KURDISTAN . . . and the quest for Nationhood
RED CROSS Picking up Pieces
ISLAM IN THE MODERN WORLD
FEELINGS ARE PHYSICAL
Refugee Transitions

Refugee Transitions exists to report on a wide range of refugee and human rights issues of relevance to the work of the members of the National Forum of Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma; to focus attention on the impact of organised violence and human rights abuses on health; to provide ideas on intervention models to address the health and social needs of refugees; to debate and campaign for changes necessary to assist, empower and strengthen refugee communities in their settlement process and ultimately bring together a vehicle for cultural and personal expression.

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The views expressed in Refugee Transitions are not necessarily the official views of STARTTS.
Message from the Director

By Jorge Aroche, Executive Director, STARTTS

Welcome to the eleventh issue of Transitions, the first as “Refugee Transitions” a national magazine giving voice to the views and concerns of the National Forum of Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (NFSSTT) and our clients and supporters.

Becoming a national magazine has been a slow process, and continues to be a work in progress, albeit a very promising one, as I hope you will judge by yourself on the basis of the quality of this issue. Already the scope of the articles has been enriched by our national base, and this trend will continue.

One of the difficulties that needed to be overcome in becoming National included the increased cost of producing and distributing "Transitions for Refugees". The measures taken to address this problem include reducing the frequency of publication from 4 to 3 issues per year, and adjusting the price of subscriptions. We also continue to search for sponsorship from appropriate sources.

Putting this issue together, notwithstanding the challenges of going national, has been one of the most difficult challenges faced by the production team so far. So much has happened since our last “Winter” issue of “Transitions”, that 48 pages seemed like nothing to accommodate the number of comments and contributions to this issue of Transitions.

From the shock and horror of the 11th of September, the ensuing conflict in Afghanistan and its multiple implications at every level, to the Tampa incident and the further polarization of the “refugee debate”, and a national election where for the first time refugee issues, or rather border control issues were sadly central to the political debate, the last few months have been extraordinarily eventful at international and national mainstream levels. Inevitably, these events, and the often racist and short-sighted reactions to both the events and the debate, has affected the lives of many of our clients and ex-clients, and of refugee communities in general.

Similarly, a lot has happened at the level of the forum (NFSSTT) and individual agencies, including an incredibly productive 2nd National Meeting of staff from NFSSTT member agencies focusing on the development of national standards for torture and trauma services in Australia (and commencing a process that will continue over the next couple of years), the very successful Triple J “Real Appeal”, raising funds for work with children and adolescents, and tremendously successful in its own right as a consciousness raising event, and many other exciting and interesting projects somewhat obscured by these “larger” events. Other notable events in the field included a very successful conference at UNSW that focused on various aspects of the refugee convention on its 50th anniversary.

Reflecting the substantial thought and internal debate involved, I believe this issue manages to provide a good mix of commentary on the larger events from a variety of perspectives, and our continuing commitment to focus on “forgotten conflicts” behind the genesis of refugees, and on providing a local focus and a voice for refugees and torture and trauma survivors.

Some hard editorial decisions had to be made, however, and so we can look forward to the 12th issue of “Refugee Transitions” for a closer look at the process and outcome of the National NFSSTT Meeting and the Triple J “Real Appeal”. The next issue will also include further commentary on current world issues from various perspectives, and on the national refugee debate, exploring Australia’s current policies from a long-term impact perspective and looking at its implications for the social capital of the nation. We will also provide the second part of the “Kurdistan and the quest for nationhood” article, covering Iranian Kurdistan.

I hope you find reading this issue of “Refugee Transitions” as stimulating as I have, and once again, I invite you to subscribe if you haven’t done so already. On behalf of the staff and management of NFSSTT agencies, I wish you the very best for 2002.

Jorge Aroche
Kurdistan was erased from world maps after World War I when the victorious nations carved up the Middle East and denied the Kurds of a nation state. Geographically, politically and economically marginalised, Kurds never stopped dreaming of a homeland but were never allowed to emerge as a coherent nation. OLGA YOLDI writes about their struggle.

Still waiting..... KURDISTAN
Last September, Turkey's parliament announced greater cultural freedom for the Kurds, after approving several constitutional reforms including measures easing restrictions on broadcasting and publishing in the Kurdish language. This was the best news for Turkish Kurds in decades but this was a reform package primarily aimed at strengthening Turkey's campaign to join the European Union. Although the country had been accepted as a candidate for membership in 1999, it was told it needed to clean up its human rights record before it could start accession talks.

The issue of Kurdish language rights continues to be highly sensitive, given that the conflict in the ethnic Kurdish dominated south east has claimed more than 30,000 lives since 1984. Successive Turkish governments have resisted lifting curbs on the use of the Kurdish language fearing this would further fan separatism among the country's estimated 19 million Kurds. "Parliament is on the way to going down in history as the pioneers of Turkey's reformation process," wrote Ilnur Cevik, editor of the Turkish Daily News.

The Turkish parliament however stopped short of abolishing the death penalty - another condition set by the European Union for membership. For a country that spent US$10 billion dollars annually repressing the Kurds in the last 15 years of conflict, the reform package is seen as a step forward. Although there is a long way to go Turkey might find itself with no option but to seek a solution to the Kurdish problem.

"The process of democratisation could be successful in Turkey," a representative of the Kurdistan Workers Party said. "The Kurdish problem will be solved if the country incorporates the Kurdish guerrillas and the Kurdistan Workers Party in an appropriate democratic system. Violence embedded in society and the social structure will lose its meaning and will be dumped in the dustbin of history," he added.

Proposals to legalise Kurdish language education are absent from the reform package. Some politicians say that changes do not go far enough, that to be able to carry out major reforms it will be necessary to change the constitution. "The present constitution should be scrapped all together," Mr Hasim Hasimi from the Motherland Party said to the Los Angeles Times.

The question is, how far is the Turkish government prepared to go in order to enter the European Union?
A LONG HISTORY

Kurds' ethnic roots reach back thousands of years to the dawn of Mesopotamia. They were not actually called Kurds until the 7th century, when most of them converted to Islam. Kurdistan is situated in the mountains and plateau where the states of Turkey, Iraq and Iran meet (east and south east Turkey, northern Iraq and western Iran.)

Kurds constitute 28 per cent of the population in Turkey (about 19 million,) 24 per cent in Iraq, 12 per cent Iran and 10 per cent in Syria. But Kurds can also be found in Lebanon, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

“Kurdish” people have existed as an identifiable group for possibly more than 2000 years, but only in the twentieth century did they acquire a sense of community as Kurds,” Historian David McDowall writes in his book A Modern History of the Kurds. “This sense of national community occurred at the same time when Turks and Arabs also began to embrace an ethnic sense of identity... As a consequence Kurds had to compete against states intent on forging a new identity based upon an ethnicity that they felt denied their own identity. Kurds were disadvantaged because they lacked both a civic culture and an established literature.”

But do Kurds constitute a nation or are they just an ethnic group? Kurdistan does not enjoy international acceptance as a nation within a recognised territory. It does not constitute a nation state because it lacks the institutions of government as well as a shared language. In fact language differences, the prevalence of different scripts - Latin in Turkey, Cyrillic in the ex Soviet Union and Persian in Iraq and Iran, cast a shadow on the uniqueness of a Kurdish language. Kurmanji, which is spoken by most northern Kurds and Sorani by southern Kurds, are perceived as dialects rather than languages and there are still constant debates about their status as languages.

Kurdistan is however real - it has survived in the imagination of most Kurdish nationalist groups and many Kurdish people who deeply believe in a Kurdish homeland. Nevertheless Kurdistan is also an imaginary place. It has acquired a mystical quality as the land of mountains, wheat fields and deep fertile valleys, a place located in a major crossroad of the world, where ancient tribes and nomads used to live and wonder, where Kurds shared a common ancestry, a common culture and myths.

Historians have written that Kurdish identity was forged in the 1920s, but it was extreme poverty and state oppression that fuelled Kurdish nationalism over the years. However, the task of building a homeland would prove difficult if not impossible, as governments sought the assimilation of Kurds into their own territories and perceived Kurdish nationalism as a threat to the integrity of their national sovereignty.

It was the introduction of modern borders that changed the lives of Kurds forever. Although some borders have existed for centuries, the modern border became a major impediment for Kurdish unity and nationalism, as the Kurdish population suddenly became separated, divided, and fiercely controlled by governments. Frontiers would in fact transform the lives of many Kurds, particularly the pastoralists whose movements had been unrestrained by international borders for centuries.

Once frontiers were carved they would remain forever and Kurdish culture, language and identity have been constantly undermined by the regimes of the countries they inhabit.

“The border was also increasingly used for smuggling, still an important source of income in impoverished areas. Permeable frontiers afforded refuge to those offended by the state. Kurdish leaders have been seeking sanctuary in neighbouring states... They would cross the border when defeated and cross it again to resume their rebellion.” McDowall writes. “With time borders have become less permeable. Surveillance has retarded Kurdish national progress and has largely suffocated Kurdish cross border trade.”

In 1920 Kurds lost an opportunity to form their own modern nation state under the Treaty of Sevres, which was never ratified, later to be abandoned in favour of the Treaty of Lausanne, which supported the division of Kurdistan. As a result, Kurds became the largest nation of people without a homeland. They would remain minority communities living in states with oppressive regimes that forcibly imposed a national identity on all ethnic groups. Over the years a history of resistance would develop. Their demands for autonomy, self determination and separate statehood would bring them into direct confrontation with governments, which did not hesitate to declare war on Kurdish freedom fighters and on the defenseless civilians.

A CLASS STRUGGLE

On 29 June 1999 a Turkish court convicted Kurdistan Workers Party leader Abdullah Ocalan to death. The Turkish state called Ocalan a terrorist but many Kurdish people looked upon him as their leader. Following his conviction he declared:

“My sadness stems from the fact that Turkey could not learn from the policies applied in the world. Although a solution was possible for Kurdistan we did not seize the opportunity.”

Abdullah Ocalan had grown up a Muslim but became a Marxist while studying Political Science at Ankara University. In August 1984, Ocalan and small group of friends formed a clandestine group that ultimately became the Partiya Karkari Kurdistan PKK -The Kurdistan Workers Party, based on a Marxist-Leninist ideology. They launched a series of attacks and ambushes on Turkish forces in the Kurdish region and decided that theirs would be a class...
war. They were angry at the exploitation of both the rural and urban proletariat at the hands of Kurdish landlords, merchants and the ruling establishment. Ocalan decided to sever all ties with the Turkish left as he saw it as an inappropriate vehicle to represent Kurdish interests and was able to suppress other Kurdish voices.

The PKK’s manifesto consisted of educating the poor, the students, on breaking traditions that kept Kurds backward and on creating a free, open and progressive society. They recruited militants from the poorest and most oppressed sectors of Kurdish society in an effort to drive all Turkish forces from Kurdish territory and establish a united and independent Kurdistan.

The PKK initially declared war against the security forces, for they represented state oppression and against the landlords, who were perceived as perpetuating feudalism. For many years a small group of landlords had owned most of the land, (less than 3 per cent of the population owned 33 per cent of the arable land) and as a result had enormous power. The PKK started to shoot at landlords and launched spectacular ambushes against the security forces. But in the process it created a climate of fear and great ambivalence among ordinary Kurds. Some admired it for its courage but others loathed it because its Marxist ideology challenged the social order.

The government retaliated by employing Kurdish tribesmen to work as armed guards. Their mission was to guard the border areas to block PKK access to supplies and logistics. This strategy turned out to be effective in dividing the Kurdish population. The government exerted pressure on tribes (that were believed to be loyal to the state and hostile to the tribes that supported the PKK) to join the village guards. Some tribesmen were expelled from their villages when they refused to join the guards. Others decided to leave to avoid being caught between the PKK and the village guards. Those left behind soon became polarised by the conflict. Because village guards knew the mountains as well as the PKK guerrilla fighters, they were much more effective in fighting the guerrillas than regular military units. The PKK retaliated with brutal attacks.

As time went by the PKK was becoming a threat to the Turkish state because of the mass support it enjoyed from the Kurdish people. Conditions of life deteriorated

Deprived of their livelihood, their homes and the land where they had lived for generations, many had nowhere to go.
as the conflict intensified. The government introduced a law prohibiting all expressions of Kurdish culture and allocated 200,000 troops to Kurdish areas. Turkish Kurdistan was now invaded not only by the guerrillas but also by the police, the gendarmerie, the army and the village guards.

Troops continued killing guerrillas and civilians. President Süleyman Demirel announced that the counter-insurgency operation would involve systematic cleansing and deportation and indeed this is what happened. The Turkish government not only committed the most dreadful human rights violations against Kurds, such as physical abuse and torture of detainees, extra-judicial killings and disappearances, but it also implemented a strategy of mass deportation of Kurdish people. By 1993, three hundred and sixty five villages had been emptied and three million people made homeless. Deprived of their livelihood, their homes and the land where they had lived for generations many had nowhere to go.

According to Human Rights Watch evacuations were carried out with extreme brutality by the armed forces. They were not only forced to leave their homes but saw their houses being destroyed and their possessions plundered. Most had to seek shelter in surrounding areas initially and later migrated to larger cities where they found themselves living in shantytowns. With no employment, education or connections an uncertain future awaited them. Few were able to escape the trauma of the violence and dislocation.

Turkey unsuccessfully sought the cooperation of its neighbours in an attempt to eradicate the PKK, but neither Iran nor Syria (which was backing the PKK) committed themselves.

