

Why would anyone be a refugee?

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- From: The Courier-Mail
- May 25, 2011 12:01AM

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THEIR PLIGHT: Libyan children playing in a refugee camp in Remada, southern Tunisia are among some 15,000 people fleeing fighting in western Libya. Picture: AFP

Source: AFP

WHENEVER we drown in a verbal tsunami about the "tidal wave" of boat people, the phobic voices of those who demand border protection float to the surface.

They blow the same dog-whistles about queue jumpers, cultural contamination, future terrorists and illegal immigrants, all of which have been debunked as myths.

There are no orderly queues. All refugees are screened through rigorous medical tests. The majority of illegal immigrants in Australia are British and American citizens who overstay. Our authorities can screen for criminality through ASIO and Interpol. Refugees constitute less than one per cent of our

Australian population.

The current coronial inquest into the Christmas Island boat tragedy and the proposed "refugee swap" with Malaysia have prompted the usual "not in our backyard" panic.

The inquest addresses six operational questions pertaining to surveillance and detection. It has confirmed that about half of the asylum seekers had fled the civil turmoil in Iraq.

Australia was part of the Coalition of the Willing that invaded Iraq in 2003 without UN Security Council approval. That Coalition overthrew their government, destroyed their civic infra-structure and inadvertently unleashed the unholy sectarian war between Sunnis and Shiites.

We played a part in uprooting and creating these asylum seekers and therefore have a moral responsibility to compensate for the fallout as they wash up on our shores.

Apart from the valid operational questions that coroner Malcolm McCusker is investigating, there are bigger moral questions that go to the heart of the matter. They need answers but are too often drowned out by the panic merchants of boat invasions.

The same old questions dictate the public discourse: when, how and where did the boats arrive? How many boats and how many passengers? How much will they cost? Where shall we process them?

Instead, we can ask a different set of questions that addresses the causes rather than the consequences of boat arrivals.

Unlike public discourse, which can be reduced to a string of formal expressions, private dialogue requires listening wholeheartedly, without prejudice, but with empathy.

It is only when we learn that no one chooses to become a refugee that real solutions to human rights violations can be proposed.

A dialogue would reveal why they are fleeing. What can drive a family to sell everything they own and risk everyone they love to take this treacherous voyage? Why are almost all these boat people vindicated and granted refugee status? What actions can we take as a nation to redress the unbearable circumstances that led them to the sea in the first place?

If we are blinded by the boats, we fail to see the faces and hear the stories of the families inside.

They are reduced to nameless numbers that are dehumanised so we can debate them without empathy. When they are rehumanised, they become people rather than problems.

If we keep having discourse about boats, we fail to have dialogue with and about the people.

*Joseph Wakim founded the Australian Arabic Council.

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