



CREATING VALUE THROUGH A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIP

BY SHARANYA SRIKANTH

Following the implementation of the key recommendations made by the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers on August 13 2012, it has been made apparent that such preventative measures needed to be taken in order to combat the often fatal consequences associated with asylum seekers risking their lives on dangerous boat journeys to Australia. These vulnerable persons come to developed nations like Australia based on the enormous and unfounded promises indoctrinated into them by sophisticated networks of human traffickers. There is no denying the fact that such drastic and stringent measures needed to be taken in order to send a clear message to the international refugee community that there are no advantages given to asylum seekers in engaging with people smugglers. While the aforementioned laws were necessary in order to tackle the pertinent global issue of human trafficking, such amendments alone are not sufficient in targeting this vicious cycle that has cost some of the most vulnerable members of war-torn

regions, particularly Sri Lankan Tamils that account for a large portion of this figure, their livelihoods and even lives.

The cost of charter flights that transport asylum seekers to Nauru and overcrowded detention centres in Australia is now costing taxpayers an average of at least \$6.1 million a month, which includes the costs of the new policy of returning these boat people to Sri Lanka. On average, offshore processing costs approximately \$1 million per asylum seeker annually, with almost \$400 million being expended on government contracts. Official tender notices from the Department of Immigration reveal a total of 57 tenders for special air charter services have been issued at a cost of \$36.7 million for the six months to February 15, 2013. One tender marked “to various locations” was issued at a cost of \$15 million for 23 days of service and is believed to include the transfer of asylum seekers to Nauru and the return of failed Sri Lankan asylum seekers. While these exuberant costs

may be necessary, the question that needs to be asked is how this use of resources can be made more valuable to both Australia and the vulnerable asylum seekers. This article seeks to provide recommendations in answering this pertinent question.

Volunteering at the Organisation for Ealam Refugee Rehabilitation (OfERR) in Chennai, India over the Summer of 2012-13, has led me to the belief that Australia has the potential to become an international figurehead in dealing most effectively with people smugglers. This can be achieved through the combination of various mutually beneficial initiatives as well as the inclusion of enabling laws in the future regarding Australia's stance on refugees and asylum seekers to allow for freer movement between the war-ravaged region of Sri Lanka and Australia. Australia, having one of the largest Sri Lankan Tamil populations in the world outside of the island nation and presenting itself as a global leader in pressuring the Sri Lankan government in regards to war crimes allegations, is indeed capable of adding further value to its relationship with the island nation. Such value can be found through going beyond the boundaries of the one-dimensional offshore processing policy currently in place, and instead, taking a more multi-faceted approach. I believe that this can be facilitated through the Australian Government assisting NGO's like OfERR in targeting the issue of human trafficking at the root by creating greater awareness within the camps through people-to-people transparency.

It is a staggering figure that approximately one third of the people who attempted to enter Australia by boat from January to October in 2012 were Sri Lankan Tamils. Nevertheless, it is not my intention to dwell on statistics, but rather to share my recommendations based on my first hand experiences with Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. As a second year law student currently studying at the University of New South Wales, member of the Sri Lankan Tamil Diasporas and Australian citizen, I strongly believe that the Australian Government has the financial resources and humanitarian capacity to follow-up Australia's new stance regarding offshore processing. As a nation, we can be instrumental in remedying the concern of human trafficking by playing a greater humanitarian and altruistic role through assisting these asylum seekers in a valuable return to their homelands. This can thereby be achieved through increasing the nation's esteem as a forerunner in asylum seeker policy innovation and role model to fellow developed nations through their facilitation of humanitarian initiatives, thus assisting Sri Lankan Tamil refugees and asylum seekers in their return to the motherland.

I. ENDING THE CYCLE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AT A GRASS ROOTS LEVEL

It has now been established that it is only through the creation of a safe environment back on the island that word can be spread about the dangers of human trafficking, where more often than not, the most vulnerable, namely Sri Lankan Tamil asylum

IT IS ONLY THROUGH THE CREATION OF A SAFE ENVIRONMENT BACK ON THE ISLAND THAT WORD CAN BE SPREAD ABOUT THE DANGERS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

seekers in desperate situations, are lured onto boats under false grounds. The only way to remedy such a situation is through word of mouth and changing these vulnerable persons' perception of human trafficking in order to prevent them from engaging in activity that is endangering their lives, the lives of fellow family members and even their livelihoods as they often drain their entire life savings. However much NGO's and state government officials (namely those in Tamil Nadu) inform refugees of the dangers of human trafficking after first-hand interaction with numerous refugees within the camps, it is my belief that nothing would resonate with them more than the stories of fellow asylum seekers who have experienced firsthand the dangerous boat journeys and the lifetime of indebtedness they will endure in their attempt to repay these human traffickers.

This phase of the process looks at a more permanent solution of ending the cycle of human trafficking through facilitating more substantial dialogue between asylum seekers and potential asylum seekers, particularly regarding the offshore processing of asylum seekers on Nauru. Furthermore, it is proposed that substantial incentives need to be provided by the government as a method of encouraging people to come forward with information about traffickers. This information will prove vital to the Australian Federal Police and will subsequently allow for the infiltration of these complex networks, eradicating the problem at the root.

