

The Refugee Debate

As one of 147 nations who have agreed to the United Nations 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, Australia has agreed to provide shelter for refugees seeking shelter from war or danger. Refugees are usually accepted as such before they arrive in Australia.

Australia has always sheltered people fleeing from danger. This commitment was particularly strong in the years after World War II (1939–1945), when hundreds of thousands of Europeans fleeing war-ravaged countries were welcomed by Australia.

The same commitment was shown in the 1970s after the Vietnam War. However, since the early 2000s there has been considerable public debate about how Australia should react to asylum seekers, especially those who come directly by boat rather than going to refugee camps. Asylum seekers hope to be classified as refugees and then accepted by Australia.

The Tampa Incident

In August 2001, 433 Afghans aboard a leaky wooden boat were headed for Australia to seek asylum. The boat started to sink in the Indian Ocean. A nearby Norwegian cargo ship, the *MV Tampa*, was asked to help. The *Tampa* picked up the refugees, but the Australian Government then refused permission for the *Tampa* to enter Australian waters. It did not want the refugees to be able to ask for asylum.

The *Tampa's* captain, Arne Rinnan, continued to steer towards Christmas Island, an Australian territory, even after Australian soldiers boarded the ship, as he said those onboard needed medical help. After a long discussion between the Australian and Norwegian governments and the United Nations, the refugees were transferred to an Australian Navy ship and taken to the Pacific nation of Nauru, where they were detained. About half of the Afghan asylum seekers were later accepted as refugees by New Zealand, with most of the remainder accepted as refugees by Australia.

Public Debate

The *Tampa* incident, as it became known, occurred just before a federal election. It caused controversy at the time. Some people applauded the government's decision as they thought that people arriving by boat, rather than applying to come to Australia while they were waiting in an overseas refugee camp, were 'jumping the queue'. Others believed the government denied the refugees the right to land in Australia as a way of getting votes from people opposed to unlawful entry.

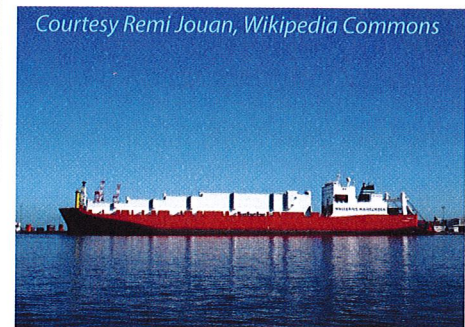
Another issue was the government policy of mandatory detention, in which all refugees, including children, were detained in special camps as their claims for refugee status were decided. This policy was later softened after some government members argued that children should not be locked up.

What is a refugee?

A refugee is a person, recognised under the 1951 Convention, who flees their home, especially to another country, during times of war, natural disaster, or other dangerous situations.

What is an asylum seeker?

An asylum seeker is a person who applies for asylum (sanctuary, or the right of residence) from the government of another country, seeking to be classified as a refugee.



Courtesy Remi Jouan, Wikipedia Commons

MV Tampa