



Eman Fatimah (left) and her husband Jamil Muhammad regret that the food coupons provided by the government cannot be used to buy baby stuff for their daughter. PHOTOS BY EDMOND TANG / CHINA DAILY

# The long road to asylum

**Sylvia Chang** visited a slum in Tuen Mun to get a glimpse into the lives of refugees on the eve of World Refugee Day, observed on June 20. **Edmond Tang** took the photos.



An old second-hand air conditioner is still running, regardless of the mess around it.



This Halloween doll is emblematic of the sorry state of affairs prevailing in the refugee habitat.

These photos were taken in a slum located in Nai Wai in Tuen Mun, New Territories West. The refugees living there migrated from Pakistan, Nepal, Vietnam and other developing countries. They came to Hong Kong seeking asylum, to escape the dire conditions in their own countries — in the middle of a war or serious political or economic crisis.

The refugees at Tuen Mun live in structures that were originally used for breeding pigs. Most refugees, in their twenties and thirties, live in a four-square-meter room, waiting to obtain a government-issued document — an identity card legalizing their temporary stay in Hong Kong. Usually it takes three years for the Immigration Department to process each application. Some refugees have to wait for eight or nine years.

They can claim HK\$1,500 a month as rent allowance from the International Social Service Hong Kong Branch (ISS-HK) and less than HK\$2,000 for food, transportation and utilities etc, as “humanitarian assistance” from the government. The money is hardly enough to make ends meet, especially for families with very small children or people with illnesses requiring specialized medical care.

As per Immigration Department laws, refugees are not allowed to work in Hong Kong. They could go to jail for 15 months, if found to have taken up employment. Some of them get involved in criminal activities or drug cartels to make a living.

The Refugee Union, a refugee-led society in Hong Kong, will hold a rally at Central on June 20, to mark the World Refugee Day, using the occasion to push for greater social welfare benefits and right to work.



This little girl does not know the taste of an ice cream, as the government-provided food coupons can't buy her any.



Suffyani and her baby live in a four-square-meter room, sharing a kitchen and a restroom with 10 other people. Her husband is in jail for taking up illegal employment.



Ali Jamseed, 25, fled from Pakistan to escape death by hanging, but doesn't see much of a future in Hong Kong.



Most of the electrical equipment used by refugees were picked up from rubbish dumps.