



Refugees in the New Zealand context

Note: This paper was originally prepared by RMS, on behalf of the Council for International Development. It was written as a background document for a UNHCR e-centre workshop on Emergency Preparedness. It has been updated for the 2004 UNHCR/ NGO Consultations to provide a general oversight of refugee work in New Zealand. While every attempt has been made to achieve accuracy, the document has been produced by RMS and does not purport to necessarily reflect the opinions of Government or other agencies.

A brief overview of:

- Existing responses to refugees
- Recent emergency responses
- Future Emergency Scenarios

Introduction

New Zealand's "island geography", relative isolation and comparative regional stability has so far protected it from any spontaneous large-scale influx of refugees or victims of natural, environmental or man-made disasters.

As a result, New Zealand has largely been able to plan its "internal" response to global refugee and/or humanitarian crises. The country is one of a few nations that provide permanent resettlement opportunities for refugees.

Responding to Refugees "internally"

The Refugee Quota Programme

Presently, New Zealand maintains an "annual quota" of 750 refugee resettlement places. These are targeted predominantly at refugees deemed, by UNHCR, to be in the greatest need of physical or legal protection. On arrival, "Quota Refugees" are accorded immediate Permanent Residence status and (provided they meet the generic requirements) they may apply for citizenship after three years continuous residence. Since 1944, New Zealand has resettled more than 30,000 former refugees from conflict zones throughout the world.

Asylum Seekers (Refugee Status Applicants)

As a signatory to the "1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees", New Zealand has undertaken to provide protection for those who arrive in the country seeking asylum from persecution, when:

- It is determined that they have a genuine fear of persecution as a result of:
Race, nationality, religion, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.
- They are unable to seek and enjoy the protection of their own Government and have no right of permanent residence in any other country,

New Zealand has a highly developed and internationally respected Refugee Determination Process. It assures the availability of appropriate legal representation at initial hearings conducted by the Refugee Status Branch of the New Zealand Immigration Service, and it provides a right of appeal to the independent Refugee Status Appeals Authority. In recent years, New Zealand has received an average of 1,585 Refugee Status applications a year – of which an average of 12.5% have been approved.¹

Recent responses to Refugee Emergency Situations

During the past decade, the New Zealand Government and the public have responded to a number of unanticipated refugee emergencies.

Most notable of these were:

1. The Kosovo Crisis

- In which NZ moved swiftly to accept up to 600 Kosovar refugees, following UNHCR's request for assistance with Temporary Protection. In the case of NZ, the Government felt it more appropriate to extend Permanent Residence status to the Kosovars. The group was accepted *in addition* to the annual quota of 750. There was some criticism from the NGO community that there was insufficient consultation, communication and co-operation between Government, non-government agencies and refugee communities during the response to this crisis.

2. The East Timor situation

- In this instance it appeared likely that New Zealand might accept a number the East Timorese refugees on either a temporary or permanent basis. An improved level of consultation was achieved in the emergency planning of this proposed intake – although some NGOs felt that there was still a need for increased pooling of information, skills and resources.

The deployment of the UN military force and subsequent restoration of relative peace and security in East Timor finally negated the need for acceptance of East Timorese refugees.

3. The “Tampa” Afghan Refugees

The most recent of event has been the acceptance and subsequent resettlement of a group of 131 Afghan refugees, originally rescued at sea by the Norwegian freighter, the “Tampa”.

The Prime Minister's decision to accept this group, not only helped to break a political impasse, but also served to demonstrate the capacity of both Government departments and NGOs to respond

¹ Averages extracted from NZIS Immigration Fact Pack, July 2001

rapidly and co-operatively to achieve rapid status determination and subsequent community placement of an unexpected caseload. There was excellent "cross-sector" information sharing and co-operation on the part of Government agencies, NGOs, existing Afghan communities and local receiving communities.

During the past two years, a significant portion of the annual NZ Refugee Quota has been devoted to reuniting the unaccompanied minors from the "Tampa" with family members and to respond to the 'regional' resettlement challenges posed by a number of residual Iraqi caseloads in Nauru, and Manus.

It must be recognized, however, that the relatively small size of these operations helped make rapid and successful responses possible. An unexpected *mass influx* of refugees from anywhere in the region would undoubtedly prove a much more complex and demanding challenge.

