For Some, It’s Backdoor or Bust
by Peter Browne

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On ABC Radio the immigration minister, Amanda Vanstone, was in an uncompromising mood. “Look,” she said, “you come in the front door, you get a fair and good treatment.”

She was talking, of course, about the people she calls illegal immigrants, and her message was that the 14 Kurds who came through the “back door” -- Melville Island -- should get back into the queue and wait their turn. If you want to seek asylum in Australia, use the proper channels.

But it’s not as simple as that, as I found out when I visited East Africa earlier this year. In Kenya alone, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is looking after nearly 200,000 refugees. Many of them want to stay in Africa and are waiting for conditions to improve in the countries they’ve fled. But others, facing persecution at home and even in the camps, are faced with confusion and danger -- and not much sign of an orderly queue.

The Kakuma refugee camp in north-west Kenya is one of the world’s most diverse camps. It’s also very big -- about four times bigger than the UNHCR regards as ideal -- and has grown from an emergency camp to a semi-permanent settlement. The region is hot and dry, with year round temperatures in the high thirties.

At the camp I met people from Sudan, Somalia and Burundi who had been living at Kakuma for as long as ten years. To begin with, they’re housed in plastic tents, with little protection from the heat and dust. Until a couple of years ago most of the refugees had to build their own shelters, vulnerable to the flash floods which affect the area. Over 9000 shelters were destroyed during flooding in 2001.

It’s only relatively recently that an organised program of building has given many refugees a small mud-brick house with a corrugated iron roof. But even these can swept away by flooding, and a few weeks after I visited 125 houses were destroyed and three refugees died when floodwaters reached the camp.

With so many people from so many different East African countries forced to live together in this arid environment, with no work and, often, too little food, it’s hardly surprising that violence flares up within the camp, and between refugees and the local Turkana people.

Frustrated at the long wait in the camp, some refugees try their luck in Nairobi, where the UNHCR has its regional headquarters. Here, they are harassed by the notoriously corrupt Kenyan police force and, for several years in the late 1990s, became victims of a group of corrupt staff within the UNHCR itself.
In Nairobi I met Tesfaye, whose experience of political persecution began in Ethiopia over twenty years ago. For a few years as a student in the early 1980s he was a member of an opposition political party, but he left the party and trained as a physical education teacher. Although he’d decided to stay out of politics, he was arrested when another opposition party took power, and tortured repeatedly.

In tears, Tesfaye showed me the marks where melted plastic had been dripped onto his chest to make him confess to violence against the government. “Hundreds of innocent people were killed,” he told me. “I am lucky to be here.”

After years of harassment following his release from prison, Tesfaye escaped to Kenya. But his problems didn’t end there. Corrupt UNHCR staff (all of whom were later sacked) were demanding payments, and only refugees with money could hope to get through the process. With the Kenyan government refusing to allow refugees to make their homes in Kenya and the UNHCR poisoned from within, he was trapped in a limbo. His situation was made more dangerous because agents of the Ethiopian government are known to be active in Nairobi against people like Tesfaye.

Other refugees face different hurdles. Anyone with a significant health problem is automatically excluded by countries like Australia. Australia is also wary of unaccompanied children and some specific nationalities, I was told by a senior UNHCR official, although the government says this is not the case. But the main problem is that the UNHCR is overwhelmed by applications and the neediest people don’t necessarily get the attention they deserve.

“Hit and miss” is how Lena Barrett, who works with refugees in the Nairobi office of the Jesuit Refugee Service, describes the process by which refugees eventually qualify for resettlement. It doesn’t sound much like a queue to me.

Who could blame someone like Tesfaye, or one of the Sudanese or Somalis sitting in the refugee camps for trying another way out of their predicament? And who could blame the 14 Kurds -- members of a long-victimised ethnic group -- for braving the journey to Melville Island?

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