

**Hong Kong Human Rights Commission  
Society for Community Organization  
New Immigrants Mutual Aid Association  
Voices of the Rights of Asylum Seekers and Refugees**

**Comments on the Government's outline of the  
Second Report under the Convention on the  
Elimination of All Forms of Racial  
Discrimination**

**Submission to Panel on Home Affairs**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper presents our views on the Outline of the Second Report of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). It aims to suggest topics and problem areas that should be addressed in the government's report under the ICERD.

## **2. Article 2: - Policy of eliminating racial discrimination**

### **2.1 Problems related to the proposed Bill against Racial Discrimination**

The Race Discrimination Bill was introduced into the Legislative Council on 13 December 2006. While welcoming the fact that bill has been finally introduced, it is important to stress that it suffers from major problems, and does not protect ethnic minorities adequately against racial discrimination or promote equality. The following areas can be mentioned:

#### **2.1.1 New immigrants from mainland China excluded**

It is very unfair that the government already from the outset is determined not to include new immigrants from Mainland China in the law as a protected group, although discrimination against new immigrants from mainland China by local people is severe. The government must recognize that new immigrants equally face racial discrimination from local people. The government argues that new immigrants are no different from the local Chinese, but in fact the government does distinguish them through different policies. New immigrants from Mainland China do not enjoy the same treatment as the local Hong Kong permanent residents under the Government policies. The rights to political participation and welfare are only enjoyed by the Hong Kong permanent residents with 7 years residence or above. Also, according to SoCO's survey in 2004, 91.2% of the new immigrants expressed that they had been racially discriminated against.

#### **2.1.2 Language discrimination is exempted in the bill**

Hong Kong has a legal obligation to legislate against language discrimination: Article 2(2) of the ICESCR<sup>1</sup> and Article 1 of the Bill of Rights already state that the rights must be exercised without discrimination as to "race, colour, sex, language, religion [...] national or social origin."

In the proposed race discrimination bill, the government makes it lawful in various areas to refrain from facilitating communication with ethnic minorities who do not speak Chinese or English. According to the bill, the failure to use a specific language in areas such as training, education, provision of goods, services and facilities, disposal of premises or access to clubs, is *not* illegal.

However, according to statistics published by the Home Affairs Bureau<sup>2</sup> only 11.2%

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<sup>1</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

<sup>2</sup> AC Nielsen 2000: *Omnibus Household Survey in the Fourth Quarter of 1999 (Characteristics of the Ethnic Minorities) Prepared for the Home Affairs Bureau*, Hong Kong.

of the ethnic minorities are fluent in Chinese, while only 60.4% claim to be fluent in English. Thus the rest are not fluent in the official languages of Hong Kong. The fact that so many do not speak English or Chinese means that the government must adapt the bill to the special circumstances of Hong Kong and thus make discrimination based on language unlawful.

Additionally, article 2 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) imposes on the government a duty to implement special measures in order to ensure that ethnic minorities have equally enjoy human rights. Thus: “States Parties shall [...] take, in the social, economic, cultural and other fields, special and concrete measures to ensure the adequate development and protection of certain racial groups [...] for the purpose of guaranteeing them the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms”. The lack of special measures, such as interpreter services, from the side of the government thus means that *indirect discrimination* is taking place, because particular racial or ethnic groups are put at a disadvantage.

### **2.1.3 No special measures obligation**

The proposed Race Discrimination Bill does not impose on public authorities a positive duty to promote equality. This duty however, already exists in race legislation abroad, such as in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. A positive approach may take form as a positive duty on a public sector employer or a service provider to promote equality of opportunity, or e.g. a requirement to monitor the progress of employing ethnic minorities. There are at least three main areas where special measures should be taken to ensure equality, namely in employment, hospital services and the educational sector.

### **2.1.4 Religious discrimination excluded**

Discrimination based on religion has not been included in the bill. Protection against racial discrimination based on religion must be specifically mentioned in the bill given the presence of religious minorities, because there is often an overlap between religious and racial identities, especially among minorities who are religiously visible such as Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims.

