**The Story of Riz Wakil – An Afghanistan Refugee in Australia**

**Written by Zac Darab, aged 14**

What is a refugee? The abstract nature of their representation through the Australian media denies the essential individuality of these people. Refugees are repeatedly presented as a category of undesirable people. They are portrayed in such a way as to incite moral panic in the community – often for political purposes. For instance, frequently it is implied that they are terrorists, smugglers of weapons, drugs or carriers of disease. Perhaps the defining example of this was the Tampa incident and associated events during which it was alleged that refugees were throwing their children overboard.

Who could forget the Australian government suggesting that theses people were somehow lesser human beings than those we would welcome in Australia? Although the allegations were eventually revealed as a political stunt, the impoverished view of refuges was not corrected. In light of this, I saw it as being very important to put a human face to at least one of these displaced people and have him inform others of his story and experiences about being a refugee.

After hearing Riz Wakil speak at a public meeting on Australian refugee policy, I was so moved that I wanted other Australians to hear what it means to be a refugee in Australia in 2002. Riz is a refugee who comes from the province of Hazra in central Afghanistan. He currently resides in Sydney. When I contacted Riz about interviewing him, he was delighted to be chosen and have the opportunity to explain his situation.

I feel humbled and honoured to have met Riz Wakil. At only 22 years of age, he had endured such incredible hardship and, at the time of the interview, he continued to be under pressure from the Immigration department. Despite his personal turmoil, he welcomed me into his home and treated me to his hospitality.

Riz’s story of becoming an asylum seeker began when he was eighteen years of age. HE said: “Unfortunately in Afghanistan we are bon in a war-torn country. We had no opportunity to go to school and get even basic education. It was an official sentence from the authorities in Afghanistan that Hazara people are not allowed to study.”

Riz went on to explain that the Hazara people had been oppressed long before the Taliban took control. ‘We, the Hazara, are the third minority group and we have been badly treated for centuries,’ His community was excluded from the social goods like education and access to medical resources, Riz said, because they were not of the highest socio-economic status, and they were seen as inferior to the ruling party, the Pashtu.

Riz was forced to leave his country and his family to try and find a better quality of life elsewhere. His journey, however, was not easy. ‘We didn’t have nay proper documentation because the country was destroyed and there was no one to supply us with proper documentation, so it was illegal to leave Afghanistan. When we left Afghanistan, I spent a few weeks in Pakistan just to get the proper travel document and after that I cam to Indonesia. Everything was arranged and after that I spent about six weeks in Indonesia before catching the boat.’

He did not have the luxury of coming to Australia by plane, instead he cam y a ‘leaky boat’. There was 73 people on that tiny little fishing boat, sixty Afghans and thirteen Iraqi refugees including two kids an done family.’ Shoulder-to shoulder, no facilities, no room to stretch or to lie down, no privacy for personal ablutions and the constant fear of being swamped in the rising swell. Nor did the fear subside when they reached Australian waters. They didn’t allow us to land on Ashmore Reef Island,. They kept us on the boat. After two days navy official came out. We said, We are sick and we are having medical problems, you should help us. “ The only answer we get from the officer, he said, “Next time try to catch a plane. Don’t come by boat.” He didn’t have any sympathy for the people. It took them another two days to bring us from Ashmore Reef Island to Broome.”

This is the greeting that Riz received when he arrive in Australia. Coming from a land-locked country, it was only recently that Riz and most of the passengers had actually seen the ocean, let alone sailed across it in a tiny vessel. They were traumatised from their journey. For all the refugees who had fled their countries because they were so poorly treated, it must not have felt so different when they arrived in Australia. In Broome, Riz was told that his application would be processed within forty-five days. He was then escorted to Curtin Detention Centre where he received a basic health check and was searched to ensure that he was not bringing anything illegal into the country. Riz was then taken into detention where he remained for nine months.

Curtin Detention Centre used to be an air force base but has since been converted into a detention centre. After his extended period of incarceration, Riz was ecstatic to hear that he was allowed into the community. He was issued with a temporary visa, which invalid for 36 months. The sense of freedom he experienced when learning of his release faded somewhat when Riz learned what temporary visa meant for him.

