

The Big Smog

Edited by Jake Hamilton



Looking forward to a new life
One of the refugee families interviewed for Time Out

CALVIN SI

THE BURNING ISSUE

How we fail our refugees

Hong Kong is often celebrated for protecting asylum seekers and political refugees. But as **Shirley Zhao** reports, the government is now turning its back on their financial needs

Along with his wife and three children, Ruwan has not been able to pay the rent for the past two months. Seven years ago, he and his wife fled war-torn Sri Lanka with their first new-born to Hong Kong, seeking asylum. The Hong Kong office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recognised his wife and children as refugees – but denied his case because, he says, of his insurgent background.

The family rents a flat in Mui Wo, Lantau, for \$4,500 a month. Previously, Ruwan's wife and children, qualified for UNHCR's assistance, received a monthly allowance of \$7,200, including an accommodation subsidy of \$1,200 and an additional \$1,500 per family member for food and other necessities. Yet, even with this allowance, they barely survived.

Since then, matters have gotten much, much worse. The UNHCR stopped providing recognised refugees with an accommodation subsidy from January this year, cutting their monthly allowance

from \$1,500 down to a mere \$300. Ruwan's entire family now survive on a total of \$1,200 a month.

Although the SAR government has taken the responsibility of providing recognised refugees with food, and an accommodation subsidy of \$1,200 (paid directly to the landlord by the government), it is still barely enough to cover the rent. What's more, to receive groceries, Ruwan's wife, who suffers from severe back pain, is required to travel several hours to her food supplier in Yau Ma Tei.

"My wife can't walk for long intervals and she often vomits. Why does she have to suffer? Why am I not allowed to get food for my family?" asks Ruwan. "In Sri Lanka I was tortured physically. Here I'm tortured mentally. They [UNHCR] are splitting my family."

Currently, there are 180 officially recognised refugees residing in Hong Kong and a further 500 asylum seekers and 'torture claimants' with their cases under the process of Refugee Status Determination. All are becoming

increasingly frustrated by the drastic allowance cut by the UNHCR. "What can I do with only \$300 a month? Nothing!" says Aaron, a 28-year-old recognised refugee from Afghanistan. "When I asked why they cut our allowance they said 'it's none of your business'." Aaron was so insulted by the allowance cut, and UNHCR's attitude, that he simply refused to take the money.

Choosin Ngaothepitak, head of UNHCR's Hong Kong and Macau office, tells *Time Out* that they made this decision because of a budget cut, as well as a new co-operation process with the government. According to Ngaothepitak, last year the office received an operational budget of US\$1 million (HK\$7.8m) from the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, while this year the budget has been cut by a further 30 percent to US\$700,000 (HK\$5.4m). "As soon as we knew about the budget cut, we began to step up conversations with the local government. Finally they agreed to provide assistance to the recognised refugees," states

Ngaothepitak. Previously, the government-subsidised assistance programme provided subsidies for food, accommodation and other necessities only to asylum seekers and torture claimants. This year, the government started to include recognised refugees into the programme.

"The government assistance for refugees is fundamental and sufficient already," says Ngaothepitak. "The \$300 allowance we provide is to cover other necessities like phone bills and razors, so that refugees can have an easier life here."

The allowance accounts for 12 percent of UNHCR's budget this year. According to Ngaothepitak, the remainder, which amounts to almost HK\$4.8m, will be spent on hiring staff to handle newcomers' registrations in Hong Kong, the process of Refugee Status Determination, the resettlement of recognised refugees, as well as providing recognised refugees with medical help and necessary counselling. "Our mandate is to provide refugees with international protection that ensures they will not be sent back to their home countries – not to provide direct assistance," he says.

Yet the assistance from the government may not be as sufficient as UNHCR believes. Mohamed, 35, is a recognised refugee from Yemen.

He used to live in a rented flat in Jordan for \$2,500 a month, paid for by his \$1,200 accommodation subsidy and \$1,500 allowance from UNHCR. But this year he was evicted by his landlord because the accommodation subsidy from the government remains at \$1,200, which, combined with the \$300 allowance, could not cover the rent. "Nowadays in Hong Kong, where can you find a flat at \$1,200?" asks Mohamed, who is temporarily staying at Vision First, a non-governmental organisation supporting refugees and asylum seekers. "As soon as they cut the allowance I lost my home."

"The human suffering is the consequence of UNHCR when it decided to cut the refugees' allowance," says Cosmo Beaton, founder and co-ordinator of Vision First. "It (UNHCR) treats refugees with great disrespect. Just because they are refugees, does that mean they deserve to live a sub-standard life?"