PARinAC

A growing number of New Zealand's "refugee related" NGOs and former-refugee community organizations became involved in the "Parinac" (Partnership in Action) process with UNHCR, from its inception early last decade. Parinac provided a mechanism for dialogue and joint initiatives with UNHCR's non-governmental partners, operating both in internal and external refugee arenas.

In recent years this mechanism has proved very effective in helping to facilitate a "joint NGO submission" on matters of resettlement policy and practice. The submission led to a number of significant improvements in refugee policy and service delivery. The framework, originally provided by Parinac, has now developed into the "*National Refugee Resettlement Forum*". These three-day forums (held twice a year) bring together representatives of government, UNHCR, resettlement NGOs and refugee communities, providing an opportunity for input into policy formulation and the sharing of information, concerns and perspectives. The Minister of Immigration is normally in attendance during one day of these meetings.

Responding to Refugee Emergencies "Externally"

New Zealand has a long and proud history of responding to refugee emergencies. The government, NZ Red Cross, NGOs and faith-based agencies all continue to play important roles in responding to refugee and other emergency situations.

New Zealand defence forces have played an increasingly significant role in peacekeeping operations around the world – helping ensure that repatriation of displaced populations can occur in safety and assisting with the rebuilding of essential infrastructures.

New Zealand Red Cross and both international and national NGOs or faith-based relief agencies are often among the first to provide staff and volunteers to work in emergency relief, capacity building and development.

The New Zealand government frequently contributes financially to “emergency relief” efforts, through contingency funding within its ODA budget.

The Council for International Development

The Council for International Development (CID) plays a pivotal role in New Zealand for both Government and the NGO community. It has a broad membership of NGO and faith-based organizations that have an interest or active involvement in aid and development issues. The Council provides a very effective mechanism for inter-agency communication, information sharing and assistance with NGO capacity building. It also provides Government with an avenue for ongoing advice and exchange of perspectives with the NGO community on matters of relief and development.

Plausible Future Refugee Emergency Scenarios

Global Warming

One of the most plausible “future refugee scenarios” relates to a potential “new category” of refugees – thus far not covered within the Convention or Protocol. These may broadly be defined as “Environmental Refugees”. Some of the effects of global warming have become increasingly evident in recent years and there can no longer be any dispute about rising sea levels and climatic changes within the Pacific region. Environmental experts estimate that the cultures and economies of some low-lying pacific islands will be dramatically affected within the next twenty years – forcing populations to seek sanctuary in other countries. There are approximately seven million people inhabiting the islands of the South Pacific, many of whom could potentially be affected by “shrinking” land mass and/or environmental change. As a close Pacific neighbour, New Zealand could well be called upon to accept some of the displaced populations that may result from the growing effects of global warming and other climatic change.

Realistically, however, such displacement of pacific populations is not likely to occur suddenly and there is therefore time for New Zealand to plan for an appropriate graduated response to such an unfolding scenario

Political Instability

While it is hoped that political stability and racial harmony will be maintained and enhanced within both the South Pacific and the greater Pacific regions, the possibility of racial, ethnic and/or religious conflict (leading to the displacement of people) cannot be overlooked or ignored. Recent events in Indonesia, East Timor, PNG, and Solomon Islands have all highlighted the potential for possible refugee emergencies that could arise with little advance warning.

Mass Boat Arrivals

Experience from Australia to the Pacific coast of North America has demonstrated that boatloads of people can (and will probably continue to) reach distant shores – despite ever-improving surveillance and other deterrents. The problem of “people smuggling”, which is producing so called “mixed flows” of refugees and economic migrants - is not likely to diminish while there are desperate and/or persecuted people seeking safety or economic improvement.

Cyclones, Earthquakes, Tsunamis and Volcanic Eruptions

In the short-term, it is probably natural disasters that represent the most likely cause of sudden large-scale emergency displacement of people in the region. Records show that such disasters have been occurring globally with increasing frequency and intensity.

The “displaced populations” of natural disasters would not be classified as refugees. However, they present many identical challenges for emergency response teams. Issues of water, food, shelter, security, emergency medical assistance, sanitation, registration, identification and communication are common to most situations of sudden mass displacement.

Peter Cotton
Executive Director
RMS New Zealand

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