



NEW ZEALAND HAS BEEN WELCOMING refugees for quite some time. Many receive assistance from Refugees as Survivors New Zealand, a lead agency for mental health services. Its manager G.E. POOLE visited STARTTS and spoke to OLGA YOLDI.

Refugee Services in New Zealand

New Zealand is quite a small country, not known for its multicultural society. What is its refugee intake?

GEP: New Zealand has a population of 4.2 million in the two main islands. About one third of them (1.3 million) live in Auckland, which is one of the most multicultural cities in the world. A quarter of its residents were born overseas, on the other hand, the city has the largest population of Polynesian people (Māori, Samoan, Rarotongan, Niuean, Fijian and Tongan) in the Pacific and 23 per cent of its population has an Asian background.

Even the remainder of New Zealand is also rapidly becoming multicultural. People from Asian origin make up 13 per cent of the population in Wellington, 11 per cent in Hamilton and 8 per cent in Christchurch, while Maori make up 14 per cent of the population. So yes, New Zealand is changing.

I must say that Aotearoa (New Zealand) bases its multicultural development on solid bicultural foundations. As you may know, the partnership between Māori and Pakeha (European) is founded on the Treaty of Waitangi. Honouring this Treaty is now taken very seriously by the people and the Government. Although

this is really a new trend. It did not always occur in the past. But now it is broadly understood that the Māori are Tangata Whenua, or the first people of the land, and their indigenous rights and needs must be honoured and respected first by the Crown, as Treaty partner, and by all subsequent settlers who come to live in such a wonderful country.

How is the settlement of refugees taking place?

GEP: Significant numbers of refugees (over 40,000) have been welcomed by New Zealand since WWII, with Polish, Jewish and European displaced persons arriving first. Later, Hungarian and others from Eastern Europe, Uganda, and Chile were welcomed. Between 1977 and 1993, New Zealand accepted more than 11,000 refugees from Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia. In 1987, a formal quota system was established by the government, and 750 refugees plus 300 family reunification cases are accepted annually. Approximately 1,500 refugees arrive each year. New Zealand is currently the fourth per capita country accepting quota refugees for resettlement.

Refugees are arriving from Afghanistan, Somalia,

Sudan, Colombia, Bhutan, Burma Myanmar, Iraq, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi, Congo, and a number of other countries. During the 1990s significant numbers came from Kosovo, Bosnia and other areas during the Balkan conflict.

New Zealand makes an effort to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to assist some of the most vulnerable and harmed refugees, with highest protection needs. This has implications for the level and nature of settlement support services required by these people when they arrive as refugee intake includes a very large number of medical and disability cases, high protection cases, and women and children at risk. In recent years, an average of 20 per cent of the intake has included survivors of torture.

New Zealand has a fairly unique system for welcoming refugees. All arrive through the national Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, at Mangere. This Centre is set on a 10-acre property and also houses government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on a single site as a 'one-stop-shop'. The purpose of housing refugees in this centre is to conduct comprehensive initial assessments and provide orientation. Groups of 120-150 people arrive every eight weeks and stay for a period of six weeks.

Immigration New Zealand operates the site and supervises selection, travel and entry provisions, and there is a refugee medical centre, carrying out health and dental assessments and treatment needs. Our agency, Refugees As Survivors New Zealand (RASNZ) conducts the mental health assessments, and initial treatment, and aspects of orientation such as road safety, drivers licensing, health promotion, and understanding and using the health system. Auckland University of Technology delivers general orientation, provides English as a Second Language courses, introduction, and language and childhood educational assessments. Refugee Services Aotearoa (RSA) delivers practical settlement support in the first six months including housing, school enrolments and other related aspects and the Red Cross is also on the Mangere site assisting with locating missing family members overseas.

“I would have to say that no, refugee issues are not anywhere near as politicised as they are in Australia, although they have the potential to become so, given the right conditions in the future.”

Where do refugees tend to settle?

GEP: About 40 per cent on average of new quota refugees, plus virtually all asylum seekers and Convention refugees, settle in Auckland. The remainder are settled in Hamilton, Wellington and Palmerston North; and on the South Island in Nelson and Christchurch. The only specialist mental-health services for refugees are located in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

We are interested to learn how the more recent Australian experience of settlement in rural areas has been going.