In the early 1990s the PKK changed its direction. It stopped attacking civilians and, for the first time, Ocalan spoke of federalism as an option instead of separate statehood. He seemed to have reached the conclusion that the PKK would never defeat the Turkish army and the conflict would never be solved by military means. In December 1991 Ocalan announced his readiness to abandon the armed struggle for a negotiated solution.

The army continued its attacks on villages and guerrillas penetrating Northern Iraq where PKK had some bases. However in 1992 President Turgut Özal seemed to have had a change of heart and was now more receptive to the idea of the PKK having a voice in Turkey’s political system.

In March 1993 Ocalan declared a ceasefire. He demanded cultural freedom, the abolition of the village guards, an end to the state emergency in Kurdistan and the recognition of Kurdish political rights. Unfortunately President Özal, who was trying to convince the parliament to consider a peace process, died of a heart attack. Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel interpreted the ceasefire as a sign of weakness and refused to initiate talks.

“The state does not negotiate with terrorists,” he said.

In May, Ocalan declared the ceasefire over and resumed fighting, now launching a series of attacks on tourist areas, and taking tourists hostage. The PKK also attacked the Turkish embassy in Switzerland.

By 1993 the PKK had been waging war for a decade, but the armed struggle had not been effective in defeating the Turkish army or bringing a political solution to the Kurdish conflict. By 1996 it was struggling to maintain logistics and access to food and water. In 1998 Ocalan, who had to leave his base in Syria, was arrested in Nairobi and brought back to Turkey to face trial. He was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death, but his case was taken to the European court in Strasbourg. Ocalan’s lawyer spoke of the unlawful abduction in Nairobi and the inadequate facilities for the preparation of his defense. President Demirel assured the international community that Turkey would indeed abide by Strasbourg’s ruling.

Following Ocalan’s trial many PKK supporters were detained by security forces and repression against the Kurds continued unabated. Ocalan called from prison for
a complete cessation of PKK military activity and the PKK announced that while it would abandon the armed struggle, Ocalan would continue to be their leader.

The army won the war against the Kurdish guerrillas but at a high price. The cost of suppressing the Kurds was more than US$100 billion since 1984. Had this money been invested in much needed economic development, education and health services in neglected Anatolia, the seeds of revolution may never have been sown.

Apart from the suffering inflicted on individuals and families and the loss of life the conflict hindered the political evolution of Turkey as a free democratic society. Military repression inevitably weakened civil society and human rights abuses brought Turkey into conflict with Europe.

The war also had a devastating impact on the economy, agriculture and the environment. The Kurdish provinces continue to be unquestionably the poorest in Turkey yet they receive only 10 per cent of the national development budget. Decades of total neglect have resulted in extreme poverty, high levels of illiteracy among the Kurdish population and a total lack of development. These are the real sources of oppression of the Kurdish people.

The recently announced greater cultural freedom for the Kurds will be of little value, unless the government takes serious steps to reverse the economic disparities between eastern and western Turkey, by investing in development, education and employment creation. Cultural freedom will not mean much to the Kurdish people, if they continue to be deprived of the most basic and fundamental human rights.

The Kurds have been viewed as the weeds disturbing the Ba’athist vision. Khaled Salith

Iraqi Kurds under Saddam Hussein’s regime had two options: assimilation or extermination. In 1975 the Ba’ath Party embarked on the Arabisation of the oil producing areas in Kurdistan, evicting Kurdish farmers and replacing them with Arab tribesmen from the south. That same year when the Kurdish Democratic Party fled to Iran, after the collapse of the Kurdish uprising, many tribes were forced to leave their homes, their land and resettle in the barren desert in the south of Iraq. Later a quarter of a million people would also be forcibly evacuated from their homes by the borders with Iraq and Turkey.

Arabisation also meant that Kurds could neither sell their homes to other Kurds, nor could they build new homes or inherit land or property.

Divisions and rivalries within the opposition made the fight against Saddam a difficult task. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 the Kurdish leadership was deeply divided. The

IRAQI KURDISTAN

SADDAM’S EXPERIMENTS -

On 17 March 1988 many people in the town of Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan were not able to rise from their beds. They died unaware in their sleep. Just before sunrise fighter planes dropped tons of chemical and biological weapons on defenseless civilians.

The chemical bombardment had indeed been unprecedented in the history of the war against the Kurds. “The sound of crying and groans rose from every house… Many who survived the early morning bombings died later. That Friday afternoon, the magnitude of the Iraqi government’s crimes became evident. In the streets and alleys of Halabja, corpses piled up over one another. Children standing in front of their houses in the morning died from breathing cyanide gases.” Dr Christine Gosden and Mike Amitay write in their article Chemical Attack of Halabja by the Iraqi Regime.

More than 5,000 people died and over 10,000 more were wounded. Many of these were women and children. According to Middle East Watch, survivors who sought medical attention in Arbil were arrested, taken away and all males executed.

Halabja had been captured by Iranian troops aided by Kurdish guerrillas during the Iran-Iraq war, so the attacks were perceived as a punishment to the Kurdish population for sympathising with Iran.

According to British geneticist Dr Christine Gosden, who visited Halabja, the Iraqi government had been developing chemical weapons such as sarin and tabun, and mustard gas, which burn, mutate DNA and cause malformations and cancer. These gases can also kill, paralyse and cause immediate and lasting neuropsychiatric damage. Dr Gosden writes that Saddam had also developed biological weapons such as anthrax and the viciously toxic mycotoxins.

“It is likely that the Iraqi government used mycotoxins in the Halabja bombing. This is one of the most dangerous biological agents ever devised because they are capable of producing the effect we fear most - being driven mad by designer psychosis and killing people from rapidly growing untreatable cancers,” she wrote.

About 250,000 people survived the chemical attacks. Ten years later survivors are still suffering from neurological damage and dying from cancers and respiratory ailments.

The Ba’ath Party of Iraq had a long history of perpetrating atrocities against the Kurds. It has always been an enthusiastic promoter of pan-Arabism - the unification of the Arab world through a form of Socialism based on nations, not on class - and during the Cold War found strong allies in Western countries such as the US.
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdistan Socialist Party (KSP) and the Iraqi Communist Party had a common goal: to overthrow the Ba’ath regime; but they were neither unified nor coordinated in their efforts.

The KDP and PUK’s guerrilla forces known as peshmergas - those near death operated independently from one another launching attacks against Iraqi troops and pro-government Kurdish militias, known as jash. Divisions and rivalries were so deeply entrenched that both Kurdish parties would later end up fighting against one another.

The KUP was established in Syria and supported by Syria and later Iran. The KDP, which revived its alliance with Iran after 1978, assisted the Iranian army to capture a border town during the Iraq-Iran war in 1983.

Saddam, who saw the dangers of Iranian cooperation with the Kurds, made attempts to negotiate with the KDP leader Masud Barzani but negotiations failed. Then he approached PUK leader Jalal Talabani, who announced a cease-fire. Talabani made a series of demands including the release of political prisoners, obtaining 30 per cent of oil revenue for the development of Kurdistan and an extension of the autonomous region to include the oil rich town of Kirkuk. The PUK argued that democratic elections in Iraq were fundamental for a free Kurdistan. But Saddam would not compromise, particularly after the US promised him support to defeat Iran.

In November 1986 Talabani and Barzani formed a coalition in Iran and announced the creation of the Kurdistan National Front, which included most Kurdish political parties. The Front would unify peshmerga forces and would be backed by Iran. Saddam, who had boasted the Kurds would not achieve anything because they were divided, saw the Front as a threat.

One year later when the Iraq-Iran war was coming to an end, Saddam appointed his cousin, General Ali Hasan al Majid, as Governor of the North and vested him with absolute powers to settle the Kurdish problem once and for all.

Al Majid wasted no time in launching the Anfal campaign - a series of military offensives between 1987 and 1989 against PUK strongholds and civilians. The Anfal campaign, which included the bombing of Halabja, systematically destroyed 4,000 Kurdish villages, killed more than 182,000 Kurds and left 1.4 million homeless. Few managed to escape their deaths by crossing the snow bound mountains to the east.

GENOCIDE IN KURDISTAN

According to Middle East Watch, the Anfal campaign was not intended as an exemplary punishment to the Kurd-
ish people for their presumed collaboration with Iran or for supporting Kurdish guerrillas.

“Punishment is not exemplary if there is no one left to witness the lesson, and Anfal was thus not intended as punishment. Anfal was a ‘final solution,’ implemented by the Iraqi government, the Ba’ath Party and the Iraqi army. It was intended to make the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan and their rural way of life disappear forever. Only such an intent can explain the precise, neat and thorough destruction of the already empty Kurdish villages, and the fact that Anfal encompassed virtually all Kurdish villages.” According to Middle East Watch.

Through a policy of shoot to kill, the first of Al Majid’s directives was to ban all human existence in the ‘prohibited areas.’ People’s only crime was to have been born Kurdish.

These ethnic cleansing operations started with chemical attacks from the air on both civilian and peshmerga targets. After the initial assault, ground troops and jash surrounded the areas destroying all human habitation in their path, looting household possessions and farm animals and setting fire to homes, before calling in demolition crews. Army trucks transported the villagers to transit camps. Men and women were segregated. Women and children were taken to camps with no facilities, the elderly to abandoned prisons where many died as a result of neglect, starvation and disease. Although the majority of women, children and elderly, who had survived the ordeal, were released after an official amnesty to mark the end of Anfal in September 1988, the men were never seen again. They had been systematically shot by firing squads and buried in mass graves in the desert. According to Middle East Watch, only 6 men survived to tell their own story.

Dr Clyde Snow, a well known US anthropologist, working in Iraq for a human rights organisation found skulls of young men in the mass graves with neck wounds and also the corpses of women who had been strangled.

Zygmunt Bauman in his book Modernity and Holocaust defines mass murder as “a virtual absence of all spontaneity on the one hand, and the prominence of rational, carefully calculated design on the other. The purpose of the modern genocide is a grand vision of a better and radically different society. Here a ‘gardener’s vision is projected upon a society.” He writes, “As in the case of the gardeners, the designers of the perfect society hate the weeds that spoil their design. The weeds surrounding the desired society must be exterminated, it is a problem that has to be solved; the weeds must die not so much because of what they are, but because of what the beautiful, orderly garden ought to be.”

According to researcher Khaled Salih, the Ba’athist rulers of Iraq have always desired to create a conflict-free, harmonious and orderly society, controlled and docile and the Kurds have constituted the main challenge to this vision, based on the rhetoric of pan-Arabism. “The Kurds have been viewed as the weeds disturbing the Ba’athist vision of Arab Iraq...They have never given up their dream. When the dream is embraced by an absolute power able to monopolise rational action, and when the power is totally free from effective social control, genocide follows.”

There is no doubt that Anfal did inflict a deep wound in Iraqi Kurdistan. Apart from systematically destroying Kurdistan, it left thousands of widows and an even greater number of orphans destitute, many of them seriously traumatised by the brutality they had witnessed. Without traditional support structures, many women took years to return to their villages.

Anfal with all its horror, devastation and death was not the end of violence. Following the 1990 Gulf war and military defeat of Iraq, another Kurdish uprising followed. This time initiated by ordinary Kurds and the pro-government Kurdish militia known as jash, who up until that time had been regarded as mercenaries and the enemies of the Kurdish people.

The KDP and PUK, keeping low profiles during the Gulf war, soon succeeded in taking control of the uprising. But after a few weeks of chaotic freedom, Iraq’s elite Republican Guard, aided by Iranian mujahideen, retaliated with such brutality that entire populations were driven out in a panic stampede towards the Turkish and Iranian borders.

One and a half million Kurds attempted to reach safety - only those crossing the Iranian border managed to do so. Turkey, fearing serious destabilisation, refused to admit them and hundreds of thousands spent weeks on the border, in freezing temperatures, exposed to snow and mud.

“Mothers carrying babies confronted Turkish troops...begging to be allowed through to seek medical assistance...Others brought grandparents on their backs or carried in makeshift stretchers of blankets. But anyone who tried to cross into Turkey was beaten back with rifle butts,” a journalist from The Independent Newspaper wrote.

Contrary to all predictions President Bush did not want Saddam to loose control of Iraq after all and the Kurdish problem was described as ‘an internal affair’ in which Bush would not interfere. So American troops watched as Kurdish people were killed by Saddam’s troops. However, television images of death, cruelty and distress mobilised public opinion. The United States and its allies, unable to solve the refugee problem, created a safe heaven for the displaced Kurds in northern Iraq, by prohibiting Iraqi planes from flying north of the 36th parallel and by pushing the Iraqi troops southwards.

The refugees on the Turkish border were first relocated to camps inside the safe haven. This was complemented by a massive relief operation organised by NGOs and other agencies under the terms of a Memorandum of Under-
standing agreed by the UN and the Iraqi government in April 1991. By the summer, a large part of Iraqi Kurdistan was controlled by Kurds under international protection.

In the absence of any Coalition intervention the Kurdish National Front agreed to negotiate with the government. Saddam proposed a settlement based on the principle of confederation, but the Front wanted an autonomy pact with Coalition protection. The parties could not agree.

