

25 November 2013

## Report on fraudulent food assistance to refugees

The Social Welfare Department (SWD) objective of providing welfare services to refugees is to ensure, among other goals, that refugees do not live in destitution and are not left 'seriously hungry' pending determination of their claims. Vision First is deeply concerned that SWD has failed this objective. The situation has seriously degraded since ISS-HK altered the food allocation in September 2013. Refugees do not receive sufficient food and, as is widely known, risk working in order to get money to purchase enough food to survive – working being illegal for them.

Vision First urges the government to investigate the quantity, quality and distribution of foodstuff that actually reaches this group. Vision First refugee members call for an urgent review of the current food supply policy that now causes considerable hardship to asylum seekers through the manipulation of food distribution through seven designated shops, as designed and organized by ISS-HK. Attention should be drawn to the following facts:

1. SWD and ISS-HK have stated that each refugee receives 1,060\$ in food assistance per month;
2. In September 2013, the food distribution system was changed to compel asylum seekers to pick up food from 3 times a month to a greater frequency of 6 times a month, with the goal of supplying fresher produce. Since then this has not proven to be the case, though not currently a pressing concern. In reality, the change concealed a reduction!
3. From September 2013 there were sharp shortfalls in monthly food allocations, varying from person to person. Refugees have reported sizable decreases between food collections before and after September 2013. Everyone has experienced different levels of reduction in food supply. Nobody has reported an increase in the amount of food supplied.
4. For example, the staple food supply reductions for before and after September 2013 have proven in many cases to be as follows –
  - from 15 Kg of rice to 7 Kg (NB: nobody receives the previous, higher amounts!)
  - from 3 bottles of oil to 1
  - from 54 eggs to 12
  - from 5 liters juice to 0
  - from 12 oranges to 4
  - from 3 bags of bread to 2
5. If SWD did not instruct ISS-HK to reduce the quantity and value of food distributed, then either:
  - ISS-HK has authorized food supply per person valued over 1,060\$ before September 2013; or
  - ISS-HK has reduced the monetary value of food after September 2013 in contradiction to point 1 above; or

- The designated food distributors have reduced the food supply, taking larger profits for their own business operations.

Refugees complain about reduced food collection quantities at the seven shops. This indicates the problem is not limited to one shop, but more likely reflects a policy change coordinated by ISS-HK. This is corroborated by the shop staff that deflects accusations by saying, "We cannot make any changes. Please ask your ISS case worker." When complaining at ISS-HK, refugees are only offered re-arranged collection dates for the same items and quantities.

Vision First is very alarmed by the significant and sharp decline in value and quantity of foodstuffs distributed to asylum seekers. Several sources confirm that the value of six collections range between 550\$ and 650\$ - a far cry from the 1,060\$ stated publicly by both SWD and ISS-HK. Could the missing 400\$ constitute a reasonable profit? Could this be a conspiracy to defraud? Are the shops cheating ISS-HK or does the scam involve other parties?

Either way, the food does not reach refugee mouths and 1,680,000\$ in tax dollars vanish each month. (400\$ x 4,200 service users).

If the government has allocated 53,424,000\$ a year to ensure refugees are not seriously hungry (1,060\$ x 4200 people x 12 months), then external audits are required to eliminate any profiteering and/or, manipulation of food supply and to expose any criminal activity including conspiracy to defraud. Relying exclusively upon ISS-HK field inspections is inadequate due to possible conflicts of interest and impropriety in the food supply system. Until food coupons are introduced, external audits are essential.

It is redundant to repeat that refugees are prohibited from taking up employment and as such depend entirely on government assistance for their basic material needs. While every claimant has developed individual coping strategies to make ends meet, it is a travesty of justice that many are arrested, convicted and jailed from 15 to 22 months for working to put enough food on their tables to survive, due to insufficient food supply from ISS-HK and the SWD.

It is obvious that refugee complaints reach deaf ears at ISS-HK. It is equally clear that ISS-HK is not sensitive to protest actions and media reports that have recently drawn attention to its many failures. From the outside, it is apparent that the government is unconcerned about refugees being seriously hungry as TVB recently reported that "With regard to the \$1060 food assistance, the government intends to keep it unchanged."

What food value does the government trust ISS-HK to deliver into refugee hands?

While those who are not forced to survive on ISS-HK emergency food, appear content with the status quo, refugees complain daily to Vision First about their plight. It is shameful that in a land of such conspicuous plenty, many human beings – not only refugees – suffer food deprivation. To this end, Vision First is determined to launch a judicial review of the entire welfare system for refugees.

In the meantime, we invite refugees to take photos of their food, write complaint letters to the Hong Kong authorities, gather evidence of these failures and fight for change.

While the segments of society that are directly involved with this community have done little to force change, it is a matter of justice and humanity that those who seek international protection in Hong Kong do not suffer hunger while their asylum claims are evaluated.