

Introduction

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In 2006 the total number of people designated as Refugees and Asylum Seekers by the United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) stood at 12 million. The refugee and asylum seeker population in East Asia and the Pacific was estimated at 1,029,400. Of these, the largest refugee/asylum seeker populations are in Thailand (477,500), China (352,700), Malaysia (152,700) and Australia (14,800). Japan, by contrast had 2,600 refugees/asylum seekers (USCRI, World Refugee Survey, 2006). Australia was one of the first countries in the Asia-Pacific region to ratify the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the Geneva Convention) – an agreement which commits Australia to providing asylum to those on its territory, or people arriving at its borders, with a well-founded fear of persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. But Australia's leadership in refugee affairs in the region changed when it excised its offshore possessions along its northern coast from its migration zone under a series of laws passed in 2001. Under this legislation, asylum seekers who arrived at these locations or those authorities intercepted at sea are not permitted to apply in Australia for visas (USCRI 2006). Subsequently, in 2003 Australian authorities turned away a boatload of Kurdish asylum seekers from Turkey who had reached Melville Island, forcing them, first to remain at sea in a small boat for four days, and then to return to Indonesia. The Government also adopted the 'Pacific Solution', in which foreign territory is used for the incarceration and processing of detained asylum seekers (Morris-Suzuki 2006:8). And recently the Government has agreed to a 'refugee exchange' program with the United States under which Australia and the United States will 'each resettle up to 200 refugees processed in the other country every year'. This action has been interpreted to stem from the Government's 'vow that unauthorised boat arrivals would not make it to the Australian mainland' (*Australian*, 18 April 2007).

The United States too no longer acts as a global leader in offering 'resettlement to refugees in urgent need of durable solutions' and Congress passed the Real ID Act in 2006, which 'blocked the admission of refugees who had provided "material support" to terrorist organizations without exception for support given under duress or coercion' (USCRI Country Report US 2006). Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that in countries like Malaysia the Home Affairs Minister stated in a press report recently that the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) 'really gets in the way' of the work of agencies under the Home Affairs ministry such as Rela and the immigration department (which do not distinguish between genuine refugees and undocumented

economic migrants). He also added that the Malaysian government 'accepts UNHCR's presence but not its powers' (Malaysiakini 8 February 2007, cited in Kaur, 2007).

The movement of refugees in the Asia-Pacific region is now an established fact and has led to open debate on the issue. However, scholarship on refugees and refugee affairs in the region is generally scant and has largely been subsumed under migration studies or produced by international organisations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and institutional bodies involved in addressing human rights. In March 2006 the Asia-Pacific Regional Migration Forum (ANU & UNE) and the UNE Asia Centre held a joint two-day workshop on the **Refugee Crises in the Twenty-First Century: Asia-Pacific Perspectives and Responses** (See media report at: http://www.une.edu.au/news/archives/2006_03.html). The Workshop fostered discussion and other interaction between researchers, human rights activists as well as government practitioners with a view to enhancing debate, academic research, policy development and teaching in the broad and varied area of human rights and related issues. The papers selected for this special issue focus on key countries in the region which have large refugee populations, evolving state policies towards migration and refugees, civil society interests, and structures and institutions involved in deciding which refugees to let in and how many. One paper specifically addresses Trafficking and the Australian Government's initiatives to combat trafficking in the context of migration challenges in the region.

References

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