“I found out that from a small detention centre, I am now in a bigger detention centre. I cannot meet one of my family members. I cannot go out of Australia if I ever want to re-enter. IT doesn’t matter if anything happens to your family back there, I cannot go and visit. For me this is an imprisonment as well.”

On a temporary visa, Riz cannot move forward, nor can he go back. He cannot return to Afghanistan because his life was so poor over there and the country is now at war. Nor can he move forward and establish his life in Australia because with temporary status, his future is very hazy. Also he feels incredibly sad about the hardship his family is experiencing. Riz said ‘My family members are desperate to get out of Afghanistan but I am not allowed to sponsor them and I am not allowed to bring them here.” On a brighter note, however, Riz is allowed to work, and he says that ‘definitely the majority of refugees on protection visas, they are working.’

Another major concern for Riz was that he could not study in Australia. Under the condition of a temporary visa, in order to study he would have to pay international student fees. “One of my friend, he is paying I think $18,000 per annum for a basic computer course and now because his visa is going to expire, he cannot concentrate on his study.’ For Riz this is a no win situation. He is excluded from the benefits that Australians take for granted. Riz explains that he can understand why he did not get an education in Afghanistan, but now in Australia because of the government policy concerning temporary protection visas, once again he is not allowed to study.

Riz recounted that before September 11, 2001, it was possible to apply for a permanent residence in Australia. However, after this date the laws regarding visas changed. His visa is now forever temporary and he cannot apply for permanent protection. Riz said, ‘The Immigration department says very, very clear in that letter that we have to come and convince Immigration department because Immigration thinks that in Afghanistan everything is all right. IT is all right for refugees to go even though it’s not safe for Australian tourists to go.”

Is Riz’s life less valuable than the life of an Australian citizen? Riz is a productive member of the Australian community. He is currently working in a printing company. He is paying taxes, paying rent, consuming goods and services, and generally contributing to the Australian economy. “In free time, I am working with the refugee organisations to do something for the people inside detention centres, and to help people who are desperate to go to another country; and for those already in the community on a temporary visa.” Even under threat of deportation, Riz is generous in giving his time to help others. He is industrious, law abiding and community-minded, as well as being keen to learn to acquire new skills.

If Riz is forced to return to Afghanistan, he will face persecution. He stated,

“When we were there our struggle was not only to get rid of Taliban, our struggle was for a secular society which gives all the minorities, the religious minorities, the ethnic minorities, the proper representation and proper rights in Afghanistan. And this is a threat for the Islamic fundamentalist government. So that’s why I think for us even they have not destroyed Taliban yet. I don’t believe the have destroyed Taliban. They are underground and they are working. As we see in the news that there are attacks, even on the President. There are attacks on the US forces, on the civilian properties and civilian people.”

If Riz stays in Australia, it is quite likely that he will also face racist attitudes here. He believes that people have nothing personal against him but the government has put out so much propaganda against refugees. He believes that the government’s current policies are racist and extremely detrimental to him a nd people in similar positions.

“And now I think while I am in Australia, I didn’t achieve anything. I had fear for my life in Afghanistan and I have fear for my life in Australia as well. I don’t know what will happen after thirty months. So I cannot do anything. Still I am afraid what will happen. The other thing, we have been targeted by the ethnic majorities and we have been targeted by racism here. When we go outside and introduce ourselves as Afghans, all the people here, because of the propaganda, the think all the people from the idle East, they are terrorists and they are harmful for the society.”

You now know Riz Wakil’s story. AT the age of 22, he has experienced intense disadvantage, which is unimaginable to me and to most Australians. He has been persecuted, faced heavy seas in a tiny fishing boat, been incarcerated and conferred a temporary status in a country renowned for giving people a fair go. Despite all this, Riz continues to strive for freedom but his visa is now limited to four months. He has proved himself to be hard working in improving his job skills, perfecting his English and spending his time helping other refugees. Riz would be an asset to our country. I would appeal to the Australian people to lobby for Riz and other refugees who have fled war-torn countries. In the war against terrorism, Riz is a victim and he needs our support.