicide bids, including slashing his wrists and an attempted hanging. Finally, after 13 rejections, Morteza was granted a protection visa and a new life in November 2003. As his son, Alex, "our little Aussie" as he calls him, plays outside their flat, from where Morteza runs his own building services company, he explains what it is to be free.

"WHAT HAPPENED TO ME I WOULD NOT WISH ON ANYONE, BUT I ALSO KNOW THE STRENGTH IT GAVE ME. I LOVE THIS COUNTRY."

"Sixteen to 20 were my life's lost years," he says. "What happened to me I would not wish on anyone, but I also know the strength it gave me. I love this country. After what my family went through, it took my life away, but then it gave it back – and for that I am thankful."

Farshid Kheirollahpoor, 39, and wife Rozita Shahbazifar, 30. Now settled in Sydney, the couple is expecting their first child.

LOVE BEHIND THE WIRE

When Rozita met Farshid in the Australian desert it was a match made not in heaven but a place of purgatory. The young Iranian asylum seekers – she a young Christian condemned for her faith by Islamic fundamentalists, he a fugitive following a security crackdown against pro-democracy supporters – had escaped along different yet dangerous routes, only to end up together inside the Curtin detention centre in remote northern Western Australia.

Now, nine years later, Rozita Shahbazifar, 30, and Farshid Kheirollahpoor, 39, are married, Australian citizens and live in Sydney. He manages his own painting service and maintenance consultancy, while she is studying to become a nurse. Best of all, she is pregnant with their first child.

Rozita, from the oil city of Ahwaz in south-western Iran, was forced to flee her country because of her conversion to Christianity. Like many, she followed the refugee trail to Indonesia, an especially dangerous journey for a young woman alone. "In that situation, you can't trust any person – not from your own city, your own country," she says. "I was so scared."

Along the way, Rozita dealt with people smugglers, but never those in charge, always someone acting for them. That detention awaited her in Australia was never mentioned and, again, there was the story about the grand ship that would carry her to this new home. "I had no idea and as soon as I saw it, just a crowded fishing boat, I was shocked and said I didn't want to go. But the people I was with, families who were supporting each other, all decided to go and I would have been left alone. I had no choice."

For two-and-a-half days, they were tossed on rough seas and Rozita was continually seasick. Picked up by an Australian naval patrol boat, she ended up in Curtin, a totally alien place, as she couldn't speak a word of English.

In 1996, after hiding for almost a year from Iranian authorities while members of his family were interrogated, Farshid escaped to Pakistan and then Malaysia, where he endured two uncertain years after being duped by a people smuggler. "I was cheated of my money. I had no documents, I was stateless, I couldn't go anywhere."

Finally, in November 1998, Farshid flew to South Africa on false documents and from there to Perth, where he surrendered to immigration authorities. "I thought, if this is to be my country, I must be honest," he says. "But that was my biggest mistake. It cost me three years in detention."

Farshid spent 18 months in the Port Hedland detention centre before being moved to Curtin, where he quickly found a role assisting other refugees with their legal work. "I felt I was helping others – translating for them, helping with legal aid. It gave me meaning and I thought maybe I'm here for a reason."

Farshid was released in 2001 and granted permanent residency, but Rozita remained inside and was transferred to Baxter detention centre in South Australia. Farshid, who worked on refugee advocacy programs, then met the asylum seeker advocate, Julian Burnside QC, who took Rozita's case to the independent adjudicator, the Refugee Review Tribunal – and won. She was released in July 2003 and she and Farshid settled in Sydney to build their new lives.

Farshid then set up a job network, Freedom, to connect refugees with supporters and work opportunities. He says many refugees continue to do it tough.

"After all these mountains that you climb, there's another one – building a new life here," he says.

"If you have no qualifications, no job, no language … it can be hard. Hopefully, Australians can have a better understanding of how hard." >>>

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALANA LANDSBERRY.