Are New Zealanders open to newcomers?

GEP: My view as a former migrant is that New Zealanders are very open to newcomers. Kiwis generally have an open, friendly, and caring approach to migrants from all backgrounds, and refugees are no exception. Similar to the Australians, Kiwis believe that everyone deserves a 'fair go'. Generally the NZ Government demonstrates strong commitment to quota refugees and, for a small country, a fair amount of resources goes into resettlement.

I think that race and ethnic relations in New Zealand can show their sharp edges at times just as everywhere else in the world, but generally New Zealanders are, in my view, among the fairest and least prejudiced people of the number of countries I've lived and worked in. I think that a large portion of that openness has probably come from the bicultural journey with the Māori people, and a history of social consciousness, voting rights, equality, and social inclusion.

What are the government policies in relation to refugee quotas? Is there much of a debate about refugees? How are asylum seekers treated by the government?

GEP: Since 2004 about 896 asylum seeker claims have been approved. Nearly they are accommodated in the community. A small number (considered at risk of absconding) are housed at the Mangere Accommodation Centre (MAC). This is a hostel and not really a secure



Participants at a photography workshop in Te Papa Museum made digital stories for 'The Mixing Room, stories from young refugees in NZ. PHOTO: BECKY NUNES/2009

facility where people can come and go during the day. A very small number (six at present) are in secure detainment at Mt Eden Prison Remand Centre. The Refugee Council of New Zealand has strongly opposed housing any asylum seekers in a correctional environment and the Government has signalled its intention to end this practice as soon as a new facility at Mangere is built.

I would have to say that no, refugee issues are not anywhere near as politicised as they are in Australia, although they have the potential to become so, given the right conditions in the future.

There was one very contentious case of an asylum seeker named Ahmed Zaoui in which the government of the day claimed he was a security risk, but would not release the information or evidence around this. The case drew a lot of controversy but was resolved in favour of the claimant eventually. It led to a complete review and revision of the law, resulting in the new 2009 Immigration Act. A recent case of an attempted airplane hijacking by a former refugee also drew a fair amount of negative attention, but both of these incidences passed. Generally, there is public support for welcoming refugees and considerable goodwill.

Anyone who has ever sailed on the Tasman Sea will attest to how it presents a formidable natural barrier. But recently, political leaders have warned and predicted that a ship with asylum seekers may eventually make its way into New Zealand territorial waters. If or when that does occur, how prepared will New Zealand be to uphold international humanitarian standards and best-practice with regard to the accommodation and processing of asylum claimants, is an open question.

I think that in most developed Western countries immigration has become increasingly intertwined with politics due to concerns about national security, border control, and the fear of terrorism, as well as social issues around cultural diversity and tolerance. Of course New Zealand is no exception. The recent passing of the new reforms in the Immigration Act 2009 was partly in response to asylum issues, court cases, and related controversies. Concerns about Australia's recent asylum issues and practices and the Australian Government's response to the arrival by boat of a wave of asylum seekers, has also provoked public-policy debate on this side of the Tasman.

The evidence is well-established that the involuntary

detainment of human beings not only damages them but also brutalises the people and the societies carrying it out. The analogous historic context in the ending of indigenous land confiscations, or the ending of suppression of the Māori language, or, in more recent times, the ending of pre-dawn immigration raids on Pacific Island communities by Governments, these are all inescapable parallels. When such practices are ended, civil society is strengthened and civilisation advances a little.

I certainly believe that by preparing well in advance for what many people believe will be an inevitable sea arrival here, and by implementing best-practice models prior to that event with the present asylum seekers coming by other means, New Zealand could positively demonstrate its international commitment to humanitarian principles applied to the increasingly complex issues of irregular migration.

What are the main problems experienced by newly arrived refugees? Which countries do most refugees come from?

GEP: The problems here are very similar to those in Australia and many resettlement countries. The line-up of usual suspects are housing issues, barriers of language and culture, social isolation and unemployment. Our present quota composition consists of refugees from Burma (Myanmar) and Bhutan (Nepal), but also a number of people from Congo, Iraq and Afghanistan. Fairly recent intakes have included vulnerable women and children from Colombia.