### **2.1.5 Exception for companies with less than six employees**

The government has announced that several exemptions will apply to the future race discrimination law. Among these, there is a three-year exemption for small businesses or employers with less than six employees. Ethnic minorities who work in small businesses such as restaurants, salons, shops etc. report being discriminated against. These groups need also to be protected. They receive lower wages or have worse working conditions than their Chinese counterparts solely because of their race. However, Hong Kong already has 3 discrimination ordinances in place, which the businesses have had plenty of time to accommodate themselves to. Furthermore the government already published a *Code of Practice Against Discrimination in Employment on the Ground of Race* in 1998, which means that the businesses already have had time to get to know the principles of non-discrimination in employment. Thus the government should make the exemption period as short as possible.

## **3. Article 5 – Guarantees of rights of everyone without distinction as to race,**

## **colour, or national or ethnic origin**

### **3.1 Article 5(a) - Justice/Law Enforcement Agencies**

#### **Ethnic minorities**

The outline of the report does not mention the issue of racial discrimination as practised by the police. Aside from a short notice about the possibility of complaining against police to the Complaints Against Police Office (CAPO), the Report does not mention the many problems that ethnic minorities face in their encounters with the staff of the Police Force or the Correctional Services Department (CSD).

A study indicates that the police attitude towards ethnic minorities is often rude or discriminatory. 22% of those stopped by police and 33 % of those asking for help state that the police maintain rude and discriminatory attitudes<sup>3</sup>. The police had approached more than half the respondents (59%) for ID checks<sup>4</sup>. Such consistent monitoring of ethnic minorities is only able to take place due to ethnic minorities' stigmatization and stereotyping as being associated with crime.

The government should include in its report information on measures taken to address the problem of racial discrimination by the police and the staff of the CSD.

### **3.2 Article 5(d) – Civil Rights**

#### **New immigrants**

The Immigration Ordinance requires applicants from the Mainland to apply for immigration to Hong Kong by the One-way Entry Permit in cooperation with the Chinese Authority. Following amendment of the immigration ordinance in July 1997<sup>5</sup>, mainland children, regardless of their status as holders of right of abode, not only have to apply for a One-way Entry Permit, but also for the Certificate of Entitlement from both sides of the governments.

However, at present, the approval of the One-way Entry Permit de facto rests solely with the Chinese Government and the system has come in for severe criticism over corruption, and the lack of transparency and uniform standards. As a consequence, the applicants, the majority being spouses or children, have to wait for more than 5 years to join their families in Hong Kong, the long separation causing major disruptions and problems for the families.

In contrast, overseas children having the right of abode in Hong Kong can apply for the Certificate of Entitlement either through the Chinese Consulates or the

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<sup>3</sup> Society for Community Organization, Hong Kong Racial Discrimination Study Series II: Ethnic Minorities. (Hong Kong: 2001). This is also confirmed by case studies of police officers that admit that the police force has discriminatory attitudes towards ethnic minorities.

<sup>4</sup> Society for Community Organization, Hong Kong Racial Discrimination Study Series II: Ethnic Minorities (Hong Kong: 2001)

<sup>5</sup> Article 24 (3) of the Basic Law states that the permanent residents of Hong Kong shall be persons of Chinese nationality born outside Hong Kong of those Chinese permanent residents in Hong Kong. The children given birth by Hong Kong Chinese permanent residents could immigrate to Hong Kong by the One-way Entry Permit issued by the Chinese and Hong Kong Authorities. However, after the handover in 1997, the Immigration Department changed the Immigration Ordinance in July 1997, by which the immigration of the children in the Mainland born by the Hong Kong Chinese permanent residents ought to be approved by having the One-way Entry as well as the Certificate of Entitlement.

Immigration Department by post. Non-mainland women, who marry with Hong Kong permanent residents, can even directly send their application to the Immigration Department during their stay in Hong Kong. Generally, both groups' application can be approved within one month, especially when the spouses pass the financial status assessment.

### **3.3 Article 5 (e)(i) – right to work**

#### **Labour Department**

Studies show that both new immigrants and ethnic minorities suffer from discrimination during job-seeking. More than 30% of new immigrants have been rejected for employment or in interviews merely due to their new immigrant status<sup>6</sup>. For ethnic minorities 18% have been rejected on the grounds of language although the job nature did not require spoken or written Chinese. A study also reveals 27% of ethnic minorities have been rejected when the employer learnt that the person was not Chinese/Western<sup>7</sup>.