A MASSACRE, FAMILY TURMOIL, THEN A NEW LIFE

Hakim Sultani, 36, with his wife, Safia (right), 31, daughter Sahar, 16, and sons Maisom, 13, and Faisal, 10. The family settled in Perth in 2006.

Before the rise of the Taliban regime, Hakim Sultani and his brothers ran a successful restaurant in their village in Ghazni province, in south-eastern Afghanistan. Yet the ascent of the Taliban in the late 1990s divided local clans and sparked major conflict. When one of his brothers was drawn into the resistance against them, Hakim was also forced to hide in the mountains or face execution. "It was a terrible time," he remembers. "My uncle and neighbours were killed, people disappeared and were never seen again." Two of his brothers would eventually die in the bloodshed.

In late 1999, the resistance spirited Hakim across the border into Pakistan. He was then put into the hands of a succession of people smugglers, which led him on a labyrinthine journey through a succession of Arab states. He was then sent east to Singapore, where he hid for more than a month, before being taken by boat to Indonesia, where he was told he was being sent to Australia. "I said, 'Where's Australia?' and was told, 'Just go on the boat and you can live there'."

The vessel turned out to be a small fishing boat in reasonable condition. With 14 other refugees squeezed on board, Hakim was at sea for eight days, much of the time seasick, low on food and water. "It was terrible, nothing but sea and sky."

Then the fuel ran out and the boat, which had at least made it to Australian territorial waters, drifted. It was soon spotted by a surveillance plane and a naval patrol boat arrived to take Hakim and his fellow refugees to Port Hedland, where they were put in detention. "It was like a jail … they'd let us outside for fresh air."

He spent three months locked up before being interviewed and another three months before being granted a temporary protection visa and sent south to Perth. Once there, he sent a letter home, letting his family know he was alive. Six months passed before he received a reply – the first words from his loved ones in 15 months.

Meanwhile, he had gone fruit-picking to earn money and found full-time work making granite and marble benchtops, a job he still holds. Unable to gain permanent residency, which would allow him to bring his family here, a desperate Hakim contemplated returning to Afghanistan. Yet his mother wrote saying it was too dangerous, that there had been a further massacre in their village and the family home had been ransacked.

"ALL I WANTED WAS TO BRING MY FAMILY AND START A NEW LIFE … I'M HAPPY TO HAVE THIS FOR THEM. WE HAVE SUFFERED A LOT, BUT WE HAVE A CHANCE AGAIN."

Finally, in September 2004, he was granted permanent residency and, in early 2005, was reunited with his family in Pakistan, which allowed him to finally "feel human again". His wife, Safia, 31, had been pregnant with their youngest, Faisal, when he was forced to flee his homeland.

"When I went to meet them, Faisal was asking, 'Who is he? Is he my father?' " says Hakim. "All I wanted was to bring my family and start a new life." He finally won the right to bring his wife and three children to Australia in February 2006.

Hakim, 36, knows his family's life is here now, in the home they have established in Perth. His daughter, Sahar, 16, would like to study medicine, and his sons, Maisom, 13, and Faisal, 10, are soccer-mad and, as he says, are becoming more like Aussies every day. "I'm happy to have this for them. We have suffered a lot, but we have a chance again." >>>

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROSS SWANBOROUGH.

PEOPLE SMUGGLERS

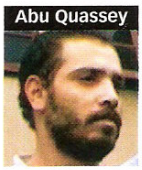
People smugglers come in many guises. Sue Hoffman, a researcher at Murdoch University's School of Psychology in Perth, who has dealt with these shadowy operators while researching a doctoral thesis on those who seek their help, says there is no typical smuggler. While some people smugglers operate in syndicates or as individuals and are out to make quick cash, there are others who want to help their countrymen and their families out of compassion.

Asylum seekers have two choices: legal or illegal. They can place themselves in the hands of the UNHCR – the United Nations refugee agency – with the hope of resettlement, which may take up to five years, or they can trust their fate to people smugglers. Wealthy refugees can try for a flight to Europe or the US, although this might require journeying to a jump-off point such as South Africa. If they don't have enough cash or are weary of life on the run, Australia by boat is an option for a fee of $5000 to $10,000 per person.