Beaton says he noticed that the funding UNHCR raised in Hong Kong had greatly increased in 2010 and last year. "I don't understand how come they claim insufficient budget with ample funding. We sent them requests – but they never answered."

Although he has not yet qualified to receive UNHCR's allowance, Uta, a 36-year-old asylum seeker from Georgia, also disapproves of UNHCR's lack of response. "They must be more accountable on how they spend the money. We want to know because we still have hope for UNHCR. We think it exists to help us. But when we are suffering and begging for our lives, they don't even bother to answer our questions."

Uta tells *Time Out* that UNHCR has requested that all refugees and asylum seekers don't speak to the media without its approval: "They threatened to close our files if we don't do as they require." For asylum seekers, if their files are closed by UNHCR, they can't be recognised as refugees in Hong Kong.

According to UNHCR's Hong Kong fundraising office, it raised a total of HK\$27m last year, almost four times more than that of HK\$7.7m in 2009. Ngaothepitak explains that all funding which the Hong Kong office raised went to UNHCR's headquarters, unless donors required specifically that their donations be used to help refugees in certain regions, in which case the donations would be transferred

directly to the required regions. "Few donors required their donations to stay in Hong Kong," Ngaothepitak specifically tells *Time Out*. "There were none last year."

Ngaothepitak says the UNHCR headquarters plans and allocates budgets to different offices across the world; the amount of budgets will be decided according to the levels of emergency in different regions: "Many crises happened last year. Although the funding raised in Hong Kong had increased significantly, the total global funding was still not enough. The bulk of funding was distributed to regions that needed money the most, like Africa,

Pakistan, Somalia and Libya. Hong Kong is a stronger community and the government has been supportive to the refugees."

Ngaothepitak's view is not shared by human rights lawyer Mark Daly. "The allowance cut is definitely unreasonable," says Daly. "UNHCR is shifting its responsibility on to the government-sponsored programme which is nowhere near adequate to meet international standards."

While Daly thinks UNHCR should take a more active role on behalf of the refugees in its co-operative partnership with the Hong Kong government – and urge the government to create a fairer and more complete system for refugees and asylum seekers – he believes the focus of criticism should be on the government since it doesn't allow refugees and asylum seekers to work in the city. "Refugees and asylum seekers lost important sources to survive by not being able to work here," says Daly. "They can't live by themselves, which is the major cause of all problems. A lot of other countries allow refugees and asylum seekers to work."

"We are allowed to stay. We are allowed to beg. But we are not allowed to work," says Uta. "I don't dream that I have the right to work here – but I want to at least learn some skills and get some certificates so I can have more opportunities when I'm resettled. Yet we are not allowed." *For protection, all names of refugees have been changed.*

DO YOU HAVE AN OPINION?
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We are allowed to stay. We are allowed to beg. But we are not allowed to work

Everybody's talking about... Dirty little secrets and dirty little tricks

What does it take to be a good Chief Executive?

Answer: a good wife. Seriously, how many more times will Mrs Tang have to stand in the spotlight, slap on a grimace, shed out tears and back up her philandering, tycoon-grovelling, basement-hunkering husband? From 'it's all my fault' to 'if I could choose again, I would still marry Henry' – we have this to say: Lisa, you're either the best spouse in Hong Kong and deserve to take your hubby's position in the CE election race, or the best politician in Hong Kong who still deserves to take his place. Oh, and Henry, why does your wife have to constantly weep and publicly forgive your affair(s) and alleged illegitimate offspring on Women's Day? Can't you grow yourself a set and take it like a man?

Then again, what does it take to be a bad Chief Executive? Answer: private trips. Indeed, when our 'get-the-job-done Donald' was spotted dodging cameras in a Macau tycoon-triad banquet, who would have thought his previous 'trips' on a tycoon's private jet and a luxury yacht would be dug out by our omnipresent media to whip the city into a rage, demanding his resignation? When he solemnly announced in public that he would give up his apartment palace developed by a Mainland tycoon in Shenzhen, he never looked so noble! Of course, if he meant to sacrifice himself to help divert attention away from Henry (and he did get that job done), as some media have speculated, then he's surely in the Tycoon Club forever. And given Donald's recent exposure, the news that the government granted him a 400,000sq ft land lot worth HK\$600 million for a price of \$1,000 seems natural to us. That's just what seems to happen nowadays.



The players Clockwise: CY Leung feels penned-in; Donald Tsang gets emotional; and Henry Tang rolls out his weeping wife (again)

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