Despite the lack of official evidence from the Census and Statistics Department, indicators from existing wage studies nonetheless reveal that the median monthly income of the groups concerned is lower than the overall Hong Kong population. The median monthly income for the overall Hong Kong population is HK\$10,000<sup>8</sup>. However, for new immigrants the median monthly employment earnings is HK\$6000<sup>9</sup>. Lastly for ethnic minorities it is HK\$3800<sup>10</sup>. These figures reveal clearly that the groups concerned have a much lower economic status compared to the overall Hong Kong population.

A study of ethnic minorities reveals that they receive lower salaries (41%) and have longer working hours (38%) than other races on the same job level. The same applies to new immigrants who are subject to longer working hours, lower wages and poorer benefits than their counterparts in Hong Kong<sup>11</sup>.

However, when seeking jobs through the Labour Department, ethnic minorities often feel that government front line workers and institutions will use language as an excuse for not providing services. For instance many minorities have not been able to find a job through the Labour Department because the worker told them that they could not help them find a job if they couldn't speak Chinese or because the information on vacancies was provided in Chinese. In a survey released by SoCO, only 7.4% of the ethnic minorities who had approached the Labour Department to search a job could

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<sup>6</sup> Society for Community Organization, Hong Kong Racial Discrimination Study Series I: New Immigrants from the Mainland (Hong Kong: 2001)

<sup>7</sup> Society for Community Organization, Hong Kong Racial Discrimination Study Series II: Ethnic Minorities (Hong Kong: 2001)

<sup>8</sup> Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong, Quarterly Report on General Household Survey, January to March 2000 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government, 2000), table 9A.

<sup>9</sup> Census and Statistics Department, Special Topics Report No. 25 Social Data collected via the General Household Survey (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government, May 2000), 35.

<sup>10</sup> ACNielsen, Omnibus Household Survey in the Fourth Quarter of 1999 (Characteristics of the Ethnic Minorities) Prepared for Home Affairs Bureau. (Hong Kong: 2000)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

find a job through these means.

The government should state in its report what measures it has taken to provide multi-lingual employment services.

### **3.4 Article 5(e)(iv) The right to medical care**

Many ethnic minorities have reported that they do not receive adequate health care from the public hospitals. In fact, accessing hospital services is a major problem as interpreters are seldom provided so that some have to rely on unprofessional interpreters or even refrain from seeking medical care.

A survey by SoCO in February 2004 revealed that more than 1/3 of ethnic minorities has communication problems with hospital staff, and that they cannot fully express their problems to the staff. It is not only those who do not speak Chinese who have problems. Even those who have English as their second language face various difficulties.

The right to health care is a human right. According to the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) every person has the right to receive public medical services (article 5(e)(iv)). However, when smooth communication between patient and staff is not provided, the government is eventually barring ethnic minorities from getting optimum health care on an equal basis with Chinese people.

The government should state in its report what measures it has taken to ensure that all public hospitals provide interpretation services and whether it has taken any measures to inform ethnic minorities of the interpretation services.

### **3.5. Article 5(e) (iii): Right to Housing**

Both new immigrants and ethnic minorities face discrimination when they seek accommodation. According to a study by SOCO, 35% of new immigrant respondents experienced rejection by landlords. According to the respondents, the major reason for the refusal was the presence of newly arrived children (82.1%). Therefore, they find it difficult to rent a place (92.9%) and to improve their living conditions (57.1%)<sup>12</sup>. For ethnic minorities, 30% experienced rejection by landlords on spurious grounds.

#### **New Immigrants**

Hong Kong Government's residence rule in the allocation of public housing constitutes institutionalized discrimination against the right to equal access to housing for the new immigrants. The existing residence rule requires half of a household to have a minimum of 7 years residence in Hong Kong by the time of allocation. As a result, applications of more than 8000 new immigrants, who fail to meet this criterion, are frozen. It is because most of them are single-mother or new immigrant families. Denial of housing rights due to the discriminative rule is confirmed by a SOCO study, in which 45.6% of the respondents said they were barred from access to public

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The Baseline Research did not cover the three other nationality groups of FDWs, Sri Lankans, Nepalese and Indians. Systematic research has not been undertaken comparing wages of these nationalities, but it is widely known among migrant-support groups that they share similar conditions of underpayment and maltreatment as Indonesian FDWs.

housing as a result of failure to meet the residence requirement<sup>13</sup>.