Tell us about your centre? How many refugees do you assist per year? What kind of problems do they present? What services do you offer?

GEP: RASNZ was established as the specialist refugee mental health service in 1997 and has a multidisciplinary and multicultural staff of psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, body therapists, a social worker, counsellor advocates, and refugee community link workers. A number of our clinical and service staff have themselves arrived as refugees. There are 120 interpreters in 30 languages, and we do a lot of professional development with this important group.

There are two main refugee centres in Auckland. The first is the assessment team at the national Mangere Refugee Centre, and the second is the Refugee Mobile Team (RMT) which covers all of metropolitan Auckland. The RMT travels with hybrid cars and operates around the region. The RMT was recently a recipient of the Gold Award for Achievement at the recent conference in Sydney.

“The evidence is well-established that the involuntary detainment of human beings not only damages them but also brutalises the people and the societies carrying it out.”

There is also a health promotion and community development team with 15 refugee community facilitators, who are leaders from multiple communities, and a research team which is presently carrying out a major national study on “Family Reunification, Mental Health and Settlement Outcomes”. It is just developing and a new Youth Team called RYAN (Refugee Youth Action Network) is about to be launched in 2011.

A large proportion of refugees are survivors of torture and trauma and have all the associated needs. We also do a lot of follow-up work with refugees with medical and disability issues. Because of the often high needs, and complex nature of the quota composition, much work is done with those just arriving as well as those settled in the community.

Are mainstream services equipped to deal with the complexities experienced by refugees? Is training on cross-cultural issues being provided?

GEP: Unfortunately mainstream services in New Zealand are not equipped to deal with the special needs. Specialist services, where they exist, fill some of the gap. Similar to Australia, refugees have difficulty accessing mainstream health and social services. In 2007 RASNZ and the Asian Health Services of the Waitemata Health Board developed the CALD (Cultural and Linguistically Diverse) training resource. This is a six-module course including cultural competencies, cultural self-awareness, working with interpreters, with migrants and refugees. It also has a practical component in clinical case review. Te Pou, the National Mental Health Workforce Centre, helped fund us to roll out the pilot CALD training across New Zealand in 2008. Now we have CALD training



Young Cambodian refugee and her child in Auckland. PHOTO: JESSICA MACCORMICK

being delivered in several government departments and health services. We have a big commitment to sharing knowledge, training and capacity-building.

Some of our team members recently visited the STARTTS Centre in Sydney and were very impressed with the scope, the range, scale and quality of the innovative work going on there. We were very grateful for the knowledge, the resources and expertise shared and for the bonds of collegiality. We have discussed with your Director about the possibility of some staff exchanges during next year if this becomes possible.

Apart from clinical services, do you provide community development and capacity building initiatives? Could you give us some examples?

GEP: Yes, Dr Arif Saeid and his team work in community development and they established a range of innovative and effective initiatives. One project is the Gardening for Health Initiative in which former refugees in the community are assisted with seeds, tools and mentoring to establish their own gardens for self-sufficiency at home. The RYAN (Refugee Youth Action Network) is another

major community development initiative coming from Arif's team. So far, over 90 young leaders of the future have been nominated to participate in outdoor-pursuits leadership training, run in Northland, by the Ngati Wai Māori Trust. This is in partnership with two refugee-run organisations, the Umma Trust (Muslim Social Services) and the Ethnic Youth Employment and Training Trust.

There is also a small youth project established in Hamilton. The Ministry of Social Development is very clued-up about grassroots models of community development and support a range of initiatives around the country. We've also transplanted the Victorian Foundation's Rainbow Programme for refugee children in schools, and are very grateful for the sharing of these resources.

There is also the RISI (Refugees In Sport Initiative) in which corporate sponsors help children and young people from refugee backgrounds get involved in mainstream sports such as soccer, swimming, cricket and netball. As part of this, RASNZ has its own highly successful football team, the “ALL REFS”. The All Refs have won some major tournaments, but as yet have not gone up against another famous NZ team of similar name. **R**