When negotiations failed Saddam decided to punish the Kurds by imposing an economic blockade on Kurdistan. He withdrew its civil administration and separated the region from the rest of Iraq. He imposed an internal embargo that cut Iraqi Kurdistan from the national electricity network, stopped monthly food rations, caused financial losses when the 25-dinar currency note was summarily cancelled and blocked the supply of vital heating and cooking fuels. Saddam also prohibited the sick from seeking specialised medical treatment elsewhere in the country and stopped salaries and pensions of tens of thousands of active civil servants.

He was determined to make life unbearable in the safe haven, particularly during the long and cold winter. A cold and starving population would have no choice but reject the Front and submit to his terms. But the Front declared its intention of replacing the old Legislative Assembly with a democratically elected parliament and a leader. It was time to establish clear leadership and a proper government for Iraqi Kurdistan.

**SELF RULE IN SAFE HAVEN**

For the very first time in the history of Kurdistan, on 19 May 1992, Kurds broke their silence by exercising their democratic rights electing a government of their choice. Calling the election “a farce and a crime organised by their American masters and implemented by Kurdish lackeys” Saddam Hussein tried hard to disrupt them but couldn’t.

“I never believed that one day I would vote in Kurdistan. It’s like a dream come true…” Mumtaz, an Iraqi Kurd living in Britain who had returned for the occasion, said to The Middle East Newspaper.

The main contenders for power were the KDP and PUK who won the elections, receiving almost equal number of votes. Fuad Masum from the PUK was appointed Prime Minister of the newly established Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

The elections constituted not only a threat to Saddam but to Turkey and Iran, which refused to recognise the KRG.

Both parties agreed to divide all government positions equally and to have each minister seconded by a deputy of the other party. Barzani and Talabani agreed to stand outside government in order to pursue international diplomacy. Apart from lobbying the international community for recognition, their mission was to reconstruct and revive the destroyed villages, the infrastructure and, most importantly, the economy.

But restoring a devastated economy would prove far too challenging for the newly established, unrecognised de facto government, for Saddam’s economic war and the embargo imposed by the UN made Iraqi Kurdistan totally dependent on external aid and on the existing social infrastructure of the Iraqi regime.

“Before the Kurdish uprising Iraqi society had become dependent on oil money, from the Kurdish area and even basic foods were not produced inside the country. Every-

**For the first time in the Kurdish history, oil money is being used for development rather than destruction Dr Jamal Fuad**

thing was imported. Kurdish farmers in Iraq were prohibited from cultivating the land and were forced to move into big collective towns under military supervision. After the uprising the international aid mechanism just replaced the former Iraqi system. Now the whole economy became dependent on international humanitarian aid,” according to an aid worker quoted in the book *Kurdistan in the Shadow of History.*

Saddam sought to destabilise the area even further by delaying relief trucks from crossing into Iraqi Kurdistan and attacking UN staff. On the other hand international aid agencies refused to consult with the KRG on any matters because it was not internationally recognised.

“The Kurdish Regional Government was by-passed by international aid agencies on the most pressing issue it faced, the rehabilitation of Kurdistan. To deny the Kurds control over their own requirements contradicted the basic principles of relief and development, this was particularly so, given the enormity of the task of recovery.” historian David McDowall writes:

Difficult economic conditions and a lack of power to run a functional democracy led to tensions within the KRG leadership. Ideological clashes led to increased antagonism between Barzani and Talabani who had very different leadership styles. Disagreements over the divisions of tolls and customs fees levied at the borders led to hostility, to the point that in 1994 an armed conflict broke out between the KDP and the PUK.

Now Iraqi Kurdistan was facing a civil war, supported by Turkey and Iran, in an effort to extend their influence over the region, donated weapons and money to both parties, but alliances continually shifted.

This wasn’t the first time neighbouring countries had interfered in Kurdish politics. Simko Halmet, PUK representative in Australia says that the Iranian, Iraqi and Turkish governments have always used other Kurds to fight
against their own. “Iraq supports the Kurds from Turkey, not because they like them but because they use them against Kurds in their own country” he says. Attempts at mediation by countries such as Iran, the US and France led to temporary cease fires but did not prevent the escalation of the civil war which was now further complicated by the intervention of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan.

Open hostilities reached a peak in 1996 when Barzani’s peshmerga joined the Iraqi army in an attempt to defeat the PUK once and for all. For the first time Saddam’s army penetrated the safe haven and occupied the city of Arbil.

In September 1998 both parties signed a peace accord, brokered by the US, which ended the conflict and set a course for a united Kurdish authority.

The civil war left 1,000 dead, thousands displaced and Iraqi Kurdistan politically and militarily partitioned between the two parties. Many Kurds left the area as they had lost confidence in the leadership that was perceived as being more interested in their own power struggle than in the task of governing.

“Civil war is nothing new, all nations have been through wars and rivalries. Even the US and France had civil wars.” Simko Halmet says. He reflects on the past in his Sydney home. “You have to understand that this is a generation of Kurds educated under the Ba’ath dictatorship. Kurds have been oppressed, treated like animals, poisoned with gas. After all that you can’t expect this generation to be peaceful and democratic. The PUK for example is now talking about civil and human rights. There has been an evolution in their thinking,” he says.

Simko was a freedom fighter for 5 years. He knows well the mountains of Kurdistan. He joined the peshmerga at the age of 18 and has no regrets for having dedicated an important part of his life to the cause. “We are learning to forgive ourselves” he says. “If we don’t, how are we going to live with each other?”

AN UNEASY COEXISTANCE

The Kurdish de facto government has somehow survived the last ten years, in spite of the embargos, the internal conflicts and the constant threat of Saddam Hussein. This represents an achievement in itself.

“Now that we have tasted freedom, there is no way we can be pushed back to the pre Gulf war era by subjecting us once again to the dictatorial rule or any other rule of Baghdad.” Dr Jamal Fuad, Minister of Agriculture and Secretary to the Planning Council of the KRG, said at a recent Kurdish conference in Sydney.

Thanks to the 13 per cent of the share of the public oil revenues that Iraqi Kurdistan receives since 1996 (under the UN Security Council Resolution), the area has come out of poverty. For the very first time the region has received a share of its own resources which has allowed for some development.

“For the first time in the Kurdish history, oil money is being used for development rather than destruction,” Dr Jamal Fuad says. As a result infant mortality rates have declined and 80 percent of destroyed villages have been rehabilitated as well as the infrastructure. There is still a long way to go, though, in terms of economic development and in reviving the agriculture - the very foundation of the Kurdish economy.

“The number one factor for the revival of the agricultural sector is the return of the rural communities to their earlier habitat,” Dr Jamal Fuad says.

But economic and political uncertainty is undermining the potential of this democratic experiment in Iraqi Kurdistan, for Kurds are in constant fear that Iraq may want to regain its control over Kurdistan. In fact, Iraq continues to destabilise the area with its Arabisation policy.

On the other hand the lack of economic opportunities are contributing to people leaving the region. “Without a permanent political solution that includes international guarantees for the safety and security of the region and a share of resources it is unlikely that the needed capital investment and entrepreneurial activity will take place that will result on a stronger economy and more employment opportunities.” Dr Rowsch Shaways, President of the Iraqi Kurdistan National Assembly, writes.

Most Kurds want democracy and freedom from oppression and most importantly, they want to live in peace. Separate statehood is no longer seen as an option among many Kurds who are prepared to accept a federal system. “We have a dream. We want to live in a free and democratic Iraq that respects the basic human rights of people.” Dr Shaways writes.

Syrian born Kurdish National Congress leader, Dr Jawad Mella, has called for the creation of Kurdish unity and for the issue of Iraqi Kurdistan to be placed in the international agenda. He believes that the regimes governing Kurdistan aren’t democratic and they also abuse their own citizens, so in such political systems Kurds will never be free from oppression so separate statehood is the only solution.

“It is time to put aside our differences,” he said in an interview. “Kurdhood is in the heart and the mind. It is in the spirit and motivation that leads many Kurds to continue their struggle for recognition of their forgotten nation.” He said.

It is that spirit and motivation that has kept Kurdish identity and nationalism alive through decades of oppression. Whether Kurds attain a federal system remains an open question, as it will depend on the political and economic future directions of the regimes ruling Kurdistan. One thing is quite clear: the dream of a homeland is not dead yet and as for the Kurdish spirit, it has survived intact.
Picking up pieces

The ICRC and Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies around the world have an unending task to put together those scattered by the mayhem of war and natural disasters. PETER WILLIAMSON visited the Australian Red Cross and heard refugees tell their stories.

“On their way back the Croatians started shooting. My mother told my dad to run, but he didn’t want to run, and he stayed there. So he got caught, him and another three men. They kept my dad in the car, while they took the other three into the police station. And that was the last they saw him. It’s been ten years this month. The first of this month.”

Branka can recall every detail of what followed. “I was in the hotel playing with my friends in the corridor and one of the boys my age walked past and said: ‘They’ve taken your dad,’ and I said, ‘Yeah, right’. So I went into my room and my mum was crying and I said, “What the hell happened?” and she hung her head and started crying. I can play it over and over; every detail, what colour the blankets were, where she was, what she was doing. Everything. I was nearly nine.”

Every year tens of thousands of people go missing in wars. Almost all are civilians. Millions are separated from their families - driven from their homes, torn apart - mothers from children, men from their wives. And some are never found. Unanswered questions about lost loved ones haunt the victims of this misery for all of their lives. It is the job of the Red Cross Tracing Agency and Refugee Service to put back the pieces. Carolyn Jones and her team of four paid staffers and four volunteers in the NSW division are working on about 300 searches for missing people and about 200 messages at any one time. Nationally, the Australian Red Cross has handled 50,000 cases in its tracing services across all states, including 800 new cases and 1300 messages in the last year.

Branka remembers her old life, the life she had before the war, before the name-calling because she was a Serbian child in Croatia. “My brother and I would get up early, and go and feed the goats. My mum and dad would go and work the fields. We were friends with all the Croatians. They would come over and have dinners, everything.”

“When I was about seven years old, at school we used to get teased being Serbian, and all that. It was really bad, but I can’t remember being fearful, or anything. But then I remember I came home one day, and my dad told us we had to pack up our stuff and go. So we did that, and we moved to Benkovac.”

“While we were still at home, before we ran away to Benkovac, I was sleeping in my clothes and shoes and everything, in case they attacked, and underneath the window we cleared the pebbles and the grass, in case the Croatians came. One time we went to my grandparents’ house, and my mum and my auntie took some guns that they had for hunting rabbits and things. They were patrolling, and they were so scared, just the two of them. The men were at work.”

“We were there a couple of weeks, and then they said it was okay, so we went back. Then a couple of weeks later, my dad said we had to go again. So we packed up. And I still remember one thing, me and my mum were packing my things in my bedroom, and I had one of my pictures in a frame, and I said ‘Mum, can I take this?’ And she said, ‘No, we’ll be back’. But we never did go back.”

Unable to return home, her mother eventually found refuge for the family in Australia. “My mum was going through the Red Cross, and trying to find my dad. And my cousins that stayed back as well. They tried to go through the government, but nothing ever came up. I think they have lost hope, because they call my dad ‘deceased’. And that’s really painful, because we haven’t lost hope.”

In Australia life has been hard for her mother, working to support her three children at school. Branka works, too, at weekends. The family, however, is unable to discuss their loss. The subject of Branka’s missing father is too painful. “My mum is just so strong, but I can’t talk to her about my dad. I will start crying before she does. It’s just difficult to talk about it. My sister, she was nine months, she hasn’t really seen my dad. We have just two photos left. And my brother, he doesn’t talk about it. Ever.

Frishta was 14 when she lost her family.

“My mother was a teacher and my father was a prosecutor, with seven children. We had a car and we had TV, everything, but this is what has happened - I have lost everything. The Mujahideen came, in 1994. Because our house was on a corner, and there were many groups in Afghanistan fighting each other, maybe seven, maybe nine,
and these attacked our house. They said they needed one of our rooms upstairs in the corner, where they had a view of the streets and they could control anyone coming that way.”

With the Mujahideen occupying their upstairs room, Frishta’s house became a target for rival militia. When the attacks came, the family would run to the mountain behind their house, and hide among the rocks. “As soon as it started we would run out. Always, when it started, my father would say ‘Go, just go. Just rescue yourself’, except my mum who would take the small children, and when she was running, sometimes, she would take some things to keep us warm. She was doing that, not my father, not me, not my brother. In the morning, we would meet after everything stopped.”

One night the house came under rocket attack and was completely destroyed. The attackers were Shiite, and Frishta’s family - her parents, two younger brothers and a baby sister - being Sunni, were taken away. “All that night, on the mountain, I was asking where is my family, and our neighbours said, ‘Your mum is coming, coming, coming’. But at five o’clock in the morning, when it was getting light, they said, ‘Your family has died. That’s all. Finished. All gone.’”

“I was crying, and my brother was very, very young. I was fourteen. People said you have to go with your neighbour. Because we were from another group, Sunni, we couldn’t go and talk with other groups because [their militia] would take us as well. After thirteen days, my neighbour took us to Pakistan. Me and my two sisters, and my brother. I was the oldest.”

The bus trip took three days, with a fourth spent at the border, waiting. They finally crossed into Pakistan and went to Rawalpindi. Frishta had sent a message to her uncle in the USA to say what had happened; he sent her some money, but there was no further contact. She had to grow up fast. Living with neighbours from Kabul, she realised that she must contribute to the upkeep of the brother and two sisters. She found work teaching languages to people up to 20 years older than her, and she gave the money to her neighbour to help pay for food.

