Australia’s refugee population: A statistical snapshot of 2014-15

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Statistics published by the Immigration Department reveal that during the 2014–15 financial year 6,002 permanent visas were granted to refugees abroad who had applied to be resettled to Australia, representing a decrease of 500 from the previous year. Though the Department has not revealed the countries from which these refugees have fled, consistent with previous years, Australia continues to honour its commitment to resettle refugees from countries with protracted refugee populations such as Myanmar, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Of the 6,002 visas granted to refugees abroad, 1,009 visas or 17 per cent were granted to women considered at particular risk because they didn’t have the protection of a male relative or were in danger of victimisation, harassment, or serious abuse because of their gender.

The number of refugee category visas granted to people who had not yet left their home country decreased substantially in the last year to only 133 (a decrease from more than 700 in 2013–14). Previously, such visas have been granted to locally engaged employees in Afghanistan who were considered at particular risk of harm as a result of providing assistance to the Australian Government.

Though Australia honoured its commitment to grant 4,567 visas to Syrian and Iraqi nationals in 2014–15, it is not known how many were granted ‘refugee category’ visas (comprising the 6,002 visas mentioned above) and how many were granted ‘special humanitarian program’ (SHP) visas. As explained elsewhere, traditionally a legal distinction has been drawn between these two categories. The SHP visa is for people who are subject to substantial discrimination amounting to gross violation of human rights—not for refugees fleeing persecution for a 1951 Refugee Convention reason. In addition, visa applicants under the SHP must be supported by a proposer who is responsible for their settlement, including air fares. Historically, most of the visas available under the SHP (5,000 places allocated in 2014–15) have been taken up by family members of refugees and humanitarian entrants already in Australia. Therefore, granting SHP visas to refugees from the Syrian conflict will undoubtedly impact upon the already enormous back-log that exists with delays in family reunion under the SHP estimated to exceed 20 years.

Another interesting development last year was the grant of 507 permanent visas (an increase from 245 last year) under the Community Proposal Pilot. This is a program that continues to be trialled by the Department to enable approved community organisations to provide practical support and a substantial financial contribution towards the cost of settlement. It is not currently known how many of these recipients were Convention refugees, as opposed to humanitarian entrants under the SHP, or the countries from which they fled.

With respect to persons already in Australia (having arrived in Australia on a visa such as a visitor or student visa), a total of 8,848 asylum seekers lodged applications for protection visas in 2014–15,
representing a decrease from 10,600 in 2013–14. Of these, only 261 were made by asylum seekers who travelled to Australia by boat. The remaining 8,587 applications were made by people who travelled to Australia by plane—with the vast majority coming from Malaysia, China, Pakistan and India. Of these, 2,747 refugees were granted permanent protection visas in 2014–15 with all but one of these visas going to refugees who had travelled to Australia by plane. The vast majority fled persecution in Pakistan (430), Iraq (355), Iran (340), China (239) and Egypt (239) amongst others.

However, that is not a complete picture because there were also 156 temporary visas granted to refugees during the year, though these have not been counted under Australia’s humanitarian program allocation, which remained at 13,750 places in 2014—15. These temporary visas, primarily for refugees who travelled to Australia by boat, included temporary protection visas (TPVs) of which there were 44 granted in 2014–15 (an increase from 23 last year), temporary humanitarian concern visas (21) and temporary humanitarian stay visas (91). Also, during the year 25,762 maritime asylum seekers remained in Australia on temporary bridging visas. The total number of temporary humanitarian stay visas granted for the purposes of release from immigration detention is not currently known.

The Minister also granted 64 visas (a decrease from 140 visas in 2013–14 and 435 visas in 2012–13) exercising his personal ‘public interest power’ under section 417 of the Migration Act 1958 to override an adverse decision of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. This significant decrease is despite an increase in the number of requests being made by asylum seekers for intervention (1,955 in 2014–15).

Thus, leaving differences in visa outcomes aside, Australia provided protection to approximately 13,500 Convention refugees in 2014–15 (representing an increase of about 3,500 from last year), the majority having fled persecution in Syria, Iraq, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.