



## HUMAN RIGHTS

*At a time when the barriers facing refugees have never been greater, it is more vital than ever to hear stories of survival from refugees like Ramazan Kawish. LLAM McLOUGHLIN reports.*

# Life After Detention

*“Living without identity kills you every day. Every time they call your number, you die,” says 33-year-old Afghan refugee Ramazan Kawish.*

Kawish is an articulate and intelligent man, who has worked as a teacher, translator, tour guide, radio producer, project manager and businessman. He speaks six languages and has an academic background in social sciences.

In 2004, he landed a job with the United Nations (UN) to help conduct the first presidential election in Afghanistan. The role took him out of his home in Bamyan, in the centre of the country, and into Taliban controlled areas where, Kawish says, “If the Taliban found my UN identity card, I would have been killed.”

He worked for the UN again in 2005 for the first parliamentary elections. Refusing the demands of local warlords who tried to use their wealth and power to buy their way into government, Kawish began to face grave danger. As a principled man committed to civic duty, he faced many threats to his life.

Several violent encounters with unknown assailants hired by the warlords left him completely blind for four months, until surgery partially restored sight in one eye.

After some years hiding out in Pakistan and India, Kawish returned to Afghanistan with the hope of further serving his community. The dream was short-lived. His friend handed him a letter from the same authorities who threatened him years earlier. The threat to Kawish’s life was there in black and white. His own brother pleaded with him to leave Afghanistan: “You lost your eyes. I don’t want you to lose your life.”

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Kawish spent many hours on the Internet. “I researched the detention centres, the boat journey, the Australian people and culture. I knew the decision was very difficult and would have a bad impact on my future life. People would think I avoided the queue – but there is no queue – you have to find your own way,” he says.

His passport brought him by plane as far as Thailand. Kawish then paid \$2400 to people smugglers for 24 hours on a train and 10 hours hidden under a blanket in the back of a car to Kuala Lumpur, and more time on a boat ride to Indonesia. Another \$4000 put him on a rickety vessel headed for Australian shores with 128 other asylum seekers with scarce food, water and fresh air, soaked in the stench of human excrement and unsure he would live to see the next sunrise.

Many took sleeping pills because “they would prefer to be asleep when they die.”

On 23 September 2011, “everybody cheered” when Kawish and his fellow travellers were intercepted by the Australian Navy and placed in detention on Christmas Island. Lonely, weak from tiredness and 8kg lighter than when he left Afghanistan, he finally had some hope that the Australian government would look after him.

The first six months in Australia’s care were difficult for Kawish because he felt like a criminal caged in the security fortress of the Christmas Island detention centre. “I thought there might be open areas because it’s an island – you don’t need security. Instead there were huge fences, walls, big gates and many locks.”

Detained by the Australian government, Kawish was also tormented by his own mind: “I had a bad feeling. I felt guilty. I felt shame for leaving my family in danger. I was still suffering and this is usual for everybody.”

Plagued with guilt and terrified by nightmares, Kawish also suffered the ultimate indignity. Like all asylum seekers under Australia’s immigration regime, he was stripped of the signifier of his humanity: his name. “If you lose your identity, even for one day, it hurts a lot,” Ramazan says.

“First, I feel like I’m in gaol. In gaol they have a number on their back – I’ve seen it in movies. Second, I’m not a human here – because every human has a name –

a baby, even for one minute, should not be without a name.” He says it states in the Quran “before your child is born, put a name on it.” Thus to fail to give a child an identity is to commit “the biggest crime.”

His transfer to a Tasmanian detention centre in October 2011 offered little relief. One day, after hearing some commotion at the football field, he ran out of his quarters to see an Iraqi man shoulder-deep inside a hole, trying to bury himself alive. The man’s desperate feelings were familiar to Kawish. “I suffered in Afghanistan, and then I suffered all the way here. I paid a lot of money, and now I’ve ended up in prison. At which point did I do wrong? You have to do some bad things to be in gaol. The only answer is I was born in a bad place in a bad time. The only other reason – I came here by boat.”

Kawish speaks of those dark feelings inside Australia’s immigration system, and how hard it was to cope. “You are dying every moment in a detention centre. You want to share your pain with other people. Everyone wants to release their pain, and everyone wants to share their stories. They make you sad, they make you hopeless. You feel like you are burdening other weak people.”

Yet compared to most people arriving in Australia by boat, Ramazan Kawish is one of the lucky ones. After half a year in detention he was granted refugee status and allowed to permanently settle in Sydney. His assiduous efforts to keep travel documents and written evidence of persecution around his neck at all times during his passage to Australia helped his case.

Life as a free man in Australia has had its rewards. Kawish was able to sponsor his wife to join him here and they have just become parents for the first time. Yet while he is physically safe, Kawish says, “My mind is not safe.” He is separated from his family back home and grieves for his lost eyesight.

He also wrestles with the challenges of fitting into a new society, because he feels that Australia is a “100 percent opposite culture” to Afghanistan. “Back there, neighbours come together every day and talk to each other. Here it doesn’t happen. People are inside at home or at work. If you’re at a park you can’t talk to kids or strangers. In Afghanistan, you go somewhere, you go talk to kids you don’t know, you play with those kids and everyone enjoys themselves.”

Another difficulty is his struggle to find work.

He has spent years with a job seeker agency with only a part-time car wash job to show for it. That this is happening to a man as highly skilled, experienced, and motivated as Ramazan Kawish demonstrates the barriers to integration in Australia.

Despite these hardships, Kawish remains as committed as ever to serving his community. In Australia that means being a refugee advocate and he suggests some common sense policies as a good starting point. He would love to see fewer lives lost at sea but believes the humane way to do that is “to increase the number of refugees from the UNHCR [The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], then fewer people will get on boats. [There’s] no hope from the UNHCR, which is why they risk their lives.” He believes the government needs to open the door to refugee applications from Indonesia. He says that these desperate people are essentially stuck in a house which is on fire and currently “Australia has closed every door to the house – at least one door should be open.”

Although he is critical of government policy, Kawish remains overwhelmingly positive about the Australian people. He knows many doctors, lawyers and ordinary Australians support refugees. He speaks of the way many Australians share their happiness with him and encourage him to enjoy life. Kawish even understands anti-refugee sentiment in some parts of the community. “Australian people are not racist... they just don’t know the reality. If they found the information, if they knew about the real life of a refugee, they wouldn’t call them queue jumpers,” he says. Negative attitudes towards refugees are spurred by the media and government. “The government says we come here illegally. The media is not telling people the reality. It’s normal to fear things when you are told they are scary.”

Kawish calls for our communities to take up the mantle of dissipating these fears and welcoming refugees. “We can’t rely on the government or the media, but we can rely on ourselves, our society, and our communities. We need to ask ourselves, what can each of us do to help asylum seekers?” R

*Ramazan Kawish was interviewed in association with a series of talks organised by the Refugee Council of Australia and People Just Like Us.*