She was assessed by UNHCR and, together with her younger brother and sisters, eventually resettled in Australia. Her six years in Pakistan were very hard and Frishta chooses not to speak about some of the things she endured. “I had many responsibilities, myself. I had to work; my neighbour was very good to me, but I realised that I had to contribute something. I had to go and do something, because no one could be expected to have four people extra in their house. When I was 16 or 17, I wanted to be independent.”
they said to me, ‘You should get married, maybe someone comes from overseas like Germany’, but I said ‘No’, I would do anything for her, but I would not do that. Because I had promised myself that I will not get married until I knew if my parents were dead or alive.”

Putting one’s life on hold is common to victims of war. Apart from the pain and grief of loss of one’s home or loved ones, it is tremendously disruptive to one’s life. Branka speaks of the impact on her schooling: “I went to Year 1; Year 2, I started, but the war happened and I didn’t finish; Year 3, I didn’t go. Year 4, I started in Benkovac, but bombs were falling everywhere so I didn’t finish Year 4. Year 5, I didn’t go, too - I was supposed to go when I came here [to Australia], but they put me in Year 6.”

Not all cases are about missing people. At least some of them are about setting the record straight.

Adele contacted the Australian Red Cross to throw some light on her own background and the story that her mother told her before she died. Adele’s life was scarred by war before she was even born, in Reutlingen, Germany, in 1946, just after World War II. She had severe health problems as an infant, while her mother and stepfather were trying to emigrate to Australia.

“The ships were already waiting. If you were married couple, you could come over on a £10 package. And well my mother grabbed the first fellow she could get, and he had no idea that she already had a child, which was me. She never told him. The sole purpose of marrying him was to get on the ship, come into Australia.”

They were refused passage because the authorities knew of the sick child her mother intended to abandon in Germany. They had to wait another two years before the three of them were given passage to Australia. At the age of four, Adele was put into Saint Theresa’s Orphanage, in Essendon, Melbourne. “They just forgot about me. I was there until I was eight years old because in the Polish orphanage, you can only stay there until eight years of age.”

Adele was fortunate to be put in the care of Mother Theresa. “She was one of the most beautiful people I have ever known. She had 85 children at the orphanage, and each one of those children was loved. I was a very shy little girl, but I was very artful with my hands. And what I didn’t have, as far as love was concerned, was replaced by my Good Lord who certainly gave me something whereby I could entertain myself by making things with my hands.”

One night, when Adele was seven, Mother Theresa, was killed in a fire. Adele was watching as it happened. “I cried and I cried and I cried. I cried for three weeks. My heart broke for this lady. It was my mum. She was the only mum I ever knew. She taught me everything I know.” Three weeks afterwards, she had to leave the orphanage because she had reached eight years old. Adele was devastated, but before she left was given a gift - Mother Theresa’s piano accordion.

Adele’s mother still refused to take her daughter back - and Adele did not see her for the next thirty years - so she found herself working in the laundry run by the Good Shepherd Convent in Abbotsford - “the biggest hell that God ever put on Earth.” She found comfort in music and, on the strength of her accordion playing, won a scholarship to a private school. She says, “I do believe that there are some sorts of spirits out there that look in and looked after me”.

Many years later, she was living in Healesville and received a call from the federal police. They asked her if she was familiar with the name Ljubica Bozic? Adele said that she thought that was her mother’s maiden name. The news was that her mother had only weeks to live; she had cancer of the colon.

As her mother lay on her deathbed, Adele tried to make her peace with the woman who had rejected her. She also sought information about her background and her father. Her mother said, “Only God knows who your father was. I was raped by man after man after man.”

As Adele bathed her mother, she noticed marks under her arm. “I asked my mother, what’s that? I had seen that sign before. It was a swastika and ‘LBor96’.” It took hours, but then she told me.” Adele’s mother’s parents had owned a hotel in Yugoslavia, and on the night she was taken by the Gestapo, her father and four of her seven brothers were gunned down, in the hotel. She was put in a cattle track and sent to Germany. Many of the prisoners died along the way.

“Something inside me was certain ‘No, it’s not’. And you’re the one that told me. God love you, Carolyn! I mean, okay, I can understand her rejecting me. I can understand, because I would have been a continuous reminder of how I was conceived. But, I am loving this woman now, spiritually.”

Putting on her mother’s Slavic accent, she repeats the story: “‘You know, Adele, I was working in an ammunition factory in Germany and I was picked because I was very smart. I was in university and I spoke languages - French, Hungarian, Yugoslavian, German - very good German.’” Her mother told her that she became a sex-slave for the Germans.

After her mother’s death, Adele sought information on the meaning of her mother’s tattoo. Journalists at the German magazine Der Spiegel told Adele that the tattoo under her mother’s left arm meant she was a member of the SS, not a slave.

Carolyn Jones interrupts her to expand on the news on her case: “I will just clarify for you, Adele, the International Tracing Service in Germany, which has all the wartime records, told us that there are records in there, in their vaults and their files, that confirmed that she is reg-
istered as doing forced labour.”

“She IS registered?” Adele said as the implications sank in. “So she was registered in the files as a forced labourer?”

“Yes”.

“Oh, God love it! Who found that out?”

“You know, when we started the trace, we wanted confirmation from the Red Cross in Germany…”

Adele interrupts: “So she wasn’t an SS? So she was a ‘Lebensborn’ woman*. Oh God love it! Oh Jee … Oh, Carolyn, I’ll tell you what, you’ve made me really so pleased about that!”

Adele’s relief is palpable. “I was told she was in the SS! That’s what I was told! Darling heart, you’ve got no idea what that’s done to me. Now, I can really grieve for my mum. You see, to be an SS is a choice you made - like to be a terrorist. But something inside me was certain ‘No, it’s not’. And you’re the one that told me. God love you, Carolyn! I mean, okay, I can understand her rejecting me. I can understand, because I would have been a continuous reminder of how I was conceived. But, I am loving this woman now, spiritually.”

“You know, I was holding my breath? Because, had you even told me that my mother was a Gestapo or an SS, and was part and parcel of killing the Jews … Look, I would have thought, well, okay, now I’ve prepared myself for that and I would have said, ‘That’s my mother, but I’m not my mother’s child’. Because I do know the difference. I could not do that, but for you to tell me my mum was a slave … my God, can you imagine? … Just try to step in her shoes. Brothers shot dead on the stairs. I mean, if you had any emotion, then, God, you would have gone numb. You wouldn’t have known what love was. You see, all I can do at my age, 55, is sing the blues, honey, and boy can I sing the blues.”

I am surprised to learn that the Red Cross still gets many cases from World War II. Carolyn Jones says that a lot of people try to trace relatives as they near the end of their lives. Cases such as that of Adele’s mother may also lead to claims for compensation, although these are not determined by the Red Cross. There seems no end to the conflicts giving rise to new disappearances, new streams of refugees, and new searches for loved ones. The main communities using the tracing service in New South Wales are Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi, Polish, Russian, Somali, Sudanese, and Ukrainian.

The job inevitably confronts great sadness, but Carolyn says: “This job is wonderful, especially when we find a case where relatives are still alive. But success varies from case to case. Success may be the client being able to say, ‘My father’s dead’, and there is thus a resolution.”

Frishta’s neighbour went from Pakistan back to Afghanistan to sell up, hoping to move to Europe. Amazingly, Frishta’s father was selling vegetables in a market, and saw the neighbour after seven years. He had no idea that the neighbour had cared for his four children during this time, or that they were still alive. Frishta’s father then went to Pakistan to see how they were, but on arrival, he was told they had gone to Australia. They gave her father the phone number in Australia. He called Frishta in Australia, but Frishta could hardly believe it was her father’s voice. She thought someone was joking with her. It was the first time she had heard his voice in over seven years.

Frishta’s father returned to Afghanistan to fetch the rest of his family. On their way back to Pakistan, they were robbed and Frishta’s telephone number was taken, too. The neighbours had left for Tajikistan and Frishta’s parents thought that there was little hope of finding their children again. After a few months, Frishta was becoming desperate at not having heard from her father again. She contacted the Red Cross, and a trace was begun. Her mother, meanwhile, had contacted the Australian High Commission in Pakistan, and the Red Cross was able to contact her through them. The Red Cross then assisted Frishta’s parents, brothers, and sister, in their quest to gain residence in Australia, under the family reunion programme.

Frishta tells me about her family’s arrival in Sydney. “My sister cleaned the house, everything was ready for them to come. Then they called Anglicare to come, because I had no car to go to the airport. And when we were going, and that plane was coming, even the bus driver, he was crying. He said. ‘I will put on the music if you don’t stop crying’. He was crying, the social worker was crying, everyone was crying, but it wasn’t sad crying, it was beautiful.”

She shows me a picture of her family - all nine of them, reunited at Sydney Airport, just two months ago. Her father looks 60, but he’s only 48. He was impris-
ined twice and beaten, in the years he was lost to his children. But she has her father, and her mother, all of them, embarking on a new life in Australia.

Two days before we met, Frishta got engaged to an Afghan man in Sydney. She has applied to enter a university next year. Her parents are learning English. They are regaining their health, and they say that they are in “paradise”.

Adele is waiting to hear the outcome of the second part of her trace in Yugoslavia. She hopes that she may have uncles and cousins. She is putting together pieces of her past, and coming to understand her mother’s hell, and how this led to her mother to put her to an orphanage. Perhaps, some day, she will make contact with family she does not yet know she has. Adele says to me, “Make sure that the story will have a conviction that’ll make anybody, next time they look at themselves in the mirror, say who am I? Who could I be? What if? And don’t pigeon-hole me, mate! Maybe I have got more genes of a very brave family called Bozic.”

Branka is still waiting, hoping for her father to be found. I think of her words: “Now, I can’t bear to think about it any more. Every day it’s in my face, any incident that happens around the world, like in Africa or in Afghanistan, or in Kosovo, it just brings it back. I just want to push it behind me; I just can’t bear it, but it’s always there.”

“I only became involved with the Red Cross this year, because I’m sick of it and I really want to do something. I just realise, now, it’s been more than half of my life.

“I wish I could get in there myself, and look in all the prisons. But I don’t have much power to do anything. My uncle knows a number of Croatian people that we lived next to, and he has tried to call them and find out what happened. But it’s all hush hush; they can’t talk about it, because they’re afraid someone is listening, and they can’t say anything.

“I’d like to go back to where I lived and visit and just see the place. My mum won’t let me, because people know me because of my surname, and because of what happened to my dad. My house isn’t there anymore. I know it was bombed, but I’d like to go. Some people who go back say you can’t recognise anything. Even the graves are gone.”

The trace for Branka’s father began in 1994, in Yugoslavia, and like many other cases that were started overseas, it was transferred to Australia. Picking up a list of missing people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Carolyn Jones starts talking about the vast numbers of people still missing. “From the Bosnian war, for example, there were over 20,000 people missing and they have resolved less than 3,000. It is the same with the other sectors, like Croatia. Every six months we get an update, and it’s really hard to tell people that there is no more news on a particular case.”

The tracing services are free of charge and are provided to families separated by war or natural disaster. The Red Cross or Red Crescent societies in many countries have limited resources, so it is difficult to apply pressure to speed up the searches. In Ukraine, for example, each caseworker has a load of over one thousand cases, and 30 new cases are received daily.

The method used varies from country to country, and depends on the type of records available to the Red Cross. The Australian Red Cross uses public records such as the Electoral Roll, telephone directories, registers of births, deaths and marriages, and contact with community groups. In Germany, there are very extensive records relating to the use of forced labour and the concentration camps. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also has its own records relating to visits to people in prisons, detention, war zones, and its work with refugees over many years.

The process of tracing is necessarily bureaucratic. The Red Cross must maintain neutrality at all times and, just as importantly, must be seen to be neutral. It has to work with all parties to a conflict, and negotiate access to prisoners, to people, and even to the records kept of human movements, deaths, and imprisonments. Carolyn Jones explains: “They [the ICRC] may be working, for example, with the Serbian authorities and the Croatian authorities, to uncover graves or get access to prisons. However, in all conflicts, each side wants to know what has happened to their own people, but they may try to cover up anything that they have done to others, which isn’t helping get answers for the victims’ families. It’s difficult because it’s such a slow process.”

I ask Branka how she feels about the possibility that her father has not survived. After ten years, she has not given up hope: “I would rather not know anything, than know that he is not alive”. The trace remains open; there is still a possibility that an answer may be found.

* The Lebensborn Project kidnapped children and “racially good” young women from Eastern occupied countries. The plans were to raise the children as Germans and to use the women to breed young Germans fathered by SS members and to be raised with SS indoctrination in selected Nazi families.
Finding the Courage to Act

Not since the establishment of the United Nations Convention for the protection of refugees has the need for a balanced and principled dialogue about asylum seekers been more urgent. This year marks the convention’s fiftieth anniversary. The increasing demand for its use is a sad indictment of the world’s collective failure to build a just and egalitarian global society.

The convention’s raison d’etre is to provide protection to people fearing persecution on grounds of race, religion, political beliefs or belonging to a social group – and who are outside their country of origin. It was designed when industrialised nations bathed in the glow of victory after World War II and humanitarianism seemed a natural, if not essential, progression from the past. The convention aimed to restore dignity and security to those displaced and persecuted, but I sometimes wonder if the authors could have foreseen the extent of its ongoing relevance.

