

# Indonesia's Asylum Hub

*Much has been made of the boats arriving on Australian shores, and the fate of the people who make it this far. But to get to Australia many asylum seekers pass through Indonesia, where they face long waits, difficult circumstances and an uncertain future. Most end up in Cisarua, West Java. Documentary photographer DAVID MAURICE SMITH explored life in Indonesia's asylum hub.*

**T**he Australian government has taken a firm stance towards the boats targeting its shores, and while the boats may have stopped the global phenomena of persecution, torture and violence that lead to large-scale human displacement have not. An obvious question remains: what has become of the souls whose desperate and dangerous circumstances forced them to flee their homelands?

Nestled in the interior of West Java, Indonesia, the town of Cisarua has become a hub for asylum seekers from Asia, the Middle East and Africa desperate to find a new country to call home. In this mountainous region known for relentless rainfall, trauma acts as an unfortunate bond between desperate strangers from faraway places. They gather in small pockets of overcrowded dwellings, maintaining low profiles to avoid attracting antagonism from the locals. With no ability to work or study, theirs is a life in limbo, shadowed by their pasts and uncertain of their futures.

Initially asylum seekers from Iran and Iraq were attracted to the town by a local population who spoke



The Hoseinis, an extended family of 10 Hazara asylum seekers from Afghanistan, live together in a one-room apartment in Cisarua, Indonesia. PHOTO: David Maurice Smith/Oculi



Mohammed – who is not comfortable showing his face – is a 33-year-old from Iraq. The day before this shot was taken he and his young family were informed the UNHCR had rejected their initial application for refugee status. PHOTO: David Maurice Smith/Oculi

Arabic (Saudi men had historically travelled there for holidays focused on carnal pursuits). Sudanese, Eritrean, Somali, Afghan, Indian, Sri Lankan, Burmese and Pakistanis followed, lured by solidarity, affordability, cooler temperatures and a proximity to the UNHCR offices in Jakarta.

Many arrived with hopes of taking boats on the precarious journey to Australian waters, while others came with a more conservative plan to place their fate in the hands of the UNHCR process. Still others arrived with no clear strategy, having literally run for their lives in the dark of night.

UNHCR statistics estimate that in 2013 there were more than 10,000 asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia, with many of them living in the Cisarua region. It is here that the heartbreaking human stories so common to asylum seekers can be easily heard. After being detained and tortured by the Taliban for 48 hours (they were searching for a male relative who was a driver for the International Security Assistance Force), Hazara asylum seeker Hasan Hoseini gathered his family and fled their home in Afghanistan's Helmand province, paying a smuggler US\$72,000 dollars to get four adults and six children to Indonesia. Two months after they arrived in Jakarta the little money they had left was stolen by a thief who broke into the single-room apartment they all share. While they express gratitude to be safe

from the immediate threats they faced in Afghanistan, they have entirely new challenges to face. The thought of a life in Australia or elsewhere is distant, blurred by harsh reality.

The Hoseini family, like all asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia, have no access to humanitarian support (Jakarta did not sign the 1951 convention on refugees and does not acknowledge the rights of asylum seekers) and face an overworked UNHCR system that leaves many waiting years for interviews to determine their fate. Detention centres set up to accommodate their influx have reached capacity and stories abound of desperate individuals trying to bribe their way into the centres to ensure they are fed and receive basic medical treatment.

Some have escaped tragedy at home only to have it strike again. After fleeing indefinite compulsory military service well known for shocking human-rights abuses, Abraham (not his real name) walked for 67 days from his home in Eritrea to Khartoum, Sudan, where he hired a people smuggler with borrowed money to get he and his brother to Australia. On 27 September 2013 the boat they were on sunk, leaving 44 of the 72 asylum seekers on board dead, including his brother. He has since lost all contact with his parents, wife and three young children in Eritrea and assumes they have been taken by the government. In Cisarua he shares a tiny flat with three other Eritreans, pooling their savings in hopes of lasting



Abraham – not his real name – who walked for 67 days to flee indefinite compulsory military enlistment in Eritrea. PHOTO: David Maurice Smith/Oculi



Adel Rahim from Khartoum, Sudan, shows the scars left by 27 months in prison after being detained as a political dissident. PHOTO: David Maurice Smith/Oculi



Aboodi Alkhald fears for his children's future. PHOTO: David Maurice Smith/Oculi



Asylum seekers Mohammed – not his real name – and Tara fell in love when they met three months ago in Cisarua. PHOTO: David Maurice Smith/Oculi



Hazara asylum seekers gather to play sport in Cisarua. Weekly games offer a welcome distraction from the difficulties of life in limbo. PHOTO: David Maurice Smith/Oculi

long enough to ride out the UNHCR process. Having arrived in Jakarta in July 2013, Abraham's interview to determine his status has been set for 21 April, 2015, a daunting 21 month wait.

With the scars on his back a testament to the 27 months he spent being tortured as a political prisoner in his native Sudan, Adel Rahim speaks with long, considered pauses in his broken English. After being offered a job in the US, his government accused him of being a spy for the west and he was sent away without trial. He was tortured, his wife was murdered and his oldest son was also imprisoned. When asked of his plans to get to Australia, he answers with a shrug of his shoulders: "Australia, no problem. America, no problem. Europe, no problem. Just be safe."

Many asylum seekers faced unexpected hardship when they arrived in Indonesia and discovered that the conditions promised to them by smugglers were far different to the realities. Tales are common of broken promises by smugglers, who disappear after collecting large sums of money or passports, and landlords collecting rent in advance then kicking out tenants.

After fleeing religious persecution in Iran two years ago, truck driver Aboodi Alkhald and his four children tried to reach Australia by boat. After paying for the promise of a reliable twin-engine fast boat, the overloaded single-engine vessel they were presented with sank. They

were rescued by fisherman from a nearby island. Aboodi has vowed that even if Australia was not turning back boats he would never attempt the voyage again.

In the face of the challenges endured in Cisarua, a desperate search for normalcy endures, with asylum seekers clinging to shreds of routine that depict life as they once knew it. A group of Hazaras (largely from Pakistan) have managed to organise their own football league. Others gather once a week at the community pool or the gym to exercise. A rare few have even found love.

Mohammed (he did not reveal his full name), a Shia Muslim from Iraq, met Tara, an Iranian Christian, in March. They have been inseparable since, but Tara's family has just received their second rejection for refugee status from the UNHCR – meaning they must either return to Iran or continue to live illegally in Indonesia. They, like so many others, do not know what the future holds for them.

Whether the policies of more fortunate countries such as Australia uphold the rights of asylum seekers or not, the decision to flee will continue to be made by those living in places where violence and conflict are a daily reality. Desperate people will keep making their way to Indonesia, accepting the waiting game that goes along with it, because they believe they have no alternative. Boats or not, the will to secure a safe and stable future for their families will win out. ▮