As a result, since most of the new immigrant families are very poor, they can only afford to seek accommodation in cage-homes, cocklofts, cubicles and rooftop huts. The deprivation of housing rights causes lots of problems among families living in congested conditions.

### **3.6 Article 5 (e) (iv): Right to Social Welfare**

The Hong Kong SAR Government imposed 7 years residence rule in the criteria of accessing to public assistance<sup>14</sup> in its strategy of new population policy in 2004. These rules created more obstacles for new immigrants to integrate into the society and cannot receive proper assistance whenever they are in need. Although children can access to public assistance, but their parents cannot access to public assistance.

According to the Statistic from the Social Welfare Department, there were 1665 new immigrant applicants in 2004. Only 230 applications were permitted. 1299 cases were considered as self-withdrawal. In 2005, there were 3856 new immigrant applicants. Only 856 applications were permitted. 2892 applications were considered as self-withdrawal. SoCO found that many applicants were persuaded by the Social Welfare Department to sign that they self-withdrew their application although they urgently need financial assistance. Besides, it took a few months or even one to two years for the applicants to wait for the assessment of application of CSSA. The waiting is unreasonable comparing to normal one month waiting of general application of CSSA. It made the applicants, most of them are single parent mother and her children suffer as there is very few emergency assistance to the applicant in the waiting period. Most of the situation is that mother and the children share one person's public assistance. The policy hinders the poverty-stricken new immigrants to receive CSSA, and pushes them into deeper water.

The government should state in its report whether there are any measures to support families living in poverty without access to social security.

## **4. Special groups:**

### **Asylum seekers**

The particularly vulnerable situation of asylum seekers should receive special attention in the government's report under the ICERD. Below are a number of issues that should be highlighted.

#### **4.1. Number of asylum seekers**

There are currently 1,800 persons in Hong Kong who seek asylum under the International Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention). 78.4% are from Asia, 21.2% from Africa and 0.4% from other continents. 17% of the asylum seekers are female.

An asylum seeker is someone who seeks protection under the Refugee Convention to

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<sup>13</sup> Society for Community Organization, Hong Kong Racial Discrimination Study Series I: New Immigrants from the Mainland (Hong Kong: 2001)

<sup>14</sup> Public Assistance is named as Comprehensive Social Security Assistance(CSSA).

be recognized as a refugee. A refugee is someone who has been recognized to be unable to return to his country because he has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, as defined in article 1 of the Refugee Convention.

#### **4.2. Refugee convention not signed**

While China and Macao have already ratified the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which now already have 145 States Parties, the Convention has not yet been extended to Hong Kong. The lack of any refugee law means that asylum seekers are left without any basic means of living, including food and shelter and are subject to detention and deportation.

In the concluding observations of the Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (E/C.12/1/Add.107) May 2005, the Committee expressed concern "that HKSAR lacks a clear asylum policy and that the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, to which China is a party, are not extended to HKSAR. In particular, the Committee regrets the position of the HKSAR that it does not foresee any necessity to have the Convention and the Protocol extended to its territorial jurisdiction."

The Committee has recommended that the "HKSAR reconsider its position regarding the extension of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol to its territorial jurisdiction, and that it strengthen its cooperation with UNHCR, in particular, in the formulation of a clear and coherent asylum policy based on the principle of non-discrimination."

#### **4.3. No coherent asylum policy**

The lack of any local asylum policy means that asylum seekers do not receive proper protection by the government. There is a need to deal with their right to not be arbitrarily detained, not to be deported, right to food and accommodation, right to education and medical care.

