

## The boats may have 'stopped', but more refugees are stuck in limbo in Indonesia

Written by The Conversation USA

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Ahead of a regional forum to [combat people smuggling](#) this week, Indonesia has requested that Australia accept more of the growing number of refugees [stuck there in transit](#)

Since Australia enacted its controversial [Operation Sovereign Borders](#) policy in September 2013, more and more refugees are spending longer periods in limbo in Indonesia.

Their lives are put on hold for years – having no rights to work or study – as they wait for resettlement to a country where they can continue their lives.

### After Operation Sovereign Borders

Three months after Operation Sovereign Borders was put in place there were [10,316](#) asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia. By January 2016 that number had reached [13,679](#) – the highest in Indonesia in the last [16 years](#)

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Indonesia is [underfunded](#) and struggles to cope with these increasing numbers.

In February 2014, the average waiting time between registration and the first interview to determine refugee status with the UNHCR was between [seven and 11 months](#). By August 2015, there was a backlog of more than 6000 asylum seekers waiting to be interviewed. The average waiting period had increased to between [eight and 20 months](#)

While the number of asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia increases, the number of places available for resettlement to a third-party country is shrinking.

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Since November 2014, Australia has limited its refugee intake from Indonesia to [450 places per year](#). Previously, Australia had provided places for the majority of refugees in Indonesia, accepting around [two-thirds](#) of all cases between 2000 and 2013. In 2013 alone, Australia accepted [815 of the total 900](#) resettled refugees.

Australia announced in November 2014 that it would not resettle any refugee registered with the UNHCR in Indonesia [after July 1, 2014](#).

At the time, [nearly 2000](#) asylum seekers had already been registered between July and November. By August 2015 a [further 3100](#) had been added to the list.

Refugees in Indonesia will have to hope that countries like New Zealand, Canada and the US increase their intake to compensate for Australia's cuts.

But, as the world faces a global refugee crisis due to the war in Syria, it is becoming much harder to find resettlement places for refugees stuck in Indonesia. While Germany accepted [98 refugees](#) from Indonesia in 2014, it is now overwhelmed by the situation in Europe.

### Transit point

Indonesia is not a signatory to the [Refugee Convention](#), but has long been a transit country for asylum seekers.

At the end of the Vietnam War, Indonesia hosted tens of thousands of Indochinese refugees before their resettlement in countries like Australia, Canada and the US.

In 1999, asylum seekers from the Middle East started using Indonesia as the last transit point

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on a clandestine journey to Australia.

Prior to 2013, the Australian government lobbied Indonesia to intercept and arrest asylum seekers before they left the country by boat for Australia.

The flow of boats to Australia has now all but ceased. There is also little need for interception: asylum seekers have started to surrender themselves to authorities out of destitution.

### Life in transit

While asylum seekers and refugees are permitted to live in the community in Indonesia, the UNHCR is unable to provide any form of support for the majority of them.

In this situation, many quickly become destitute and are forced to “ [sacrifice their freedom for food](#) ” by surrendering themselves to authorities to enter immigration detention. Doing so ensures they will at least have somewhere to sleep and something to eat.

As of January 31, 2015, there were 2237 individuals in temporary interception sites, 2874 in community housing facilities run by the International Organisation for Migration, and 2567 in immigration detention scattered across 13 Indonesian provinces [from North Sumatra to West Timor](#)

Conditions vary from site to site, but overcrowding is a persistent problem. The sites have greatly exceeded the [maximum capacity of detainees](#) . Extortion, lack of access to legal representation and violence [have been reported](#) across detention centres in Indonesia.

The remaining asylum seekers and refugees live independently in the community, typically in Jakarta or Bogor. They arrange their own accommodation and living needs.

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In some ways this is a preferable situation to detention. But the challenges of navigating a new language and culture often leave asylum seekers socially isolated. They are also vulnerable to discrimination and harassment.

Some refugees have responded to this situation by banding together to help one another. The ethnic Hazara population in West Java is a good example. They add structure to their lives by organising regular football games, going to the gym together and teaching one another English.

Most impressive of all is the emergence of a number of education centres and other services, initiated and run by refugees to cater for the specific needs of [their community](#) . These activities help stave off boredom and anxiety, and represent an attempt to carve a normal life out of a difficult situation.

Since Operation Sovereign Borders came into effect, Indonesia has struggled to cope with hosting more asylum seekers and refugees for increasing periods of time. As the Bali Process gets underway this week, a key point of interest will be how Australia responds to Indonesia's recent appeal to accept more of the thousands of refugees living there in limbo.

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*Antje Missbach receives funding from the ARC.*

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/the-boats-may-have-stopped-but-more-refugees-are-stuck-in-limbo-in-indonesia-56152>