

Meet a 'queue jumper'

Crikey

Friday, 6 August 2010

By Dr Tanya Ahmed, a psychiatry registrar

Her brown eyes are blank. Her face is expressionless, her body motionless. She has no thoughts, no feelings, no purpose. She huddles in the corner of a stark hospital ward. She does not respond when her children kiss her. She hasn't drunk today, and hasn't eaten for days. If only she had the energy, she would find a way to die.

She has just arrived in this foreign land. She doesn't understand what people around her are saying. Nothing is familiar. It's not home. Attempts to sooth and comfort are misunderstood. She flinches from my touch. She doesn't trust me, or anyone. What little she says shows she feels she is being punished. She feels guilty. And she is guilty -- guilty of leaving a country in turmoil.

She tried to do what Australians would call the right thing. Desperate to preserve what's left of her family, to keep her young children safe, she wanted to raise them in a place without fear, persecution and the smell of death. She tried to get a passport but couldn't -- her country's government won't give passports to women still able to bear children, still young enough to fight in the army. Even if their husband has been killed in battle. Without a passport, she couldn't get a visa. Of course you could argue that in leaving, she was avoiding the legal requirements of her country. That's true. So were the people who died trying to scale the Berlin Wall.

She grew despondent. There was no queue she could join. She chose to leave despite the risks -- her country has a shoot-to-kill policy on its borders, but staying seemed a bigger risk. She paid some people to get her across the border. A long walk, sleeping rough, hiding from authorities, fearing her children would be killed, finally paying for a place on a boat.

The grief, the loss, the fear, the dislocation, the death took its toll. Now she sits empty, blank, broken.

She is a boat person. She is the reason we're beefing up border security and why we're set on off-shore processing. She is the threat to our sustainable population.

She, and hundreds like her, come to Australia hoping for freedom and a chance to live without fear. But she won't find it here. If she lives, she'll be confronted by harsh detention facilities, years of uncertainty, entrenched systematic discrimination and marginalisation. Even the social welfare system will be powerless to help.

We, the citizens of this country, have allowed political fear-mongering to blur our vision and humanity. We, aside from those remarkable few who campaign tirelessly to support her and those like her, are part of the problem, not the solution. "Stop the boats" is the political catch cry, and it seems we voters like it.

The reality is that these boats provide a service -- like it or not, they are the only way out for her and people like her. They provide an escape from intolerable brutal and deadly conditions. Consider the paradox -- our troops serve in places boat people come from. Yet we suggest people leave these places lightly, for "economic reasons", as if they would cross dangerous seas for a better paid job. To think we can stop people from leaving danger is naive. To think we should turn them around is inhumane.

The violent slide between asylum seeker and the international terrorist has worked -- asylum seekers are now sources of our collective fear. Neither Julia Gillard nor Tony Abbott wish to clear up this awful and deliberate lie.

This woman has risked her life to find a better life for her children. She is a queue jumper. All 30 kilos of her.

And she is a chilling reminder of what is at stake in the global economies of fear.

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<http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/08/06/meet-a-queue-jumper>