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Desperate wait for refugees in Malaysia

Karlis Salna, AAP South-East Asia Correspondent

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Muhammad Rafique can't deny his hopes have been boosted by the Malaysia deal, but tears well up in his eyes as he explains that 15 years as a refugee have taught him not to be so foolish as to trust such feelings.

On the walls inside the squalid shack where he lives with his wife and young child are a map of Burma and a poster of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The 34-year-old, an ethnic Rohingya who arrived in Malaysia from Burma when he was 19, is desperate to know whether he and his family might be among the 4000 refugees that will be resettled in Australia.

Under the deal signed in Kuala Lumpur on Monday, Australia will resettle 1000 bona-fide refugees a year over four years, in exchange for Malaysia taking the next 800 asylum seekers that arrive in Australia by boat.

But Rafique and his family are just three among more than 90,000 refugees in Malaysia.

"I want to go to Australia with my family. I hope to have a chance to go to Australia," he said.

It's obvious when he speaks that he sees their chances as bleak.

His English is poor and, having been a refugee for his entire adult life, Rafique has no skills.

He believes his chances are even poorer because the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which will have input into who makes it into the 4000, "doesn't like to send Muslim people to Australia".

"I am worried the UNHCR don't want to pick me and my family. I fear the UNHCR will not want to listen to me."

Unlike the 800 asylum seekers that will be transferred from Australia, Rafique has no rights to work or access to education.

He has little access to health care, and like many of the refugees waiting in a long queue in Malaysia, Rafique suffers from anxiety and depression brought on by the parlous life he and his family live, and their uncertain future.

A study by the non-government organisation, Health Equity and Initiatives (HEI), in March this year found that 70 per cent of asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia suffered symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress as a result of human trafficking, forced labour and unemployment.

Xavier Pereira, the director of HEI, said the figure was three times higher than in any normal population.

"Both men and women are equally affected, especially those who are unemployed, involved in human trafficking and forced labour," he said.

The level of anxiety was much higher among those who were yet to be granted refugee status, according to the study of 1074 asylum seekers and refugees, aged between 18 to 70 years.

Rafique has been ripped off by agents that have promised to help with resettlement in another country, and he admits to having paid a people smuggler in a failed attempt to make it to Australia on a boat.

He cannot return to Burma, according to Amnesty International, because as he is from the Rohingya minority, the Burmese authorities would refuse to grant him citizenship, rendering him stateless.

In Burma, he would suffer from systematic persecution, including forced labour, forced eviction, land confiscation, and severe restrictions on freedom of movement.

He says he will now do the right thing and wait, and hope for a chance of resettlement in Australia.

But he says others will still pay people smugglers and get on the boats in a perilous crossing to Australia, despite the deal with Malaysia meaning that within 72 hours, they will be sent back.

"They will still go, whatever chance they have, they must try to go, even if it means they go to the back of the queue," Rafique said.

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