

Presentation by REBECCA LIM

*Community Engagement Coordinator
Mercy Community Services, Romero Centre.*

Refugees and Immigration forum

With Richard Marles, MP, Shadow Minister for Immigration and Border Control

The Romero Centre is a refugee and asylum seeking support agency; a program of Mercy Community Services. MCS is a ministry of the Sisters of Mercy Brisbane Congregation.

We are a place of welcome at Dutton Park and meet the unmet needs of people from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Burma, Sudan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and many more countries.

We provide emergency support, material aid, migration assistance, meaningful engagement such as art exhibitions, volunteer work, activities and programs such as ESL classes, sewing groups, playgroup activities, computers, resume writing, understanding forms, advocacy/speaking engagements. Volunteers go to BITA (Brisbane's detention centre in Pinkenba) for ESL classes, music, Occupational Therapy activities for families.

I want to spend the next few minutes being the voice of the voiceless. On 9 July 2014, I consulted with a cross section of Tamil refugees from the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka and India.

Tamils – 20 on bridging Visa without work rights (except 1 granted sc 449 Temp Humanitarian Stay)

- Depressed about not being able to work – able-bodied young people who have capacity to work and should not be relying on welfare
- very frightened about future, many have lost their lives
- more than 1 or 2 years, no progress to their cases, frustrated thinking about future

If you don't come by boat, how else would you get here? Or register as a refugee?

- There is no right way of coming here or to Australian High Commission for a humanitarian visa no other way except coming by boat
- Even if we go to the High Commission, the staff are Sinhalese and we are frightened

Is there a UNHCR office in Colombo?

- Yes, it is there. They don't register people there and there is no safety camp
- No NGOs are allowed to go to particular village or town in Tamil area to find out if there are any problems because government doesn't allow them to visit

- My father disappeared 19 years ago and the government doesn't give me permission to find out why he disappeared

Are there safer pathways to get here?

- The only way of registering with UNHCR will be through Malaysia or Indonesia
- We cannot get visa or passport to leave SL unless bribe agents

Some in the government says you are economic migrants or refugees?

- Totally incorrect this government knows this is not true
- if everything is well in Sri Lanka, why is there a travel ban for Australian citizens so if it's not safe for Aussies, how can it be safe for us Tamils
- when a Minister visits, they decorate the place of visit, and vehicles are cleared and when 'white' people go there and think it's all fine

What about Australia giving navy boats to the SL navy?

- Big drama b/c the boat is arranged by the navy and the navy is happy to take our money, smuggle us to Australia, genocide and attempting to Sinhalise the country
- the navy could have easily stopped our passage but why is it now only trying to stop the boats

Sinhalising the country?

- in a particular place where there are Hindus, Christians and Muslims, it is natural to build a church or temple
- now they are building Buddhist temples and bringing in Sinhalese
- it is a calculated government-sponsored colonisation program
- Kenya - hot water well sacred place of the Hindus and now replaced Hindu statues with Buddhist statues and pay 10 rupees

Land ownership?

- As our land is being taken and our existence is taken, it affects everything about us, my education, livelihood, everything....I can't call this place my own

Prospect of returning to SL

- Frightened, lives will be destroyed
- Why? interrogation, shot and bodies thrown in the North and East
- known cases of returnees being persecuted Batticaloa returnee - beaten and tortured

The Australian government says it is safe and there's reconstruction

- If everything is safe in SL, why is there 69,000 Tamil refugees in India who can't be resettled in SL
- most of the land has been occupied by military, even the Indian government doesn't force SL refugees only Australia is behaving this way
- though they say the war is finished, our situation is worsened not during the war but after the war. Why?
- during the war time, at least we are behind the Tiger's line and protected, now no protection
- we require permission from government to have a celebration
- we don't need development of new roads, we want to live in freedom and peace
- even though we have escaped and came to Australia, we are deeply worried about family whether they are safe
- how did the government come to this conclusion? Have they sent a fact finding mission or taken into account independent reports, Australia is the only country that is saying this
- visitors on governmental trips will be showered with gifts, cultural dances, food
- if the SL government is treating us so well, then invite the investigators to monitor
- UN people refused visa to monitor
- Army visited each house before visit of High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay - despite the warnings, many people were brave enough to speak out and after her visit, they were intimidated
- A widow from Killinochchi who has been enquiring about the disappearance of her son and husband continues to be imprisoned because she dared to ask questions

Women's safety

- In Sri Lanka, nobody can stop CID taking women for enquiries and when they take us, we don't know what will happen but well known that women have been sexually assaulted.