There are now approximately 21.5 million people under the care of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. That’s one in every 284 people on earth. By recent accounts you might believe that Europe, North America and Australia are overwhelmed by refugees and asylum seekers. This is simply not true. Just as the top ten refugee producing countries in the world are amongst the poorest, so too are the top ten refugee receiving countries. Last year Iran cared for 2 million refugees; Pakistan 1.6 million; Tanzania 622,000. By comparison, the USA resettled 71,500 refugees, Canada, 13,500 and Australia 6,600.

The reality is that the poorest countries shoulder the greatest burden of responsibility for the world’s displaced and dispossessed. Naturally, the convention has come under intense scrutiny as an ever-increasing number of people seek sanctuary in its principles. The fundamental shifts in geo-political terms during the cold war made regional and transnational economic interests the primary drivers in foreign policy. Innovations in science, technology, and communications provide the mechanisms to speed this along, and as a result we are living in a very different and still unfamiliar global culture. No longer is it simply a question of maintaining cold war alliances.

This poses a plethora of challenges for wealthy industrialised countries in a world where two thirds of the population live in poverty, political instability, and in the case of refugees, fear of persecution, torture and death.

One such phenomenon is the escalation in the movement of people. The odious practice of people-smuggling, now perceived as a major threat to national sovereignty, has flourished largely because of a failure to find durable solutions to protracted refugee crises.

At the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture and Trauma, we deal with the human cost of people fleeing persecution, seeking to rebuild new lives. Amira, for example, survived the virtual eradication of two generations of her family. She spent 9 months in a prison where she was routinely tortured with electric shock, sexual abuse, mock executions and other brutalities. Her memories no longer haunt every aspect of her life nor do they prevent her from building a loving relationship with her husband and three children. In Amira’s case she has the good fortune of knowing that finally she was accepted into Australia, and with that came a sense of entitlement to a future she never thought possible. That future was afforded her by Australia under its commitment to the refugee convention - as one of the few resettlement countries in the world. Amira’s story is echoed again and again in the thousands who have sought refuge and a new beginning in this country.

What about those who seek asylum without invitation? How can we balance our ability to respond with our desire and our duty to do so? What has happened to force so many to flee and take such a perilous path? Their desperation appears overwhelming, and the risks asylum seekers take fall well outside the frame of reference of most Australians. Such desperation and determination appears to frighten us, gives us a sense of not being in control, or being overrun by outsiders. Hunger strikes, lips sewn together and riots are increasingly portrayed as the actions of criminals and manipulators. But to what extent is this really true?

Nine years ago, I asked a friend, Yaltchin, whose first experience of torture was at the age of sixteen, why a hunger striker in detention believed his actions would convince the Minister to grant him asylum. I was confident that it would not. Yaltchin had himself been an asylum seeker and granted refugee status in Australia. He recalled his own hunger strike while imprisoned for promoting democracy. “When all hope has faded and any sense of control has been lost the last thing you can have control over is your choice to eat. When they strip you of your dignity this may be your only, your last remaining act of defiance.”

To this day Yaltchin remembers those terrible times, resolutely in his belief that when left with no choice and no hope, preserving one’s dignity means taking great risks. Sadly, at times this may also result in self-harm or death.

Media polling on this issue in recent days has indicated up to 95% public support for stronger measures
to prevent the arrival of asylum seekers and for more stringent treatment after they arrive. When asked the simple question “Should Australia relent to international pressure and accept the illegal migrants?” - most said no. But if the question were “If you were stranded with your two young children and feared for their lives if you were to return home, what would you be prepared to risk?” What would the answer be? This is perhaps an unfair question but without having experienced such hardship I can only look at my two sons and imagine what I would be prepared to do in order to protect them from persecution or possible death. My answer is unequivocal - anything it takes.

The plight of asylum seekers all over the world is one of the most complex human rights and public policy issues of our time. It is bound by people moving from one part of the world to another, for an increasingly diverse set of reasons, all compelling, some falling within the refugee convention and others not. The convention, however, is the only international instrument through which many can envisage a new life.

This creates the inevitable tension of advocates and asylum seekers, who are pressing to broaden the convention’s interpretation to encompass more people, and governments looking to narrow its terms for fear of losing control of their borders. Neither perspective reflects the whole truth, and offer little to address the core problem.

In spite of their obvious limitations, these two opposing positions continue to absorb an inordinate amount of time and resources. Last year, European countries, Canada, the US, and Australia gave UNHCR the equivalent of $45 US per person for the 21.5 million. In the same year those countries spent approximately $22 200 per head US to fortress their borders and process 460 000 asylum seekers who had breached the defence.

This polarisation of attitudes has focussed most attention on which of these positions is right and which is wrong, which is most responsible and which is most humane. The entire environment is now characterised as adversarial - at times downright abusive - with a good splash of political opportunism. In hurling down this path, the debate has become distorted, with any common ground desecrated by defensiveness and confrontation. Those who suffer most from this are the asylum seekers, the refugees, their families left behind and future generations. They pay a terrible price, but we are all diminished by our failure to find humane solutions.

To turn this around, governments, advocates, and the community at large must find the courage to deal with these complex issues. Those arguments, which in effect mean our borders would be porous, or which promote residency in Australia for all those who seek it, clearly fail to meet community expectations. But how can we hope to prevent the flow of people seeking asylum anywhere without concentrating our efforts and resources on the reasons why these people are forced to flee?

There is an urgent need for global leadership and participation in good faith.

The plight of such people must not fall prey to the populism and opportunism which surrounds an election. A new paradigm is needed, one that gives us the freedom to reassess our role as a mature democracy in a changing world, and one that doesn’t allow the politics of fear to steer us towards policies which knowingly perpetuate the suffering of others. In our work with survivors of torture, we know that persecutors rely on people who could act but feel helpless or frightened. It’s a prerequisite for the damage they cause to be permanent - for them to win. If we can overcome these fears and act with integrity and sincerity, persecutors will inevitably lose, and we all win.

By Paris Aristotle
Director, Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture and Trauma.
Gia Hai Nguyen is a photographer who photographs ethnic community life in Sydney. “Most of my photographs try to catch the feelings of people and their daily lives in Sydney. People are the same everywhere, no black no white, no yellow - people are just people”. He feels close to people, and believes in the resilience of their cultures.

Hai left Vietnam in 1982 and settled in Sydney in 1986, having spent over three years in refugee camps in Thailand.

Hai can be contacted on 0412 380 353.

Facing page:
Relaxing in Cabramatta.

Following page:
A medium swings a sword while channelling the spirit in a home at Warwick Farm, Sydney.
Right:
Vietnamese girls at a community Hall in Edensor Park.

Below:
Medium channels the spirit which gives advice to a family in Warwick Farm, Sydney.

Facing page:
A woman brings food to church for offering to Mother Mary.
How do you understand the current conflict in Afghanistan?

I would describe the current conflict between Afghanistan and the United States as a conflict between two worlds. One world is quite powerful and can impose its power on the other. One world is struggling to gain power and to be recognised equally as a partner. This is not to justify all Islamic movements, but is simply an attempt to understand that. The majority of Muslims are illiterate, and the majority of the Muslim world is suffering from poverty. They see themselves as victims of western politics, especially when it comes to wrong leadership and the problem of puppet leaders. It’s a social question because in Islamic countries liberalism or Muslim liberals were not successful in implementing deep economic and social reforms.

There is corruption of the upper class, and a small elite enjoy prosperous and fashionable lifestyles while the majority of Muslims are suffering. Islam, like any other religion, has been used by different players as a catalyst to justify the status quo or to attack the status quo. In the Islamic world, Islamic Marxists used Islam to justify their attacks on capitalism while capitalists used Islam to justify their attacks on fundamentalists. Meanwhile, fundamentalists used Islam to justify their attacks on liberals and nationalist forces.

I have to emphasise, that not every Islamic movement is fundamentalist. There was an Islamic modernist movement of the 19th and early 20th century, and a form of Islamic socialism, especially during the 1950s and 60s. Now we have very strict Islamic movements which have politicised Islam to justify their goals.

Can one follow Islam and accept terror?

No, I personally do not think so. You won’t find any reference in the Koran that justifies the use of violence, but extremists have interpreted the Koran to justify their means. However, you should not allow anyone to oppress you, and this is one of the core values in Islam. To me, these are beautiful values, and I praise any philosophy that preaches positive resistance to its believers. Islam is a religion of resistance. For Islam, people fighting for all their freedom, against imperialism or exploitation have the right to defend their land and themselves with any means that they find.

But the question is whether acts of terrorism committed by a state are acceptable? Since 1991 over one million Iraqis have died as a result of actions taken by the West. Who are the victims of terrorism? The people of Iraq. It is hypocritical to define terrorism in one part of the world differently from that in another part of the world.

How do Afghans in Australia feel about their recent history and the war now underway?

The Afghan people, and Muslims generally, are sick and tired of these tyrannical regimes. It is the people of Iraq, the Kurds, and the Iranians, who have suffered most at the hands of Saddam. Afghan people have suffered most at the hands of the Taliban. The people have mixed feelings about the current situation. They are not
In relation to the Tampa crisis, one commentator went as far as to say that these refugees should be barbecued and given to the sharks.

the name of getting rid of Islamic fundamentalism. Also, the totalitarian Islamic regimes will be expected to use the situation to oppose any form of social change.

Muslims feel very uncomfortable where they are minorities in the countries in which they are living, and suddenly they are introduced as terrorists. My daughter was nearly attacked last night in a bus. Someone saw an Arabic word on something she was wearing. The person broke a bottle of beer and tried to attack her. Muslims are becoming victims of hatred. There are second generation Muslims who are born here, in Australia, but even they are being labeled as foreigners and told to go back home.

To what extent does prejudice stem from ignorance about Islam and the peoples who practice the Islamic religion?

Unfortunately, people get their knowledge through the media, and unfortunately in the last few months, a number of humanitarian issues have been used for political advantage. The Tampa crisis, and now the tragedy of September the 11th. Who is highlighted as the cause of the current crisis? All the problems of modern civilisation? Of course, it is Arabs, the Middle East and Islam. Somehow then, many Australians see Muslims as their enemies. They don’t recognise that the majority of Muslims condemn any form of violence against human beings. It is needless to say that what happened to the United States, to those innocent human beings, is horrifying. No human being could justify that.

In relation to the Tampa crisis, one commentator went as far as to say that these refugees should be barbecued and given to the sharks. If you can see that the majority of Afghan people are victims of the Taliban regime, how can you not sympathise with the Afghan boat people? The majority of boat people are Hazaras who, racially and religiously, are a minority group in Afghanistan. Acts of genocide and massacres were committed against the Hazara people. When they flee to Pakistan, they don’t feel safe there, because of the support for the Taliban in Pakistan. Pakistan created the Taliban themselves. So they do everything to rescue themselves, and get to more desirable western countries. I do not understand how western democracies condemn the atrocities of a fascist killing machine such as the dictatorship of the Taliban, and cannot give comfort to these people and some space to rest.

You seem to be suggesting that by backing authoritarian regimes in Islamic countries, the West provided the fertile ground for the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.

Yes. By creating this unequal social and political environment in Islamic countries, the West gives opportunities to misuse religion to justify their political goals. But equally, I must emphasise that a lot of the Islamic movements, that are being labeled as fundamentalists, never promoted any form of violence against any government, West or East, but there is no democratic environment in which these groups can promote their ideologies, and to great degree they remain underground political forces.

They wish to challenge these totalitarian regimes, but it is often the support of the Western world that makes it possible for these regimes to stay there and commit crimes against their own citizens. An example of this is the Iranian people who wanted to get rid of the Shah; they actually kicked him out and a very liberal form of government came to power after World War II. And what happened? A CIA coup actually brought him back again, and he committed a lot of horrible crimes against his nation. You can talk about Iraq - a similar case - with Saddam Hussein. He started to be labeled as a terrorist when he lost his loyalty to the USA.

What is the way forward from here, to reverse this history of discrimination and suspicion?

At the beginning of this crisis we heard the rhetoric that there was no difference between Osama bin Laden and the Taliban who harboured him. Now we hear talk of a compromise, or an attempt to do deals with moderates in the Taliban and with the Northern Alliance, maintaining some other moderate faces and getting rid of extremists. They are totally confused about what kind of regime would be installed in Afghanistan. The non-Taliban political parties are not as clean as some might wish them to be. They themselves have had a hand in a lot of crimes; and they themselves have committed atrocities.

The Afghan king and his family, reigned for 40 years and still Afghanistan was one of the most underdeveloped societies in the world. This king who enjoyed a style of life which would be a dream for anyone, even in the western world, who didn’t care what happened to the nation, would be coming back. What Afghanistan needs is not some form of magic, but education. I sometimes feel sorry for the Taliban militias as well, because they were really the bastard product of the Afghan war during the Soviet era. Groups of Afghan orphans, or Pashtun orphans, were taken by force to Pakistani madrassas and given a
very, very sick interpretation of the world and of Islam, and then the CIA, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia trained them to go back to Afghanistan. They were the victims of dirty politics.

Overall, what Afghanistan needs, is some degree of social justice, no matter who can secure this social justice, people need hospitals and people need schools, people need education. More than 99 percent of Afghanistan’s educated labour force leaves Afghanistan. It is a nation without even one percent of educated people. Even the Taliban could think more clearly if they had the education.

In traditional Afghan culture there is no way Afghan people could accept the mistreatment of women. But the Taliban never had any roots with their own culture. It is a force that combines the fanatics of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and a small number of Afghans. In fact, the way I see it is that the entire Afghan nation was hijacked by a force which was initially supported by the United States, provided with financial support by Saudi Arabia, and provided with military support by Pakistan.

