
Book Review

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Troubled Transit: Asylum Seekers Stuck in Indonesia

by: Antje Missbach

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Antje Missbach's book *Troubled Transit* is a timely study which contributes to a better understanding of the international refugee problem in South-East Asian context. The book is about the little known plight of refugees from a number of Asian and African countries who are, while on their way to Australia to seek asylum, stranded in Indonesia for years, with most of them never getting to their desired destination. The refugees mostly hail from Somalia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, countries which were 'conflict areas' forcing many to seek re-settlement in faraway lands for mere survival. These people, whom Missbach terms transit migrants, arrived in Indonesia as migrants who left their respective countries of origin to go to Australia or decided to do so once they were in Indonesia. Their journeys were halted there and they were eventually forced to live in Indonesia as refugees eternally waiting for an opportunity to leave for Australia. With a large body of information gathered from interviews and interactions with such refugees and a number of Indonesian policemen, the book offers a detailed exposition and analysis of the reasons and motives behind transit migration, the lives of migrants caught in transit, Indonesian policies regarding migration, their implementation and comparison with global standards set by the UNHCR, the impact of Indonesian-Australian foreign relations on the migrants, and people smuggling to Australia by transit migrants from Indonesia.

Indonesia is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 or the 1967 Protocol. Yet, it emerged as a destination for refugees after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and became host to the displaced Vietnamese who were given asylum in Galang, a place which got wide publicity till early eighties. In the 1990s, migrants from countries like Iraq, Pakistan and later still Afghanistan started trickling into Indonesia. Faced with harsh conditions and the ever-present fear of deportation or detention there they sought to migrate to Australia, a wealthier country with a relatively small population. A turning point in this regard came after attack on World Trade Towers with Australia's adoption of new policies in 2001 called 'Pacific Solution' which revoked the right of refugees arriving on ships or boats to seek asylum in the country. Coupled with heightened border protection all along Australian coastline the new policy had the consequence of halting migrants in Indonesia while they were in transit to Australia.

Transit migrants, thus forced to live in Indonesia, are routinely detained and repeatedly arrested by Indonesian authorities as soon as the validity of their visas expire. Those housed in immigration centres suffer at the hands of an indifferent and hostile staff, who are callous to their problems, extort hefty bribes from them and physically abuse them. Indonesian law gives no rights to migrants without valid documents making them vulnerable to such abuse, they are not allowed to work, those few who receive dole find it insufficient to make ends meet, others are forced to find livelihood as casual labourers and at times even as sex workers. The UNHCR and the IOM offer them, what Missbach terms 'semi-protection' in the name of legal and material assistance. On top of it, Indonesian Government's refusal to accept Australian Government's offer to screen migrants in Indonesia for transit to Australia diminishes their chances of ever leaving the country. In recent years, conditions have further worsened for them as new Indonesian laws criminalise foreigners without valid papers. This has increased corruption in the Indonesian police and other security agencies, and has in turn compelled transit migrants to take to illegal maritime voyages to Australia risking their lives. Indonesian politicians not only make no effort to find a definite solution to the problem through legislation, they have sought to exploit the growing number of refugees to whip up xenophobia. International relations between Indonesia and Australia have time and again soured over the issue of asylum seekers since 2001. Australia's high handed approach to transit migration and her repeated attempts at trying to intervene in Indonesian administration for framing of policies which serve her interests are main reasons behind this. Successive Australian Governments have repeatedly turned back refugees following Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to let migrants arriving on Norwegian ship Tampa to set foot in his country in 2001. Australian media and its political establishment casts transit migrants in very poor light and often as a threat to national security. Beleaguered from all sides and stranded in transit for years, migrants in Indonesia turn into people smugglers, as it is often the only means left to them for livelihood.

With such carefully gathered empirical information the book offers a convincing narrative on the manner in which states hostile to migrants from Asian and African countries ravaged by conflict, like Australia, and those without a legal apparatus and wherewithal to play host to an increasing flow of poor migrants, like Indonesia, make finding asylum impossible for refugees. For specialists in refugee studies and international migration the book provides a welter of empirical knowledge and challenging new insights. It shows how foreign relations between two countries who are not enemies can create a refugee problem. The ethnographic detail of lives and experiences of a number of transit migrants is the greatest strength of the study, which amounts to highly valuable eyewitness accounts and oral testimonies of – their suffering daily humiliation and horror at the hands of the police and other security personnel, being forced to live on the verge of starvation and narrowly escaping death during abortive attempts to reach a hostile country in search of a better life.