Australia's refugee population: A statistical snapshot of 2013–14

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Statistics recently published by the Immigration Department reveal that during the 2013–14 financial year, some 6,500 visas were granted to refugees abroad who had applied to be resettled to Australia. The majority of these people originally fled persecution from countries such as Afghanistan (2,530), Myanmar (1,145), and Iraq (830). The Department also granted 300 refugee category visas to Syrian nationals.

Though the Department’s statistics do not indicate where these people were resettled from, we do know that as at the end of May 2014, some 600 refugees were resettled from Indonesia and more than 700 from Malaysia. According to the Minister, the majority of Afghan refugees accepted last year were resettled from countries of first asylum such as Pakistan or Iran.

Of the 6,500 visas granted to refugees abroad, more than 1,000 visas or 16 per cent of the refugee category visas were granted to women considered at particular risk. However the number of refugee category visas granted to people who had not yet left their home country has increased substantially in the last year from 70 to more than 700. This increase might be explained by the grant of more than 500 visas to locally engaged employees in Afghanistan who were considered at particular risk of harm as a result of providing assistance to the Australian Government.

Another interesting development over the last year has been the grant of 245 permanent visas allocated under the Community Proposal Pilot. This is a program being trialled by the Department to enable approved community organisations to provide practical support and a substantial financial contribution towards the cost of humanitarian settlement. Though these visas were from within, not in addition to, the total 11,000 offshore Humanitarian Program allocation, it is not currently known how many of these recipients were refugees, as opposed to humanitarian entrants under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP).

With respect to refugees already in Australia, a total of 2,750 were granted permanent protection visas during the last financial year. Of these, some 545 were granted to refugees
who travelled to Australia by boat (boat arrivals) and the remaining 2200 were granted to those who had travelled to Australia by plane (plane arrivals).

The Department’s 2013—14 Annual Report (pp. 111—113) reveals that the vast majority of boat arrivals granted visas last year had fled persecution from Afghanistan (230—a decrease from 2,350 the previous year), Stateless (80—a decrease from 470 the previous year), and Iran (70—a decrease from 1,000 the previous year). In contrast, the refugees who were granted visas after having arrived in Australia on another visa (such as a visitor or student visa) were predominantly fleeing from Pakistan (380), Egypt (340), Iran (310), Libya (190) and China (145) amongst others. Thus, the majority of visa grants to boat arrivals were to Afghan nationals and Stateless persons while the majority of visa grants to plane arrivals were to Pakistani and Egyptian nationals. As noted above, the majority of visa grants to refugees resettled from abroad were to nationals from Afghanistan and Myanmar. However, that is not a complete picture of the position because there were also some 390 temporary visas granted to refugees during the year, though these have not been counted under Australia’s humanitarian program allocation, which was set at 13,750 places in 2013—14. These temporary visas included temporary protection visas (TPVs) of which there were only 23 granted due to the Senate disallowance on 2 December 2013 of the regulation that re-introduced them, temporary humanitarian concern visas (110) and temporary humanitarian stay visas (250)—which were used as an alternative to the TPV when it was no longer available. However, the total number of temporary humanitarian stay visas granted for the purposes of release from immigration detention has been omitted from these figures and is thus not currently known.

The Minister also granted 140 visas (a decrease from 435 the previous year) when exercising his personal intervention power to override an adverse decision of the Refugee Review Tribunal. Requests for intervention were made by more than 1,800 asylum seekers. It is not known whether these visas were deducted from the onshore or offshore component of the Humanitarian Program.

With respect to the number of people claiming asylum, the Department received more than 10,600 applications (a decrease from 16,900 the previous year) for protection visas from asylum seekers in the financial year (though noting that boat arrivals are statutorily deemed ineligible to apply unless the Minister personally permits them to do so). Of these, approximately 10,000 were from plane arrivals with the vast majority coming from China (1,800 an increase from 1,170 the previous year), India (1,200) and Pakistan (980). In contrast, the majority of protection visa applications lodged by boat arrivals were made by nationals from Iran (260 a decrease from 1530 the previous year), Stateless (210 a decrease from 670 the year before) and Vietnam (140 an increase from 40 the previous year). It is not currently known how many refugee category visa applications were lodged offshore during 2013—14.

Thus, leaving differences in visa outcomes aside, Australia provided protection to close to 10,000 Convention refugees last financial year, the majority having fled persecution from Afghanistan, Myanmar, Iraq, Pakistan and Egypt.