Bizarre Australia-US refugee swap

In April Australian Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews announced that, in a deal brokered with the US, Australia would ‘swap’ up to 200 refugees every year.

Under the scheme, asylum seekers presently on the island of Nauru will be considered for resettlement in the US, if recognised as refugees. At the same time Cubans and Haitian refugees currently held in Guantanamo Bay will be resettled in Australia. The US is the first government to undertake to resettle a significant number of refugees from Nauru. Kevin Andrews described the move as a deterrent, arguing that “potential resettlement in the US will be a disincentive to those who seek to come to Australia illegally because they have friends here.”

Under Australia’s ‘Pacific solution’, asylum seekers who travel by sea but do not reach the Australian mainland are processed in detention centres run by the International Organization for Migration – under contract to the Australian government – on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. Designed to discourage asylum seekers from making onshore applications, the centres deny refugees access to the Australian legal system. While the Australian government has repeatedly stated that this group would not be permitted access to Australia, approximately 96% of refugees processed through this scheme have ended up in Australia or New Zealand. Clearly, this is a circuitous, potentially damaging and extremely expensive method of processing refugee claimants.

It is hard to understand the logic of the US-Australian announcement from any point of view. The prime driver of refugee policy seems to be border control rather than any concern for the protection of undocumented arrivals. If this is at the cost of due process and human rights it will be ultimately self-defeating.

The refugee protection system can, and must, accommodate unregulated movements of people across borders seeking asylum. To take such extraordinary measures in response to a small group of asylum seekers is undignified and wholly unnecessary. One cannot help but think that the policy is also designed to ‘wedge’ the refugee lobby in Australia by putting up the US as an acceptable location for resettlement: nevertheless it is the process by which Australia arrives at this conclusion which is so damaging. We must begin to look for more sensible and humane options.

David Holdcroft (davidhsj@zipworld.com.au) is the director of the Jesuit Refugee Service, Australia.

Olympic scale of sport-induced displacement

The Olympic Games have displaced more than two million people in the last 20 years, disproportionately affecting particular groups such as the homeless, the poor, Roma and African-Americans. Mega-events such as the Olympic Games often leave a negative housing legacy for local populations.

Researchers from the Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), supported by the Geneva International Academic Network (RUIG/GIAN),1 have studied seven past and future Olympic host cities. Their report shows that little has changed since 720,000 people were forcibly displaced in Seoul, South Korea, in preparation for the 1988 Summer Olympic Games.

In Beijing the authorities are clearing large swaths of residential districts ahead of the 2008 Olympics. 1.25 million people have already been displaced from their homes and it is estimated that a further quarter of a million will be displaced by the time the Games commence in August 2008. These figures do not include the approximately 400,000 migrants living ‘temporarily’ in 171 neighbourhoods in situations of extreme insecurity, having come to Beijing due to lack of livelihood opportunities in rural
areas. Legal representatives and housing rights defenders who oppose or challenge the forced evictions are subject to ongoing intimidation, harassment and, in some instances, imprisonment for their activism. Evictions in Beijing often involve the complete demolition of poor people’s houses. The inhabitants are then forced to relocate far from their communities and workplaces, with inadequate transportation networks adding significantly to their cost of living. In Beijing, and in China more generally, the process of demolition and eviction is characterised by arbitrariness and lack of due process. In many cases, tenants are given little or no notice of their eviction and do not receive the promised compensation. This lack of adequate compensation (or any compensation at all) sometimes leaves the evictees at risk of homelessness and spiralling poverty. The forced evictions are often violent and abuses committed during the eviction processes have multiplied.

The report also addresses the housing impacts of other mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup, World Expos, IMF/World Bank Conferences and even beauty pageants such as the Miss World and Miss Universe contests. It shows how these directly and indirectly cause a number of housing rights violations including forced eviction; rising housing costs (leading to unaffordability of housing); reductions in the provision of social, public and low-cost housing; discrimination against minorities and the poor; criminalisation of homelessness; expropriation of private property; and lack of transparency and exclusion of local residents from participation in decision making.

Already, five years before the 2012 Olympic Games are due to be staged in London, over 1,000 people face the threat of displacement from their homes, and housing prices are escalating. It is clear even at this early stage that construction of the Olympic venues and facilities will disproportionately affect the poor, low-income earners, residents of public housing, and ethnic minorities such as Gypsies and Travellers.

Approximately 2,700 Roma were directly affected by the preparation and staging of the Olympic Games in Athens. For the Roma, the Olympic Games served to aggravate the discrimination and marginalisation they already suffered, leading to further segregation, violent forced evictions and setbacks in their prospects of securing adequate and humane living conditions.

Approximately 30,000 poor residents were displaced from their homes in Atlanta by gentrification, the demolition of public housing, rental speculation and urban renewal projects associated with the Olympics. Around 2,000 public housing units were demolished and nearly 6,000 residents displaced. African-Americans were disproportionately affected by displacements. Criminalisation of homelessness was a key feature of the 1996 Atlanta Games.

COHRE calls on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and other mega-event governing bodies to fully integrate housing rights considerations into the selection criteria used for judging bids to host a mega-event. Organisers must transparently incorporate consideration of housing rights into all aspects of the preparation and staging of events.

Guidelines we have prepared outline opportunities for promoting positive housing legacies to be enjoyed long after events have been staged. These guidelines urge governments, municipal authorities, event organisers, bid committees, and even corporate sponsors, athletes and spectators to:

- assess, monitor and evaluate potential and actual housing impacts of mega-events
- avoid disrupting existing homeless populations
- ensure that staging a mega-event contributes to stable housing markets and delivery of affordable housing
- use mega-events as an opportunity to increase the supply of low-income, public and social housing and improve the existing housing stock
- hold violators of housing rights to account and ensure the availability of remedies for victims.

Jean du Plessis is COHRE’s Acting Executive Director. For further information, contact COHRE’s Media Officer, Radhika Satkunanathan, media@cohre.org. The Fair Play for Housing Rights report, guidelines and background papers on the Olympic Cities studied are at: www.cohre.org/mega-events