Now there is a great degree of confusion in the western world, what we should do now. It is obvious what they should do now - they should have a broader consultation, they should take the guns and ammunition and everything from the people. Afghans have fought enough.

This is not an easy task, and really, I have to emphasise that it is an issue of poverty and illiteracy, and an issue of insecurity. For more than a quarter of a century, Afghanistan has been at war. Those people have seen nothing but guns and killing.

In a way, what we are seeing is a quintessential lesson of what is 25 years of war can do to a country?

Exactly. Exactly. And corrupt politics, and a lack of commitment to human well-being. The warnings of the Taliban were there from the early days of their coming to power. The Taliban forces are also destructive for the Islamic world.

How does it feel to be an Afghan living in Sydney right now?

It’s quite a depressing situation. You come from a land whose people have been victims of international politics for a quarter of a century.

There is a high level of uncertainty about what will happen in the future. Day after day we get news that the Americans are using the most horrible weapons, that they had never used elsewhere. Afghanistan is a kind of laboratory for these new weapons and the victims are ordinary Afghans.

On a personal level, this family’s life has been paralysed since they started bombing Afghanistan. You know what is happening, and you can’t do anything about it, those Afghans coming here can’t be terrorists. They are youths who are the victims of trauma. They are young and energetic and could make a contribution to Australia.

When people are scared, they become irrational. The majority of Afghans coming here can’t be terrorists. They are youths who are the victims of trauma. They are young and energetic and could make a contribution to Australia.

Do you feel that people are turning more to their religion as a result of the stigmatisation and isolation of Muslims?

It is a fact, that in times of crisis people become more religious. And this has happened a number of times in the history of Islam. In 1258, when the Islamic civilisation was under attack from Genghis Khan and the Muslims lost their empire, suddenly a very negative and religious expression dominated the Muslim world. Muslims actually decided to stop their interaction with non-Muslims and that was quite costly for Muslims.

They interpreted their defeat as the refugees.

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disapproval.

A similar thing happened in the 18th century, when the penetration of Western countries began to dominate and invaded Islamic countries, one after another. The immediate response of that was the emergence of the Wahabi movement which was critical of Sufism and identified Sufism as a source of problems by allowing foreign influence to come into the Islamic world. The message of the Wahabi movement was that the only salvation for us would be to go back to the values of the date of the prophet Mohammed. This was the origin of Islamic fundamentalist movements.

Again, now, there is a revival of Islamic feelings. Pakistan is a good example; since its establishment in 1948 it was a very Islamic state, but since September the 11th the growth of Islamic feeling has escalated a lot.

But I can assure you that Islam will not create a problem for the rest of the world. People are always very critical of Islam, and my immediate response is to ask what kind of Islam are you talking about, and which part of the Islamic world are you talking about? There has never been only one form of interpretation of Islam at any particular time. There are a lot of variations and interpretations, even of particular verses of the Koran, or the sayings of the prophet Mohammed.

I wonder what there is in Islam that could create fear for non-Muslims. The essentials of Islam are a kind of humanism. First of all, Islam is a continuation of the same tradition that gave rise to Judaism and Christianity. The core of Islam is not much different from Christianity.

The basis of Islam is established on five facts; that there is just one god and Mohammed is his prophet, that you pray regularly to God, that you fast, that you pay a portion of your wealth on a regular basis to the poor and the needy, and that at some stage of your life you should go and visit Mecca. And more than that, there are a lot of magnificent and beautiful values in Islam. Islam is a religion that emphasises social justice.

I don’t really think that these issues are about Islam and Christianity. Muslim issues are really the issues of ordinary life. Muslims react in this way because they are suffering inequality. It is very obvious that if you change their social and economic conditions, their understanding and expression of Islam will be very different.

How can the damage to Islam-Western relations be undone?

I don’t know if I have an answer to this question. The damage has been done, and Muslims have been isolated and identified as enemies of the West, enemies of civilisation. Historically, Islam has never had a good image within Western civilisation. No matter which era of time you’re talking about, the image of Islam has always been a mixture of fantasy and fiction rather than facts and reality. Islam has always been portrayed as a fake copy of Christianity.

In medieval times, when a woman wanted to scar her child, she would call “Mohammed, come get this boy”. There never was any understanding as to how a religion from a nomadic people could spread across so much of the world in such a short time. There must have been something there that made it so attractive to believers. Apart from a few people who made attempts to understand Islam, others saw it as a symbol of lust and barbarism. Nonetheless, in the 19th century, some Western scholars attempted to introduce Islam through studies of its poetry and literature, such as the work of Omar Khayyam and Sadi and Ofez, and the influence of Sufism.

For some time then, the image of Islam in Western culture was softened to a degree. The Iranian revolution was a turning point again, for people to say “they are bloodthirsty they are killers”, and then the Gulf war set us back further, and now again, we hear the argument that this civilisation cannot accept modern times.

Can we undo the damage? I think that life is hope, Muslims and Christians are committed to certain common values. Men should live in a more peaceful environment, in an environment where we can influence each other, and intelligently interact with each other. You can’t expect the masses to create understanding and compromise between people. That should come from the intelligentsia.

Christian clergy and Christian leaders could play a crucial role by calming down their believers, and saying that there is not much difference between Christianity and Islam. And even if there is a lot of difference between us, there is no reason why we should be killing and hating each other. No one would be a winner in such a war - that is the real ugliness of the situation.

I always argued that war would never solve the problem; in any war you are actually planting the seed of the next war. Even a regime as horrible as the Taliban could be defeated by ways other than war. There was and is an opportunity for dialogue. If you lose this belief in mankind, then you have lost belief in human civilisation. War is not going to solve any problems. No doubt of that.

One of our great human qualities is that people can influence each other by talking to each other. You can make a paradise out of hell, by talking and by exchange of ideas, if you are committed to make a paradise.
Refugee communities, teachers, activists, students, community workers, church groups, academics and lawyers attended an international conference to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention at the University of NSW last December. “The Refugee Convention Where to From Here? As the title indicates, examined the Convention and assessed its relevancy in today’s society. Eileen Pittaway from the Centre for Refugee Research based at the University of New South Wales said that the conference main themes were settlement and resettlement, the concept of asylum, the treatment of asylum seekers and the protection of refugees while in transit or based in a camp. At the end of each session participants workshoped ideas and came up with a number of recommendations for action.

“By the end of the conference we’re hoping to come up with a series of really strong recommendations to UNHCR and to Government,” said Eileen.

The conference was organised to coincide with a series of United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) international consultations that are currently being undertaken. The aim was to connect with the topics being discussed by the United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). “We’re not just going to send a book off to UNHCR, we’re going to tailor it specifically to the right places,” Eileen says. “The outcomes were very focussed and policy oriented for UNHCR, the Australian Government and other governments as well.”

There are currently no international monitoring guidelines in place for the Refugee Convention. “The big international push is for a monitoring mechanism for refugees whether it be a treaty body or a special international monitoring body. We discussed that and came up with some recommendations,” says Eileen.

While the setting up of an international monitoring body is one objective, conference convener, Linda Bartolomei, says that the conference has examined a broad range of issues. “The whole point of the conference was not just to have a talk fest but something that produces solid tangible outcomes and plans,” she said.

“We are looking at a range of recommendations and suggesting a range of measures that we believe will make concrete change and these go from a really domestic policy resettlement focus in Australia for example to international issues of the massive numbers of asylum seekers and those who are fleeing conflict.”

A scholarship scheme has been devised which enables refugees who have settled in Australia to attend the conference and share their own experiences. The Mercy Foundation provided substantial funding for the conference and part of that grant includes $10,000, which is specifically for bringing refugee participants in from interstate. Fairfield City Council sponsored four refugee positions and the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women (ANCORW) has provided two.

“The scheme was for a mix of people who come from a refugee-like background who wish to come to the conference. We’re not forcing people to contribute their personal stories if that is not what they want to do. It’s about their active participation in the conference in whatever form they want that to take,” says Linda.

Refugees from Sudan, Nicaragua, Chile, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and East Timor attended the conference. “There was representation from most refugee communities right back from the first waves over the last 20, 30, 40 years.”

A panel comprising a variety of views participated at each session. “On each panel we had an academic view, a refugee giving their personal story and a community worker explaining what it is like in the community. We are endeavouring to get that mix in all of the sessions so that everyone gets to hear each other,” says Eileen.

Aside from the formal streams of the conference, there were also three satellite events that provided further examination. Two days prior to the conference a ‘World Court of Women’ was held focusing on human rights abuses and racism towards refugee and indigenous women.

A ‘Hypothetical’ hosted by Julie McCrossin, an Australian television and radio presenter, took place on the opening night to explore the political angles of the issues. The following day a Moot Court at Parliament House took an unnamed country to the International Court of Justice.

In 1993, Eileen and STARTTS Director Jorge Aroche were involved in a two-year project that involved a conference looking at resettlement policy in Australia. “There was a great deal of work around resettlement across a whole group of people and then we put together a really big report, which went to Government,” Eileen says. “It was really successful and we’re hoping to see the same result this time.”

By Sheree Went
An extraordinary confluence of events has brought Australia to its lowest ebb in the public acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers. Lachlan Murdoch writes.

It’s official, Australians don’t want asylum seekers landing on our shores. The unedifying spectacle of the recent Federal election campaign is testament to this. As public opinion whipped into a frenzy over ‘illegal boat people,’ the campaign was ultimately book ended by the question of whether asylum seekers would throw their children into the sea to ‘achieve an immigration outcome’. Our political leaders sang from the same song sheet when they led the chorus, “We don’t want people like that coming into this country”.

So why is it that ‘illegal boat people’ have become the new pariahs? Numerous opinion pieces advance racism and xenophobia as a basis for Australia’s increasingly harsh policies against asylum seekers and the extraordinary campaign of demonisation that masqueraded as an election. Although there is no doubt that racism has played its part in the closing of minds and hearts to desperate people, the reasons are much more complex. Our national paranoia has more to do with perceived threats to security, strong emotions connected with who gets an invitation to Australia’s party and general disaffection created by the loss of control over destiny.

Today Australians understand what most other people around the globe have known for a long time, the world is not a safe and predictable place. This realisation is not something new with its genesis in the events of September 11. It’s a much more insidious process, anchored in Australia’s long-held position as a British outpost surrounded by alien cultures and strengthened in recent decades as isolation from global events has been replaced with the immediacy of the dangers in the outside world. In the face of these external threats many older Australians yearn for an idealised notion of a relaxed and comfortable 1950s Australia. The story goes that once a upon a time you could leave your front door open day and night, secure in the belief nobody would come barging in.

Signs of Australia’s developing security paranoia have been evident for some time and the Federal election campaign is not alone amongst election campaigns in its focus on security. Recent state elections across Australia became bidding wars of another kind, overshadowed by a singular concern for which party was tougher on crime and more able to protect the public.

When viewed in this context, asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Iraq represent another unknown quantity that has the potential to threaten both personal and collective security. Their arrival has the effect of bringing home the fear and horror that has otherwise been held at arm’s length. The accompanying uncertainty leads to a demand that front and back doors remain firmly shut and emotions run at fever pitch when deciding who to let in.

Indeed, emotion has fuelled the asylum seeker debate more than any other political debate in recent times. Newspaper letters pages reported deluges of mail over the Tampa incident and name-calling was common as readers threatened commentators on both sides of the debate. There is something almost hot-wired direct to our innermost emotion chip whenever Australians consider who might be coming into the big backyard to share in the family barbie and whether they are bringing the beer.

This emotion can be manifest in the cloying, suffocating embrace that accompanied the avalanche of public support for the Kosovars and Timorese who came just two years ago with Government approval. Australians generally like invited guests and will make every effort to make them feel welcome. In return we want to feel wanted, perhaps more than any other people on the planet.

Predictably, the response becomes far less welcoming whenever there is even the hint that our new guests are
In a globalising world, rural and working people have lost control of things they once took for granted. Industries pack up and move off-shore, markets no longer provide the prices they once did, the economy is a two-headed monster subject only to international vagaries, banks close branches, doctors disappear, services evaporate and politicians seem more remote and less able to influence outcomes than ever.

In such an environment the election refrain, ‘We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’ takes on new meaning. There is something we can control after all, even if it means diverting the problem to precarious Pacific microstates. In a sense many Australians felt good about deciding something rather than nothing. Of course we are only in a position to decide the fate of those less powerful than ourselves and conveniently desperate boat people were sailing over the horizon. But many Australians decided to push back the boats because they were made to believe it was only fair to keep out gatecrashers, and others because taking back control at least made them feel a little higher than someone else on a slippery social totem pole.

The legacy of the last several months is that Australia has reached its nadir in accepting some of the most desperate and vulnerable people on the planet. Pre-election bi-partisanship has left us with pieces of the most draconian legislation passed through the Commonwealth parliament which if used declare all actions to turn away boat people as lawful and will see a ‘family-friendly’ government enforce the permanent separation of children from their parents. (See inset)

Under the new arrangements, the prospect for the boat people is that nothing will get better before it gets worse and there remains the spectre that the desperation now played out behind the razor wire of the detention centres will spill out into the streets.

The challenge for refugee advocates is to understand exactly how all this came about and to engage with people over their opinions, for without this understanding and communication, we risk driving Australians further from support for refugees in a haze of attacks and name calling over the racism many believe is basis for the policy. A constructive process of engaging with the wider Australian community and their fears of boat people may not be easy but it is vital in turning around a juggernaut that presently has the momentum of a massive fully laden container ship.

