

Australian Candidates Seek to Limit Refugees

Hi there, and welcome back to As It Is. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

You have probably heard of Doctors Without Borders and maybe even Reporters Without Borders. Today we bring you Counselors Without Borders.

But first, we take you to Australia as the country prepares for elections.

Immigration is becoming one of the important themes in the Australian election campaign. Since January, more than 16,000 illegal migrants have arrived in Australia by boat.

The country's two major parties are promising stronger measures to limit these migrants.

But critics say stricter measures hurt people who already need help. In recent months, several boats carrying asylum seekers from Indonesia have sunk. Many people have drowned.

Labor Party Prime Minister Kevin Rudd wants to send asylum seekers who come by boat to a nearby country, Papua New Guinea. He says they will not be able to move later to Australia. His plan, he says, is about saving lives, not winning votes.

“Australians have had enough of seeing asylum seekers dying in the waters to our north and northwest. They’ve had enough of people smugglers profiting from death.”

Mr. Rudd’s opponent is Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott. Mr. Abbott wants to use Australia’s military to stop the boats.

“We are announcing today that under a coalition government that we will swiftly implement Operation Sovereign Borders.”

Many voters across Australia express strong feelings about the government’s plan to stop asylum seekers. Some say those who come by boat to seek asylum are just trying to get ahead of legal immigrants. Others say Australia is a rich nation that should treat asylum seekers more humanely.

“I feel sorry for them because they are coming from third world countries.”

“What about coming by boat? Around here people seem quite angry about that.”

“They shouldn’t be angry. Just put yourself in their shoes. Imagine you were back at their country and they can’t live in their own country. They have got no choice but to come by boat.”

Riz Wakil came to Australia by boat more than a decade ago. He is from Afghanistan. Mr. Wakil now runs a successful printing business in Sydney.

He says the major political parties are not being fair about the issue. Mr. Wakil says the politicians are trying to say that refugees are bad people who are destroying Australian society. Instead, he says, politicians should be trying harder to improve education, retirement programs and other issues that he sees as more important.

The elections are on September 7.

Counselors Without Borders

Fred Bemak and his wife, Rita Chung, are world travelers. But they are not tourists. They are therapists. The two mental health experts are professors at George Mason University in Virginia. They bring emotional support to people recovering from natural disasters, war or long-term abuse. Mario Ritter has the story.

Fred Bemak and Rita Chung have traveled to almost every continent. Since 1982, they have worked in over 55 countries.

Eight years ago, the two worked with survivors of Hurricane Katrina in the southeastern United States. After that, they established a non-profit group called Counselors Without Borders. It works with people living in post-disaster and emergency situations.

Mr. Bemak usually works with a translator. But he says language has never been a barrier because understanding someone's pain goes beyond words.

“When someone is talking and their voice gets low, when someone looks sad, when someone uses inappropriate language, I am always asking the translator, 'Please clarify for me why they just folded their arms and became very tense. Why they raised their voice. Why they seemed to become defensive.’”

Mr. Bemak says he is always surprised at how hungry people are for mental and emotional help. After the major earthquake in Haiti three years ago, for example, he visited a camp where 30 displaced victims were living. There he met a woman who seemed extremely sad.

“She had lost part of her leg. She had refused to get out of bed for the past three months. And she hadn’t changed her clothes. And we sat with her and talked with her about her life, about her feelings about what was happening. At first, she was very resistant, but then she began to talk. At the end of this encounter she was smiling. She sat up, changed her shirt and held her newborn grandchild for the first time and started to come alive.”

Meeting with a counselor can help people in crises to face their losses and fears. Rita Chung recalls the group's trip to Burma a week after Cyclone Nargis hit in 2008. One survivor was a man who had lost his wife and baby.

Ms. Chung said he held his baby very tightly when the waves came in. But when the water went back, he looked down and saw that the child was missing. She said he blamed himself for not holding tightly enough. But she said others in a group said to him, "It is not your fault. The water was so strong that it pulled up trees, and buildings were washed away."

The counselor said the group did an exercise in which the man held onto a stuffed animal while the others pulled very hard. The man came to understand that the storm was too strong for any man to hold onto a child. Ms. Chung said he was able to deal with some of his guilt, and began to heal.

The professors take a group of their students with them on those counseling trips. Involving their students in such activities, Rita Chung says, gives the next generation of counselors a new way to think about their work.

She says they will not just wait in an office for people in crisis to come to them. Instead, they will go out into the community and help wherever it is needed.

I'm Mario Ritter.

And I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

See you next time on As It Is. If you would like to reach us, send an email to learningenglish@voanews.com. Or go to our website at learningenglish.voanews.com and click on "Contact Us."