After a series of conferences that I partook in while volunteering, it was concluded that the challenge of human trafficking must be tackled through sustained awareness building programs among the vulnerable persons within the refugee community. Likewise, it also applies to persons on the island who have fallen victim to human traffickers previously. The activity that is proposed is to sustain regular discussions at the camp level



PHOTO BY SRITHER NARAYANASAMY

**IT IS PROPOSED THAT
SUBSTANTIAL INCENTIVES
NEED TO BE PROVIDED
BY THE GOVERNMENT
AS A METHOD OF
ENCOURAGING PEOPLE
TO COME FORWARD WITH
INFORMATION ABOUT
TRAFFICKERS.**

regarding the dangers and unacceptability of human trafficking. This would therefore enhance the impact of the process because the effort against human trafficking would be targeted at the grass root level, in addition to a governmental or organisational level. It is this discussion that will ultimately assist the Australian government in protecting our shores and alleviating this perpetual cycle.

The vulnerable persons in the refugee community is threefold:

1. Family members of persons who have already got across to Australia.
2. Persons who have attempted to go to Australia, however failed in their efforts. These persons must then bring in five recruits if they are to be included in the next batch.
3. Persons who are not sure as to what they should do about preparations for return to the island.

This notion of information sharing will also create awareness of the noble cause undertaken by Australia regarding the government's consistent efforts in protecting those persons whose lives are in danger. NGO's and government bodies must consequently play an instrumental role in informing refugees, who are considering boarding a boat to Australia, illuminating the notion that in doing so, they are harming this noble cause and tarnishing the respected name of Sri Lankan ex-patriots residing in Australia. Australia has been extremely generous in accommodating one of the

world's largest Sri Lanka Tamil ex-patriot populations and such a notion must be shared within refugee camps to ensure that such a relationship should not be abused or taken for granted.

The most effective antidote to human trafficking has been the sharing of information by those who have attempted to reach Australia and decided to return to Sri Lanka as they were convinced that they were cheated, hence on a person-to-person basis. This information is then to be shared at the discussions that take place at camp levels. This information is also made available to the government functionaries who are pertinent in the process of putting a stop to human trafficking. A further antidote to the human trafficking efforts is the discussions among refugees at the camp level as to what would facilitate their return to Sri Lanka. The positive approach of well informed refugees preparing for return, strengthened by the success stories of persons who have returned to the island, have great potential in saving people from being cheated into attempting to travel illegally to foreign countries like Australia.

II. RESTORATION OF LIVELIHOOD AND HOMELAND THROUGH THE PROVISION OF SEED MONEY

The staggering figures associated with transporting refugees back to their homelands is likely to increase in the future. Nevertheless, it is not my intention to recommend a change in legislation. Rather it is proposed that through the creation of



IT IS CLEARLY EVIDENT THAT THERE IS SUBSTANTIAL NEED FOR HUMAN CAPITAL ON THE ISLAND AND THESE PEOPLE COULD BECOME IMMENSELY VALUABLE IF THEY WERE EQUIPPED WITH THE CORRECT RESOURCES THAT AUSTRALIA COULD EASILY PROVIDE.



a more value-laden relationship between Australia and Sri Lanka, the economic costs associated with transporting asylum seekers both to Nauru and back to their homelands can be extended to end the cycle of human trafficking. In providing Sri Lankan returnees with seed money, temporary housing and greater security for Tamils in the North and East provinces of Sri Lanka, the Australian government would in turn, be able to play a pivotal role in boosting entrepreneurship and economic prosperity among returnees.

It is my strong belief that this would be a monumental step in putting an end to human trafficking, providing an indication to these vulnerable persons that their homeland does indeed provide them with substantial opportunities for livelihood, in stark contrast to the high risk notion of boarding a boat to Australia. Through OfERR's continuous work in the camps and the open forum which they have created with close to 70 000 refugees in Tamil Nadu, India, it is evident that the refugee community is largely ill-informed of the situation back in their homeland and

it is this lack of awareness that has caused many of them to seek refuge elsewhere. The creation of more positive stories regarding those who have returned to the homeland will encourage others to endure the same process and further dissuade them from engaging with people smugglers. It is here that the Australia Government has the opportunity to intervene and add value to the process of returning asylum seekers to their homelands in adopting a greater humanitarian role, thus assisting those most vulnerable. This could possibly be exercised through greater involvement of the Australian High Commission in the North and Eastern provinces in Sri Lanka for the purposes of making the Tamil people feel safe in their homeland, previously dictated by government forces.