Six of the Best:
Legislation that Changes Australia’s Protection System Forever

In the lead
Migration Amendment (Excision from migration Zone) 2001
Migration Amendment (Excision from migration Zone) (Consequential Provisions) 2001
Border protection (validation and enforcement Power)
Migration Legislation amendment.

Not eternally grateful for all Australia is doing for them. The emotion of the squeezing embrace flipped into condemnation for the Kosovars as they were seen to trample on our hospitality, trample in all manner of muck and dirty the carpets. It was difficult to understand what the Kosovars had been through when the actions of even a few left such a bad taste in the mouth.

In contrast, the Tampa (and other) ‘illegal boat people’ are viewed as gatecrashers, not guests. Gatecrashers are dangerous. Gatecrashers set off all sorts of fears in us about how they violate our space, will take advantage of the generosity laid on for the invited guests and pose a threat to how we control our patch. While everybody else waits for their invitation to the party the gatecrashers just come on in. The immediate response is to call the police and have them removed. Nobody gatecrashes with good reason, so there is rarely any question about understanding why a gatecrasher might be breaking down the door. They come to do nothing else but abuse our sense of fairness.

Discomfort only surfaces when Australians seek to balance our belief in ourselves as compassionate people with the awful reality of what the asylum seekers are fleeing. Supposedly a defining characteristic of Australians is our ability to empathise with and support those who have experienced disasters. When confronted with the horror of the individual stories of the boat arrivals, the resistance of many Australians dissolves as they find it hard to refuse the legitimacy of their claims, the awkwardly termed ‘genuine refugees’ emerge.

Difficulties arise though when Australians are asked to share some collective responsibility for the hell from which the boat people seek refuge. Speak of the collective rather than the individual and eyes begin to glaze over with sense that their misery is just too overwhelming and fears begin to surface that it is impossible to hold back the tide of hordes of fugitives. The problem becomes much too big and out of control.

In fact nobody should underestimate the importance of control in the minds of those Australians who are increasingly faced with fewer and fewer elements of their life that fall within their influence. In essence, the Tampa boat people and all those that came before and after were skillfully crafted into a political lightning rod for all the disaffection felt by thousands of ‘battlers’. The Tampa drew kilowatts of political heat out of industry deregulation, privatisation, free trade disparities, job insecurity and the all the other evils of globalisation and neo-liberalism.

In the lead
Migration Amendment (Excision from migration Zone) 2001
Migration Amendment (Excision from migration Zone) (Consequential Provisions) 2001
Border protection (validation and enforcement Power)
Migration Legislation amendment.
Refugee Transitions

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The word “feeling” has a double meaning, referring to both emotion and physical sensation. This reflects SUE ROXON’s use of physical therapy to relieve physical symptoms such as chronic pain, which is part of an ongoing stress response to repeated and profound trauma. Here she discusses her work with survivors of torture and trauma.
Feelings are Physical

a somatic approach to post-traumatic stress

The way you organise your body - the way you sit, stand, and move - is not just a reflection of your emotional state. It is the manifestation of your emotional state.

Try this exercise. Allow yourself to slump, so that you can feel your breastbone drop down a little towards your pubic bone. Notice how this affects your ribs, and restricts your breathing. Let your head move a little forward in relation to your shoulders, and compress the back of your neck. Slightly shrug your shoulders, and bring your shoulder blades slightly closer together at the back. Tighten your jaw, just a little, and your cheeks. Crease your forehead into a slight frown. Tighten your belly a little, and your inner thighs. Reflect on your physical sensations. How would you describe your emotional state? If you continue sitting in this posture, do you find you have particular thoughts or feelings that accompany it? Can you imagine how you would feel and where you would develop pain if you maintained this posture for a long time?

Now, think of the most recent happy, joyous event in your life. Even to help your memory, but certainly to re-experience the sensation of joy, you will have to change your posture. When I have given this exercise to an audience in a lecture, I notice that everyone immediately lifts their breast bone - reverses the slump - when trying to think of a time when they felt happy.

As a physiotherapist, I was trained within the Western medical model, which conceptually separates the psyche from the soma - the mind from the body - both in diagnosis and treatment. Even the distinction between the two professions, physiotherapy and psychotherapy, is based on a clear differentiation between mind and body.

I find this model to be inadequate in providing a useful understanding of human functioning, am frustrated by its mechanistic interpretation of physical symptoms. I needed a way of working that allowed me to address, via touch, the somatic symptoms (mostly chronic pain) of which my clients complained while fully acknowledging the impact of the traumatic environment in which such symptoms developed.

The easiest way to avoid struggling to connect the soma with the psyche in a practical and effective way is, simply, to avoid separating them in the first place. Feelings are physical. A disembodied emotion is a meaningless concept. You only know what you feel, you only know that you feel, by your physical sensations. You know you are sad because you have, for instance, a heavy feeling in the chest, a lump in the throat, your eyes prickle with tears. You know you feel frightened because your heart thumps in your chest, you feel a sinking sensation in your stomach, and pricking armpits. Shame burns and guilt bites.

If we change the way we organise our bodies, our feelings change. Conversely, our bodies change as our emotional states change.

Think back to the experimental posture, commonly seen in survivors of long-term repeated trauma, whose physiology has been dominated for so long by the arousal of the sympathetic nervous system (the body’s instinctive, defensive ‘fight, flight or freeze’ response to danger) that it seems to have lost the ability to switch off its defence response when it is no longer needed to ensure survival. Bessel van der Kolk, in ‘The Body Keeps the Score’, details the precise physiology - as far as it is known - of such survival mechanisms, traumatic stress reaction and the development of Post traumatic Stress Disorder.

This posture has been described by somatic psychotherapists as ‘collapsed’, ‘defeated’, ‘withdrawn’, and ‘protective’. A history of threat and accompanying powerlessness can be seen in it. Psychiatrists may see it as ‘depressed’, while a naturopath might interpret it as indicating adrenal gland exhaustion (the adrenal gland being the organ which secretes the hormones of sympathetic arousal, as well as the hormones that switch such arousal off). Of relevance to physiotherapists, is that the maintenance of such a posture, with its pattern of constantly tight muscles, such as those at the back of the neck, combined with constantly underused muscles, such as those that extend the spine, will lead to stiffness and rigidity, weakness and fatigue, loss of flexibility and range of movement, loss of physical pleasure and sensory awareness, and chronic pain. Combined with the shallow breathing, it presents a picture of severely reduced functioning.

Jana was a 48-year-old woman from the former Yugoslav-
via whose husband had been murdered in the war, at the same time as she was separated from her son and imprisoned in a concentration camp. During this time she both witnessed and was subjected to horrific brutalities. She was reunited with her son at the end of the war and came to Australia. She came to STARTTS suffering from nightmares, insomnia, frequent flashbacks, intrusive thoughts and images, severe anxiety, panic attacks, fear of crowds and strangers and a feeling of deep dread. She received intensive counseling for many months, which reduced the intensity and frequency of these symptoms, to the point where she was able to attend English classes and lead a more normal life. She was referred to me because she still suffered constant headaches, frequent migraines, neck pain, numbness and tingling in her hands, and low back pain. This is a very common symptom pattern in torture and trauma survivors, and is not always improved by counseling. Sometimes it needs a more directly somatic intervention.

She presented as a small, thin, timid looking woman, who kept her head and eyes down during the initial visits, with occasional moments of fleeting eye contact. This fleeting contact revealed that Jana’s eyes were bright and alert, and gave me the impression that she wanted to be where she was. She held herself tensely in the way previously described - sunken chest, hunched shoulders, head well forward on her shoulders and the back of the neck compressed, with little spontaneous head movement. Her breathing was shallow, and she moved as if she were trying not to make any impact on her surroundings.

I was curious to explore whether her headaches were connected with the constant contraction of the muscles at the back of her neck - and the constant pulling of these muscles on their attachments at the back of the head, the shoulders and the mid back, but first I needed to explore the tissue of her head and neck to see if these had been injured, such as by repeated beating in a way that may be contributing to chronic head pain. (A CT scan had not revealed brain pathology). Her scalp and neck did not feel as if they had been subject to this trauma but the neck muscles, and the scalp, were tight, and the joints stiff. This initial exploration allowed me to discover how Jana felt about being touched in such an intimate way. She did not relax, but remained aware and present, and did not dissociate.

I next focused on facilitating Jana’s neck muscles to lessen their constant contraction, and to allow lengthening of her neck. Her headaches often felt less at the end of a session, due, I felt, to a slight relaxation effect, but sometimes her head felt ‘heavier’. After a few sessions, I felt the muscles becoming more responsive to my hands, but when she sat up she was more bent over. This could be interpreted as Jana feeling more relaxed and therefore less protected and more vulnerable. On a musculoskeletal level, it could be interpreted as a lessening in the chronic contraction pattern resulting in insufficient muscular activity to keep Jana stable in an upright posture. She also reported that she felt ‘strange’, ‘tired’ and ‘weak’ for a number of days, though her head pain was less acute. She described experiencing out-of-body episodes that sounded like dissociation. Jana had difficulty describing and knowing her feelings.

Jana needed to learn, or relearn, a different way of organising her body - one that enabled her to feel stable and secure without resorting to the familiarity of her habitual tension pattern to provide that stability. The risk of relaxation in severely traumatised people is that of being overwhelmed by the sensations/thoughts which habitual physical tension prevents them from feeling. I wondered if this was happening to Jana and that she was dissociating as a result. (“Don’t treat my tension - it’s all that’s holding me together” - Bumper sticker around in the 1980’s.) I was anxious to avoid inadvertently encouraging dissociation in Jana by facilitating too sudden a change in her body and physical sensations. It seemed as if the more effective a session was in changing Jana’s bodily organisation, the more likely she was to feel ‘strange’ and have episodes where she felt as though she was not present. Her dissociation was sometimes dangerous, such as having near misses with cars, and leaving the gas burning when she left the house.

I avoided this possible response by breaking down the lessons into shorter more easily digested lessons, and by asking for her constant verbal feedback, which demanded that she focus on the minutiae and the flow of her physical sensations. I wanted to know how she felt, both in terms of what she sensed happening in her body and also whether she liked it or not. Jana had talked very little and became passive when touched, but gradually became more articulate, and far less passive as a result of this approach. I also used my hands to provide precise support and stability when needed - a function which her muscles had not yet learnt to do (except by being
constantly contracted in an undifferentiated way). Jana’s
sighs and deeper breathing indicated to me when my
hands were successfully providing this support. (Illustra-
tion- hands under head)

Most of my work with Jana consisted of helping her to
discover a stronger functional stability without resorting
to her habitual and uncomfortable tension pattern. A
large part of this work involved improving Jana’s aware-
ness of those parts of her body, which she had previously
ignored, both through the imposed rigidity of her habit-
ual pattern of organisation, and her lack of awareness of
all parts of her body except those that cried out the lou-
dest. For instance, discovering the movement available in
her ribs and shoulder blades, and how it could be incor-
porated into the rest of her body movement, enabled
Jana to begin to move out of the chronic contraction pat-
tern in her neck and shoulders, and also to breathe more
deply. (Illustration)

The pelvic area is a powerful source of strength and sta-
bility. Jana’s pelvis was poorly differentiated from her
spine- in other words, she tended to move her spine
and pelvis in a block. This resulted in constant strain in
her low back as her spine stretched and pulled against
an un-moving heavy pelvis. She felt pain when bending
down or putting on shoes - any activities that demand a
mobile pelvis. However, Jana found great difficulty focusing
on her pelvic area, and never managed to let go of
the muscles of her belly to explore other ways of con-
trolling her pelvis. When I tried to bring her attention
to this area she became withdrawn, passive and inarticu-
late again. She never talked about her experiences in
the concentration camp, except her anxiety about being
separated from her child, but I assume that the difficulty
she had in moving her pelvis, compared with her willing-
ness to explore the possibilities of movement in her upper
body, was connected with these experiences. Due to the
freer movement in the rest of her body, Jana was eventu-
ally able to move with less strain on her back, but her
pelvis remained undifferentiated and her belly remained
clenched.

After eight months, Jana was taking her analgesic medica-
tion only when she needed it, rather than several times a
day. Her headaches were no longer constant, although
occasionally just as severe. Her neck and shoulder pain
was far less, and her hands symptom free. She still tended
to sit hunched over, and hold herself tensely, but was
capable of more spontaneous movement and felt more
physically comfortable. She could do more, like put on
her shoes and sit in class, with less pain. She looked and
felt more relaxed and was sleeping better. Her memory
was improving and she never missed appointments any
more. As Jana felt more physically competent and capa-
ble, she began studying more, and, hoping to retrain and
find work, started a full-time TAFE course. This meant
she could no longer attend STARTTS and I no longer saw
her.

Sue Roxon is a physiotherapist and Feldenkrais prac-
titioner and has worked since 1994 at STARTTS.
Like many recent Iranian films, *A Time For Drunken Horses* stresses social obligations above all else for the survival of community - in this case, the stateless Kurdish community. That’s why so many Iranian films are told from the perspective of children, the weakest members and the most deserving of protection.

