



Afghan refugees in Australia

There are approximately 12 -15,000 permanent Afghan community members in Australia. They have arrived mainly since the Soviet invasion in 1979. In addition, there are about **3,500 Afghans on temporary protection visas**. The Afghan community has contributed yet another dimension to Australia's cultural diversity.

What are temporary protection visas?

Temporary protection visas (TPVs) were introduced in October 1999 and were originally a policy of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. They are three year visas given to people who arrived in Australia without authorisation (usually by boat) and are able to show they meet the international definition of a refugee - that they have a well founded fear of persecution in their home country.

Under an Australian Government 2001 law, if a refugee has spent at least 7 days in a country where they could have claimed refugee status (for example, Indonesia), they are **never allowed to apply** for permanent refugee status in Australia. They can be sent back once the Government decides they no longer need protection. Most temporary protection visa holders fall in this category. Refugees whose visas have expired have not been given a further time period during which they know they can stay in Australia. Rather, their visas have simply been extended until such time as the Government decides to send them back.

There are strong indications that the Government will decide to send temporary visa holders back to Afghanistan now that the Taliban has been removed, but the Government has not issued a final decision and has not given any idea of when this might be.

How are TPV holders treated differently to other refugees?

Unlike permanent visa holders, temporary protection visa holders have no right:

- to bring their families into Australia,
- to return if they leave Australia, or
- to access generous Commonwealth funded settlement services such as temporary housing and English classes.

The effect is to **marginalise one of the most vulnerable groups** in the Australian community. Afghans on temporary visas are in a state of limbo, unable to plan or put down roots, or to obtain stable work.

This situation only adds to what is already a high rate of depression and mental illness among Afghan refugees due to the trauma they experienced being persecuted in Afghanistan, and making the long and dangerous journey to Australia. In February this year 46 year old Habibullah Wahedy committed suicide in Adelaide after being informed by the Department of

Immigration that his temporary protection visa would not be extended. He leaves a wife and 3 children in Afghanistan.

Returning to Afghanistan: Amnesty International notes that the agreements Australia has put in place for returning refugees will only put an increased strain on an already overburdened infrastructure in Afghanistan. Without the necessary financial and technical support essential to rebuilding Afghanistan, refugee returns are unsustainable. In addition, reports of chronic instability and insecurity, particularly in areas outside of Kabul, make returning a potentially dangerous option for Afghan refugees.

Indigo Foundation supports Afghan refugees

Indigo Foundation provided financial support in March 2002 for the incorporation and establishment of Sherrin Community Organisation, an Afghan (Hazara) community development organisation, based in Sydney. In addition to financial support, Sherrin Community Organisation asked us for moral support.

Since that time, Indigo Foundation volunteers have developed strong working and social relationships with several Hazara leaders and their families.

Sherrin Community Organisation ran twice weekly English classes for Afghan TPV holders in 2002. Sadly, after receiving only temporary extensions of their 3 year visas at the end of last year, visa holders became demoralised and depressed and no longer saw any use in learning English if they were to be sent back at any time. The classes were suspended but the Organisation's interpreting and community liaison services continue.

Indigo Foundation volunteers assisted with the English classes and continue to provide homework assistance to school students in several Hazara families. We have also organised social activities – a picnic in a national park, a Christmas supper, and some shared meals.

Indigo Foundation is currently working to raise public awareness of the Government's TPV policy, highlighting the devastating effects this has on TPV holders. Working alongside a large number of other organisations, we hope to change this policy. For more information or if you would like to help, please contact us, or look at <http://www.ajustaustralia.com/>, an alliance for change, of which Indigo Foundation is a member.

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Supporting Community Development

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