

Year End Message

For many years activists and NGO staff rather unsuccessfully advocated for better policies to help refugees in Hong Kong. We appreciated their efforts, but we felt that we needed a voice for ourselves. No one knows our needs better than we refugees. Perhaps the fact that advocates have so far failed to meet their generally good intentions is influenced by the fact that they have rarely consulted with our people.

During one of many lively meetings at Vision First, when refugees meet freely and share ideas, one fellow jumped on a chair and cried out loudly: *"Why don't we form a union of refugees? Yes, like our own union to let the world know that our rights are not respected in Hong Kong."* There was great excitement to start a union inspired by our own suffering and our own experiences. We wished for a group to collectively express grievances and struggle for the right to exist with dignity as protection claimants in Hong Kong. Our vision quickly became a reality.

Besides viewing Immigration failures with alarm, we refugees feel that public welfare is inadequate, as we are banned from working. The hard facts are that rent assistance is too low to secure basic accommodation, which forces many of us to live in disgusting slums. Present welfare caters for emergency food, but is offered as controlled rations. These are not of our choice (don't believe what they say!), are not fresh and lasts half the period they are intended for.

This year we formed the Refugee Union for a practical reason: we are taking charge of our lives! No one can tell us what to do or say any more. We came to Hong Kong in search of protection, not to indecorously beg for food and shelter. Truly, living conditions were better in our countries from where we would not have fled, if our lives were not in danger.

We are here to proudly inform that with the Refugee Union we have a platform to engage both the government and the public. Refugees have their own best interest at heart, unfiltered, without hidden agendas. We know and understand better the issues and problems that affect our people. Our union is the best suited organization to champion and represent us refugees boldly and fairly.

The Refugee Union was incorporated as a society on 20 October 2014 to further our great mission through upcoming years and decades. Determined before insurmountable odds, we strive to play a significant role in safeguarding and promoting refugee rights that are widely undermined by Hong Kong government and hardly acknowledged by society as a whole.

In the past decade we were deliberately deprived of fundamental rights, silenced into compliance, disabled by unjust policies, oppressed by abusers, maligned by critics and exploited because our status and perceived weakness. One by one we were trapped and victimized. Now united we stand strong and empowered. Henceforth, the individual will stand for the community, the community will protect the individual.

The Refugee Union is determined to speak bluntly against policies, agencies and people who fail to respect our rights and interests. We have nothing to lose because we cannot be pushed lower.

"DONT TREAD ON ME" warned the Gladsden flat that inspires courage in us today as we celebrate the end of a portentous year that changed how refugees are treated in Hong Kong