High up in the mountains of the Iran-Iraq border, the members of a small Kurdish village eke out an existence smuggling goods across the line. Ayoub is a 12 year-old boy who must assume responsibility for his family after his father is killed. His mother died a long time ago. Ayoub has five siblings, chief of whom is his sister Amaneh, through whose eyes the story is told; another sister Rojini has reached marriageable age; and his elder brother Mahdi, a retarded dwarf whose survival depends on a constant supply of scarce and costly medications.

The village doctor tells Ayoub that Mahdi’s condition (which is not specified) is worsening and he will die unless he undergoes an operation. This can only happen if Ayoub is able to raise money to take Mahdi across the border into Iraq; even with the operation, Mahdi is unlikely to survive more than another 8 months. Despite the knowledge of Mahdi’s inevitably foreshortened life, Ayoub joins the smugglers in order to earn the money.

The smuggling sequences are harrowing. Loading up mules with goods and feeding them vodka and brandy to numb them to the intense cold (the “drunken horses” of the title), the supply trains trudge through blizzards towards Iraq, dodging patrols, ambushes and landmines. At one point, the mules are so intoxicated and so exhausted they fall and are incapable of regaining their legs even as Iraqi troops are firing machine guns from the other side of a snowdrift. Even at the end of the journey there is no guarantee unscrupulous ringleaders will pay up.

*A Time For Drunken Horses* is a film of extraordinary humanity and dignity, and also of austere alpine beauty. The bleak and hostile environment of the villagers and the hatred of the Iraqi authorities only highlight the great sacrifices Ayoub and his kin make for the survival of their afflicted but precious elder brother. As director Gobadi stresses in a brief preamble, the harshness of life depicted in this film is the existence he has known as a member of a stateless and oppressed minority most of his life. The wholly non-professional cast use their real names and own clothes, achieving a near-documentary effect; Amaneh wears the same blue-green pullover throughout the film, almost the only splash of colour in a terrain drained of it. Watching the young Ayoub labour through snow and barbed wire on inhospitable borderlands, bearing the crippled Mahdi on his back like St. Christopher, was to witness something deeply moving.

*Reviewed by David Bolton*
FIRE, SNOW & HONEY

‘Fire, Snow & Honey - Voices from Kurdistan’ is like no other book dealing with the subjects of Kurds and Kurdistan. It is therefore destined to be a seminal work and a reference book for both the beginner and the experienced.

At first glance it appears to be a collection of Kurdish Australians’ life stories, hopes, fears and aspirations. On closer examination, however, it becomes evident that it is a great deal more than personal accounts of imprisonment, torture, persecution and hopeful thinking. The book is made of insightful essays, meaningful fables, moving and analytical poetry - both contemporary & classic, short fiction and accumulated Kurdish observations expressed as proverbs such as “Grass does not stay under a rock”, “The eye can see, but the hand is short” and “A time for rose and a time for primrose” that have been used as headings. Their meanings and impact are enhanced by Mme Danielle Mitterand’s powerful foreword and Ms Gina Lennox’s well reasoned and reflective introduction. The detailed map of Kurdistan and a lot of historical information will be new to many informed Kurds as well.

The aims of the book and the reasons for its coming into existence appear to be intertwined with the editor's compassion and concern for the plight of the Kurds. They all seem to spring from the notion which Noam Chomsky has crystallised by his saying that, “The first amendment to the US Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, but does not guarantee access to microphones.” Thus, the Kurdish women and PKK [Kurdistan Workers’ party] supporters and sympathisers have hitherto remained silent and/or anonymous in this great free and democratic country. The former due to tradition, lack of the English language, shyness, values and politics and the latter largely due to fear of being labeled “terrorist” and made subject to deportation by the Australian Authorities in concert with US State department’s pronouncements. This is so despite the fact that, as it is noted in the introduction titled “Why care?”, “The nature of PKK is a reaction to the extreme fascism [of Turkish state ideology] Kemalism.” It is this ideology that, over 50 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in full view of uncaring world leaders, continues to deny the existence of the Kurds and outlaw Kurdish language for electioneering, education of any kind, judicial proceedings, radio & television broadcasting and trade & commerce in local corner shops. Turkey continues to get away with brutalising the Kurds because of her perceived strategic location and gateway to the riches of Central Asia.

The book therefore aims (and I believe surpasses all reasonable expectations in achieving its aim) at letting Kurdish voices, long silenced at home and ignored abroad, to be heard. The voices bring to life the Kurds’ rich, diverse & enduring indeed thriving cultural heritage -literature, music, food, religion, life isolated by snow capped mountains, legendary armed struggles, unacknowledged genocides and stolen history, heroes & heroines. The voices also inspire much needed research into how and why a nation of 35-40 million people living on their ancestral homeland have been divided, dispossessed and robbed of their identity and even language.

The title of the book is highly symbolic for the Kurdish people. Fire stands for the annual Newroz (or New day, new year, new era) fires commemorating Kurdish freedom in 612 BC when a blacksmith named Kawa successfully rose up against a foreign tyrant occupying Kurdistan. Kawa lit a fire on a mountaintop to inform the people of his victory and his message was spread by fires on top of other mountains. This tradition continues to our day. Fire in the title also refers to the fires of genocides perpetrated against the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria in the twentieth century. Snow reflects the long and harsh winters where people walk up to their chests in snow, as well as the incredibly beautiful soaring mountain peaks that are covered all year round. Honey is symbolic of the fertile valleys that grow every crop imaginable, the river systems with their sources in Kurdistan that gave rise to some of the earliest agricultural settlements and civilisations, and the oil and mineral wealth which proved to be the twentieth century curse for the Kurdish nation.

The cover of the book is based on an absolutely beautiful painting by Kurdish artist Rebwar Tahir. The book publisher is Halstead Press, Sydney.

Fire Snow & Honey is retailing at Australian bookshops for $A75.00 but it is available by direct order at a significant discount: $A45.00 plus $10.00 for postage within Australia, or $25.00 postage outside Australia.

Please send cheque, money order or credit card details (number & expiry date) to Fire, Snow & Honey, Halstead Press, Level 5, 19A Boundary Rd, Rushcutters Bay NSW 2011 Australia or by email to Kurdconference@optusnet.com.au or by fax: 02-9319-7728 (+612-9319-7728 for international orders)

Reviewed by Eziz Bawermend

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Reviews

THE UNINVITED: REFUGEES AT THE RICH MAN’S GATE

by Jeremy Harding

(Profile Books/London Review of Books PB 123 pp. r.r.p. $18.50)

Here is a piece of documentary journalism that asks this question of all Western countries: “How much longer can exclusionary immigration policies work?” This emotive issue is very pertinent to Australia which recently experienced an influx of refugees arriving illegally through Indonesian ports. Generally referred to as “Boat People”, these desperate individuals risk their lives aboard overcrowded and flimsy vessels to seek asylum in a land of perceived opportunity.

During the recent Federal election campaign both major parties took a firm stance against “clandestine migration”, processing the uninvited in New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Nauru. Often these refugees are thought of as queue-jumpers rather than people who fear for their lives. Jeremy Harding is a senior editor at the London Review of Books and to the Year 2000 followed migrants and refugees in Morocco, Spain, Italy, Kosovo and Albania often accompanying border patrols.

Part one of the book deals with refugees trying to reach wealthy countries since the Cold War when populations on the move were in decline. Part two deals with the predicaments of these poor illegal refugees who challenge the rich world.

This volume may be slim (at 123 pages) but not on ideas and his argument is stated clearly: Western European seclusion of peoples from economically poorer countries widens the gulf between rich and poor and is seriously harmful to both.

Here are his facts: More than 150 million people are living outside the country of their birth. Migration and migrants are as diverse as those people who stay in their birth country. For example: professionals who take a post in another country for several years; the labourer who works on a site in Thailand but is contracted by an Indonesian company.

Refugees often seek asylum with migrants sharing their route to safety. Refugees are not necessarily poor but human trafficking organisations often eat up their capital. In the past Western Europe has generously taken refugees without disruption to the host country. Generally, however, Harding argues that refugees have begun to look like thieves or beggars at the rich man’s gate with an expensive “game of wits” being played out along the borders.

The profiteers of this moving population around the world are the agents, traffickers and facilitators. In the 1942 movie classic, Casablanca, Peter Lorre plays a forger named Ugarte who deals with refugees from Marseilles to Oran hoping to obtain a visa for Lisbon. His character says to Rick (played by Humphrey Bogart): “You object to the kind of business I do, huh? But think of all these poor refugees who must rot in this place if I didn’t help them. But that’s not so bad. Through ways of my own I provide them with exit visas.”

“For a price, Ugarte,” Rick replies, “For a price.”

Once the stranger arrives in a strange land Harding argues he is on a trial of nothing more palpable than his intentions.

- 300,000 arrived in Europe to seek asylum in the Year 2000. By way of contrast, 4174 reached Australia by boat or plane.
- Tanzania hosts one refugee for every 76 citizens - Britain one for every 530 and Australia one for every 1,583.

The Treaty of Amsterdam, which came into affect in May 1999, allows greater scope for redress in cases of human rights violations when refugees are often regarded as a drain on resources.

Attitudes to ethnic migrants change over time, he observes. Once Italians who arrived in northern cities from the south and east of the country were mistrusted much like the North African Albanians and Nigerians are today.

Any reader who is interested in the destiny of the individual must face the magnitude of this human tragedy. Confront the pregnant woman captured at the border who is held in detention only to suicide overnight. Confront the thousands that drown in Indonesian waters or in the Gibraltar Straits. Confront the families that are separated and confront the stowaways asphyxiated in trucks at British ferry ports. A sobering tale by the most sympathetic of journalists.

Reviewed by Peter Bouly
AUSTRALIA and the response to asylum seekers

Borderline: Australia’s treatment of refugees and asylum seekers by Peter Mares
(UNSW Press, 219p. r.r.p. $29.95)

Asylum seekers: Australia’s response to refugees by Don McMaster
(Melbourne University Press, 254p. r.r.p. $38.45)

Protecting the border Dept. of Immigration & Multicultural Affairs
http://www.immi.gov.au

Sharing the security burden: towards the convergence of refugee protection & state security by James Milner
http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/rsp

Globalisation, humanitarianism and the erosion of refugee protection by B.S. Chimni
http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/rsp

WISH
I am angry with these borders
That surround me.
I wish I could live
In the borderless world of your eyes.

(A poem by Marif Agha-e, translated from the Kurdish by Kamran Avin)

Recent history (and a Federal election) have painfully illustrated the deficiencies in the international and Australian responses to increases in asylum seekers and refugees, especially those from the Middle East and Afghanistan. Efforts to ensure international protection for refugees have been repeatedly frustrated, as states have expressed an increased reluctance to offer asylum. Nowhere has this been so evident in the last 12 months as in Australia.

The 2 books cited above came out in April/May 2001, that is before the most recent draconian bipartisan legislation on asylum seekers. Nevertheless, they document a horrifying governmental response to those seeking to escape the repressive regimes of Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran in particular. They remind those of us who care that much that mandatory detention was instigated by the Labor Party. They point out that the legislation and government policies have a racist element, and they suggest we have discarded a noble and humane policy with regard to those suffering under political and organised violence.

Both these books are worthwhile, each has its own emphasis, each has its own strengths, both cover the history of Australia’s asylum seeker/refugee policy adequately. Each book gives fulsome documentation/case studies of both the implementation and results of government policies. Both books address the psychological consequence to individuals of these policies. Borderline is written in a more accessible style than Asylum seekers (which was first produced as the author’s PhD thesis). Asylum seekers emphasises the strong racist undercurrent in the historical and contemporary Australia policies on refugees- the fear of the “other”. It is concerned mainly with Asian asylum seekers, with only a few mentions of refugees from the Middle East or Afghanistan. If Borderline is a history book then Asylum seekers might be considered a psychohistory book, McMaster is concerned with the national psyche, especially the racists aspects, and sees the present attitudes as a continuation of the fear of the “yellow peril” and the White Australia Policy (a number of commentators have point out that if the “Boat people” were white Zimbabwean farmers there would be mass public outrage if we treated them as we have the Afghan and Iraqi refugees).

While both these books give a good summary of government policy they are, necessarily, 10 months out of date.

If you want to know the present legal position of asylum seekers you should visit the DIMA Web site http://www.immi.gov.au - along with Protecting the border you will find more recent Fact sheets and Media releases detailing tightening of the legislation that has occurred over the last few months e.g. the Information Kit on the new Border Control Legislation.

Of course, Australia is not alone in having to deal with refugees, even if it is alone in the inhumanity with which it does deal with them. A good source of information on, and discussion of the international ramifications of mass migration is the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/rsp/. The site includes papers on the psychological consequences and treatment of refugees, and on the political and economic aspects of refugee policy both national and international.

Two papers of particular interest are:

James Milner’s Sharing the security burden which addresses the shortcomings of international responses to refugees, and the attempt to distribute more equitably among countries the burden of offering asylum.

B.S. Chimni’s Globalisation, humanitarianism and the erosion of refugee protection which looks at the ideology of humanitarianism as opposed to the “economic rationalism” of globalisation – that anomaly that says there should be a free and unencumbered international flow of goods and services but not people.

While neither of these papers specifically addresses the situation in Australia they do give a context for what has happened here and in other parts of the world with regard to our obligations under the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees.

Reviewed by David Finlay
If they deprive my poems
of their flowers
one of my seasons dies

If they deprive them
of my beloved
two of my seasons die

If they deprive them
of the bread
three of my seasons die

If they deprive them
of freedom
my whole gear dies
and I with it.

from Sherko Bekas
The Secret Diary of a Rose