

Viewpoint

Big Profits Drive Booming Trade for People Smugglers

Leighton Cosseboom

A man named Anon looks through the cell bars at the Pontianak detention center.

"We didn't come here for a vacation," he says. "We came here just to save our life."

Anon was one of 250 asylum-seekers being held at the West Kalimantan center during a visit by Melbourne lawyer and refugee advocate Jessie Taylor.

Taylor believes that people smuggling is one of the quickest and quietest growing professions in the world — and Indonesia has found itself at the center of a trade route.

"In order to stop boats from coming, the [Australian] government need only to install a controlled, robust and fair assessment and resettlement process direct from Indonesia to Australia, wiping out the demand for people smugglers," she says.

But until then business will continue to boom, as people smugglers from Pakistan and Afghanistan collect up to \$15,000 per person for transport to Australia via Indonesia from desperate people like Anon.

"Firstly, smuggling is a flexible business. Smugglers will deliver a service that suits the depth of your pocket," says Khalid Koser, deputy director of the Geneva Center for Security Policy.

In a 2009 speech at the Adelaide Festival of Ideas in South Australia, Koser explained how the illegal transport of asylum-seekers was an emerging industry, one which had grown more sophisticated and lucrative over the past few decades.

Mimicking the sales techniques of modern smugglers, he said, "You're a customer, and I'll find a way to get your business. If you're poor, don't worry, we'll find a way to make it work."

Cristina Albertin, the South Asia regional representative for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, says that for smugglers, the risks are still worth the rewards.

"While the profits are high, the criminals — in particular the organizers who drive the business — face little risk of detection and punishment," Albertin told the Bali Process Regional Ministerial Conference in 2011.

"We all recall the shocking Christmas Island boat tragedy, a reminder that smuggling networks prefer methods that minimize their risks, too often at the expense of the safety and lives of the smuggled migrants," she added, referring to a shipwreck that cost the lives of 48 asylum-seekers attempting to reach the Australian territory on an unpowered boat in 2010.

People smugglers are painted in many different lights. Many asylum-seekers "will call smugglers their heroes to whom they will be indebted for the rest of their life,"



Asylum-seekers arrive at the Christmas Island settlement area, where they will be detained for an indefinite period until their refugee status can be determined. Photo courtesy of the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship

says Jack Smit, campaign coordinator of Project SafeCom, a nonprofit association providing a haven for asylum-seekers and refugees in Western Australia.

Meanwhile, others will recall the enormous amounts of money their families were forced to collect in order to make the trip possible.

"Thinking of that, and the sometimes extortion methods used, they will hate the smugglers and call them crooks and criminals," he says.

On average, for a Pakistani or Afghan family to smuggle one person to Australia via Indonesia, the fees equate to 367 percent of the family's annual household income.

At this price, families are usually forced to sell property, hock precious jewels or go into debt with dangerous lenders. As a result of the immense cash flow, the industry of people smuggling has been brought to a new level of organization,

complete with escrow services in Peshawar and Kabul that provide money-back guarantees should smugglers fail.

In the early 2000s, people-smuggling escrow services did not exist. This often led Middle Easterners to make desperate payments to boatmen directly, which

People smugglers collect up to \$15,000 per person for transport to Australia

frequently resulted in losses of great sums of money, leaving families in extreme financial hardships.

"The normal contact usually in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a travel agent. He'll close the door at five o'clock on his business, he'll take you downstairs and he'll start to discuss other issues, more illegal issues perhaps, over the table," Koser explains. "The money is only released by that third party to the smuggler once the migrant has arrived safely."

While this new system has given asylum-seekers and families a little more peace of mind about the otherwise perilous endeavor, it has also meant that smugglers must adapt to the market by bearing a large portion of the financial risk.

According to Koser, they must first pay about 50 percent of the cost upfront to individuals in their network who make the trip possible.

"[The smuggler] needs to find someone who perhaps can supply a stolen or forged passport, who can forge a visa. He needs to pay boatmen, or truck drivers, immigration officials, customs officials and so on," he says.

Only after a successful journey can the smuggler recoup the deficit, and gain a 50 percent profit.

Paying initial costs upfront is risky, particularly if the asylum-seeker plans to travel on a boat to or from Indonesia. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees and the International Organization for Migration acknowledge that many of the boats cannot complete the journey, often due to the crew's lack of necessary maritime knowledge and vessels that are prone to sink.

Apart from the trip itself, the additional stop in Indonesia creates further risk of asylum-seekers being detained by authorities, resulting in smugglers not being paid, and boatmen also risking detention.

Taylor claims that there is further discomfort when asylum-seekers and people smugglers are locked up together.

"This bewilderment turns to despair when smugglers are released after a week or two, and asylum-seekers are left to languish in prison for months on end," she says. "Whether this is brought about by payment of bribes is unclear, but this is certainly the notion held by many of the asylum-seekers."

The Regional Cooperation Framework of the Bali Process states that people smuggling enterprises should be targeted through border security arrangements, law enforcement activities and disincentives for human trafficking and smuggling.

In 2009, the Australian Federal Police received \$48.3 million to tackle people smuggling. According to the AFP, its disruption strategy includes providing actionable intelligence to foreign law enforcement and preventing boat ventures before they depart from Indonesia bound for Australia. The capacity building strategy focuses on developing the Indonesian National Police along with several other law enforcement agencies that deal with people smuggling.

But with families in conflict areas still willing to fuel the industry, this quiet business can only be expected to grow.

Middle Eastern families continue to rely on remittances from smuggled family members to pay off the debts. The average remittance comes to \$3,750 per year.

"This means it is that these people are finding work," Koser says. "Irregular migration wouldn't exist if there wasn't also a demand for their labor."

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