



Fact sheet 5

People smuggling

What is people smuggling?

People smuggling is the illegal facilitation or transportation of people across borders. It is estimated that every year, four million people are trafficked or smuggled across international borders. The value of this criminal trade has been estimated at approximately \$US10 billion per year.

Factors such as the breakdown of national borders, the increased global communications and the availability of transportation help to increase the number of people who resort to people smuggling.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) acknowledges that people smuggling is 'a sad reflection on a variety of factors, including poverty, tightened migration policies, violent conflicts and abuse of human rights'.

Why do asylum seekers resort to people smugglers?

Most asylum seekers resorting to illegal entry are desperate people seeking escape, by whatever means they can find, from intolerable situations.

What they pay people smugglers often represents their life's savings or those of their entire family, or even contributions from entire communities. The asylum seeker then places his or her life in the hands of strangers to travel to Australia on a boat that is generally overloaded and unsafe.

As the UK, Australia and other countries responsible for establishing the international refugee protection scheme have increased deterrents to asylum seekers, countries such as Iran and Pakistan, with economic problems and much larger refugee populations, have followed suit. As a result, what was once a relatively visible and quantifiable flow of people seeking asylum has become a covert, irregular movement that is ever more difficult to control.

Legal avenues available to asylum seekers to access protection under the Refugee Convention are limited and so is help available from the UNHCR in its many cross-border refugee camps. Australia does not have large numbers of foreign posts near major refugee-producing regions. According to reports from the Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace, those it does have face overwhelming problems of under-staffing, under-resourcing and bribery.

In some nations, such as Somalia, there is no possibility of obtaining a passport, let alone a legal visa to enter Australia. In others, such as Iran and China, the government has been the

source of persecution and approaching the state or foreign embassies for travel documents or attempting to leave through official channels is dangerous to the asylum seeker and their extended family.

Is Australia being targeted?

Australia is relatively insulated from the full impact of global people smuggling. Even on a per capita basis, we receive far fewer unauthorised asylum seekers than major European nations.

In 2008 more than 67,000 people travelled on boats to the European coast, 38,000 of whom landed in Italy. Also in 2008, more than 51,000 asylum seekers crossed the Gulf of Aden making their way from Somalia to Yemen by boat.