Such a notion can only be achieved through greater understanding and awareness on the part of the Australian Government regarding the needs and scope of the rebuilding process that needs to take place in war-ravaged regions, specifically Tamil dominated

areas. There needs to be the continuation of sustained development of projects such as: the rehabilitation of Kankesanthurai Harbour, the rehabilitation of Palaly Airport, the repair and reconstruction of hospitals and schools, setting up of Vocational Training Centres, the construction of the Cultural Centre in Jaffna and finally, the restoration of railway lines and of the Duraiappah stadium in Jaffna. It is clearly evident that there is substantial need for human capital on the island and these people could become immensely valuable if they were equipped with the correct resources that Australia could easily provide. Furthermore, the inclusion of such prominent infrastructure in these Tamil dominated regions of Sri Lanka will provide the Sri Lankan Tamil population with a sense of confidence in returning to their homeland and provide a much needed boost to the declining businesses in these regions.

III. UTILISATION OF HUMAN CAPITAL THROUGH PROVISION OF TEMPORARY JOBS FOR PURPOSE OF SKILL BUILDING

In accordance with the work conducted by OfERR, I would propose the provision of temporary working visas for asylum seekers in Australia in order to improve employability and confidence levels of these vulnerable persons when they eventually return to Sri Lanka. In order for this to become a viable option, the communication and transportation channels between Australia and Sri Lanka need to become significantly more flexible.

Australia would undoubtedly benefit from the cheap labour intensive positions that these Sri Lankan workers could fill. This would therefore provide the Australian Government with a much more economically beneficial strategy, whereby the government would not have to worry about costs associated with permanent residency and eventual citizenship, but rather would provide temporary working visa. Similar initiatives have proven highly effective in neighboring nations of Singapore and Malaysia, who have built a strong working relationship with the small island nation, where individuals travel to foreign countries on fixed contracts. This would become a clear example of a mutually beneficial relationship. Additionally, the aforementioned strategy would also allow for the restoration of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka.

By increasing refugee intake and moving the Tamil population elsewhere in the world, we are simply avoiding the domestic problem back at home, more specifically, one that is becoming more and more pertinent as Tamils continue to feel vulnerable in their homeland. In order to combat this issue, we can use the Australian Government to assist the Sri Lankan Tamil population with temporary jobs, but also to ease them back into their life on the island and remove the label of “victim”.

In taking on a humanitarian role in assisting asylum seekers and in adding greater value to the process of eradicating human trafficking, we propose the inclusion of vocational training and education that the Australian Government can provide to those detained.

ONCE THEY HAVE MADE THE JOURNEY HOME, THE SKILLS, WHICH THEY HAVE OBTAINED THROUGH TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT IN AUSTRALIA, INCREASE THEIR EMPLOYABILITY IN THEIR HOMELAND.

We believe that this will prove to be highly effective as these vulnerable persons become no real burden to the Australian people, while simultaneously equipping them with the skills for a successful return to their homeland. Once they have made the journey home, the skills, which they have obtained through temporary employment in Australia, increase their employability in their homeland. We would consequently urge the government to include asylum seekers in more initiatives such as: the Australian Homestay Network, Community Placement Network, Homestay Helping Hand and Community Placement Network Assistance Trust, whereby asylum seekers are given the opportunity to take on labour intensive tasks that do not necessarily require a niche skillset. The provision of jobs to these vulnerable persons can also be extended to other manual labour jobs such as those in the agriculture and farming sectors.

Furthermore, through my personal experiences of working with refugees through the educational and women's empowerment sectors at OfERR, it became apparent to me that however simple it may seem, it was the human contact and personalised information sharing that proved the most effective in establishing awareness about particular issues. Through attending a communication and leadership workshop for tertiary students organised for Trichy region refugees in Tamil Nadu, I was able to witness first hand the intellectual brilliance of refugee students, many of who came from extraordinary familial circumstances. Upon learning that I was visiting from Australia, through my interactions with the students, I became aware that many were curious about the opportunities offered to refugees here in Australia. While the lives of these refugees were clearly not in danger, it seemed understandable that they would be curious as to the opportunities presented by the developed world. I believe that the potential

presented by these refugees, both skilled and unskilled, could prove to be a great asset to the Australian workforce and would also serve to reiterate Australia's commitment to assisting refugees and asylum seekers alike in making a meaningful return to Sri Lanka.

IV. CONCLUSION

Over the next four years, Australia's offshore processing units on Nauru and Manus Island are expected to cost taxpayers \$2.3 billion. This is a comparatively exorbitant amount given the 2013 UNHCR global budget is slightly more at \$3.7 billion, which includes funding for war-ravaged regions like Syria, Mali and Afghanistan. While some may argue that this figure was inevitable and such a stringent policy was the only viable option, greater value needs to be added to this process in order to end the deathly cycle of human trafficking.

Through my first hand experiences of working with OfERR regarding the protection and welfare of Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers and refugees, it has become apparent that a lack of awareness, information and miscommunication is what has facilitated the booming human trafficking industry amongst refugees. Simultaneously, given the labour capacity possessed by these vulnerable persons and the lack of security for refugees and asylum seekers in Sri Lanka, Australia has the opportunity to play a much greater humanitarian role in returning these refugees back to their homeland. Given the mutually beneficial aforementioned initiatives, the Australian Government has the potential to add greater value to their pre-existing offshore processing policy, concurrently assisting these vulnerable persons in making a meaningful return to Sri Lanka and ending the vicious cycle of human trafficking.