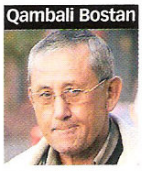
Sue argues that Australian government measures to stop people smuggling boats have put asylum seekers' lives at greater risk. Up to a decade ago, the vessels' crews, usually experienced Indonesian fishermen, would receive only light detention sentences if caught. Yet faced with stiffer penalties, crews started abandoning their boats on reaching Australian waters, leaving the asylum seekers to their fate. Or boats were crewed by inexperienced juveniles guaranteed lighter sentences. Also, because boats were confiscated and destroyed, smugglers started using run-down vessels.

THE CONVICTED AND ACCUSED

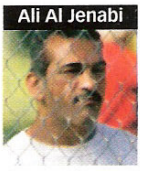
Alleged people smuggling has landed these men in court.


Abu Quassey

Abu Quassey, 36, an Egyptian national, was found guilty by a court in his homeland of the manslaughter of 353 asylum seekers, mainly Iraqis, after an overloaded fishing boat, codenamed SIEV-X, sank en route from Indonesia in October 2001. He claimed to have been only a translator who had acted for a syndicate. The former Coalition government unsuccessfully attempted to extradite him to face more serious charges and a likely heavier sentence.


Qambali Bostan

Qambali Bostan, 64, an Afghan who claimed refugee status after coming to Australia by boat in 1999, and his son, Rahmutullah Bostan, 22, were charged in May with people smuggling and money laundering, after appearing in court in Shepparton in northern Victoria. Federal police claimed more than $110,000 had been placed in their bank accounts in preparation for the movement of Afghani asylum seekers from Indonesia.


Ali Al Jenabi

Ali Al Jenabi, 37, an Iraqi convicted of people smuggling and a would-be asylum seeker, has proved a continuing problem for Australian authorities – and a rallying point for asylum seeker advocates. Extradited from Thailand in 2003, he was convicted of people smuggling and jailed for three years in Darwin. Then followed 20 months in Sydney's Villawood detention centre while the authorities tried to decide his status, aware that he had also spent six years in an Iraqi jail for defying Saddam Hussein's regime and that those he helped transport here included his mother and siblings. He is on release while his status is being determined.


Khaleed Daoed

Khaleed Daoed, 41, an accomplice of Abu Quassey (above, left), in June 2005 was found guilty of aiding a people smuggling operation. The Supreme Court in Brisbane sentenced the Iraqi to nine years' jail after he was extradited from Sweden, where he had permanent residency. Almost a decade on, the SIEV-X tragedy, which claimed the lives of 353 men, women and children when their unseaworthy vessel sank on its voyage to Australia, continues to resonate with asylum seeker support groups because of its many unanswered questions, including the previous Howard government's role in investigating the tragedy.

A TRICKLE BECOMES A FLOOD

Between January 17 and going to press, 16 boats have arrived in Australian waters – with many more expected in the coming months. As many as 3000 asylum seekers are in Indonesia, looking for a new life in Australia and up to 10,000 others could be making their way down from Malaysia.

This year's arrivals so far total 822 passengers, principally single men from Afghanistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka, plus 35 crew, mainly Indonesians.

In April, when the cyclone season in the northern Indian Ocean had abated and seas were calm, eight boats arrived, followed by three each in May and June – and conditions for sailing south should remain favourable for much of the rest of the year, until the onset of the storm phase again.

Since the start of the year, 206 asylum seekers, some of whom arrived last year, have been granted permanent protection visas and allowed onto the Australian mainland. Thirteen have returned voluntarily to their homelands. The Department of Immigration, the chief processing authority, does not reveal reasons for returns.

At the time of going to press, this year's arrivals by boat far outstrip those of 2008 – 161 in total – but are well down on the 5516 who arrived in 2001, the height of the last rush of those seeking asylum by sea.