War widows 90,000?

- We are hearing the widows are taken for investigation and enquiries by force and sexually assaulted and difficult lives because of sexual favours

If your country is safe, would you return?

- Yes
- we are ready to go now if we can live safely, treated equally, recognise our culture, land respected, traditional homeland of Tamils
- the politicians say no problem, but there are enforced disappearances, white vans, clergy and human rights workers are taken for enquiries....
- there are reliable human rights reports but politicians are not taking these reports into account and saying things are good

- The Australian Human Rights Commissioner said as recently as last week that Sri Lanka is not safe
- We have a message for Bob Carr who is always on media saying it is safe, and Tony Abbott and Scott Morrison who says it is safe for Tamils – don't you rely on independent and credible reports? Have you spoken to any of us who have lived experience?

Comments on interview process in Australia

- Did not understand process of interviews, process very foreign to us, despite telling what has happened to us in the interviews, they don't believe us
- in the interviews, they have asked us proof that we have been tortured, how can I get a cert to prove I was tortured?
- the reality is that people being returned are in jail
- how can we tell our story of 20 years in 15 minutes ?
- I take few minutes to say something but interpreter took 1 minute

Tamil Sri Lankan refugees who have lived in India since a young age

- 113 camps in India, life is tough because can't even buy SIM card because no address,
- need permission to visit camps, no access to higher education, in camps any Indian citizen can beat and harm us; there is no guarantee of protection if we return to SL despite having lived in India
- experiences: beaten badly
- separated from family and advised by family not to return to SL
- nobody will protect us
- we didn't come to Australia to be happy, but for safety and that's why we travelled 18 days at sea - know it's dangerous but prepared to die together
- no safety for SL refugees - was hit by car and sustained injury but bribed and said it was my fault
- theft case but because they were refugees and charged - easy target so whole family burnt themselves and died from injuries
- we feel like we are the world's 'garbage' being thrown from one place to another

UNHCR registration in Chennai?

- No, why?
- UNHCR rep cannot visit camp because the Indian govt doesn't allow it
- Report to Q Branch and monitored

If you have one thing to say to the politicians, what would it be?

- live peacefully
- like the European countries including Canada, UK - emphasise on reconciliation and peace to Tamils in SL, why is the Australian government not involved in peace building
- security

- live until die a natural death
- SL under international investigation have seen what army had done and SL government knows we are witnesses to these crimes, so currently we are in danger
- refugee for 20 years, want this label to be removed
- the Australian government say we are refugees but the responsibility towards us is terribly violated
- I am ready to return and if the government can guarantee my safety, I will tell the others it is safe - I will be a test case (a very bold statement)
- if return, I will be safe for 6 months by the IOM but no monitoring after that
- during the war, ICRC and NGOs asked to vacate as cannot guarantee safety
- Action against hunger 16 people shot no investigations
- I hold an Indian refugee card not accepted by the Australian government
- denied our basic human rights in SL and everything denied to us and not even considered as a race, and now not accepted as refugees, how long will we have to wait?
- when somebody burns himself, how much desperation would have made him do this to himself?
- this is not the first and there many people waiting to do this
- we will feel safe in a UN administered camp
- government is aware of Tamil diaspora and in India, why don't they trust us?
- if you send us to SL, you are sending us back to people who will kill us
- we would prefer if you send us to any camp that is operated by the UN
- if unable to do this, somewhere in the forest build a camp and we can live there and we will be safe
- this is how we feel
- Sri Lanka is too militarised
- why are we not following the European countries, UK
- we are holding the hands of those in power, the Australian government doesn't care about our suffering
- there has been a civil war in the Northern and Eastern provinces for more than 30 years and we have been displaced since a very young age

Faili Kurd from Iran

- Stateless
- 4 years in Australia
- recognised as stateless but not owed protection I want to feel useful legally - no work rights, volunteer soccer coach and my child's soccer team has said I'm a good coach, volunteers at Romero Centre I don't know what will happen to me
- it's been 4 years I don't know what to do, I've lost my life here
- my children speak English with an Aussie accent but unfortunately, cannot speak Persian

To conclude,

A respected human rights advocate summed up Australia's refugee and asylum seeking policy quite well:

The Australian government is actively inhospitable, proactively brutal and intentionally determined to break the spirits of people who once imagined they might find protection from oppression in our care.

The Australian Catholic bishops issued a statement saying the government's policy is one of dehumanisation and institutionalised cruelty.