Firstly, when asylum seekers seek to renew their visas because they are making claims of asylum, the Immigration Department ignores their asylum claims and denies them a renewal of visas and asks them to return to their countries of origin. The result is that asylum seekers are forced to live illegally in Hong Kong, always being at risk of being detained for overstaying their visas. However, seeking asylum is not a crime, and the government should issue legal identity documents to people who are on its territory to seek protection of their lives.

In fact the government's lack of planning and coordination between departments was clearly shown when 13 asylum seekers living in a government supported shelter were arrested on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2006 by the police because they did not have any immigration papers. Thirdly, there are still children who are unable to attend school because fear approaching the government. This clearly is an infringement on the rights of the child to receive education. The government must immediately deal with the problems faced by these destitute people instead of turning a blind eye to their fates.

#### **4.4 Hong Kong needs its own refugee status determination mechanism**



Currently there is no refugee status determination system set up by the Hong Kong government to deal with their claims, and the government says that it has no obligation to set up such a system and relies on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to process their claims. However, the UNHCR does not provide adequate protection to asylum seekers and in fact UNHCR only accepted 10% of the asylum seekers as refugees during 2005. This figure is highly disturbing and many asylum seekers are rejected without having access to a fair refugee status determination mechanism.

In March 2006 the UN Human Rights Committee asked the HKSAR to establish an appropriate mechanism to assess the risks faced by individuals expressing fears of being victims of grave human rights violations in the locations to which they may be returned. The committee is thus concerned about the absence of adequate legal protection and has asked the government to set up its own mechanism. However, the government has turned a blind eye to the recommendations of the Human Rights Committee and in fact it has stated that it has a firm policy of not granting asylum.

The need for the government to urgently set up its own mechanism is shown in the results of our survey of 100 asylum seekers called "Survey of the UNHCR HK's Refugee Status Determination Mechanism" (July 2006). It reveals severe problems of the UNHCR's system and that the HK UNHCR does not observe its own procedural guidelines published September 2005.

### **Main findings of the survey**

- *Asylum seekers are denied right to legal representation by the UNHCR*

According to UNHCR guidelines applicants may be accompanied by a legal representative during the interviews. However, in 91% of cases, UNHCR never informed the asylum seekers about this right, and UNHCR never allows lawyers to be present during the interviews. This seriously infringes on the right to legal representation.

- *UNHCR only conducts very short interviews before rejecting cases*

The UNHCR guidelines instruct the interviewers to provide adequate time to the asylum seekers to present their cases. However, the UNHCR rejects cases even though the applicants did not get enough time to present their case. In fact 61% of the asylum seekers say that they were not allowed to make a full account of what happened to them in their country.

- *Interpreters are not always provided, and the quality of interpretation is highly questionable*

The survey shows that many asylum seekers were highly unsatisfied with the interpretation. 41% of the respondents felt that the interpreter only summed up what they said. The bad quality of interpretation denies the asylum seekers the opportunity to clearly explain their claims and to make a well-presented claim.

- *No detailed documentation of case is given to the applicant*

According to the UNHCR guidelines, the interviewer should read back major important points of the interview transcripts. However, 88% were not asked to agree on the major points of the interview and 98% were not given a copy of the interview transcripts. Thus the applicant has no access to check whether the UNHCR makes a

faithful recording of his account of what happened.

- *No detailed written reasons for refusal are given*

According to UNHCR guidelines rejection letters should permit the rejected applicant to understand the details of the reasons why he has been rejected, so that he is able to make an appeal focusing on relevant facts and issues. However, in 81% of cases the respondent did not receive a detailed written reply about the reasons for refusal of his case. The practice of the UNHCR is to simply give a verbal explanation. However, it is highly difficult to make an informed appeal based on a verbal explanation from the UNHCR. The results show that 64% say it was difficult to make an appeal because they couldn't remember all the reasons for the rejection.

- *Uncomfortable questioning by UNHCR officers*

According to UNHCR guidelines, the interview should be conducted in a non-confrontational manner. However, the attitude of the interviewers reveals a hostile environment in which 72% of the applicants say that they felt uncomfortable during the interviews. The hostile environment makes the asylum seekers uncomfortable making their claims and many feel as if they are being interrogated.

- *UNHCR does not have a regular complaint mechanism*

According to the guidelines UNHCR should have a procedure to receive and respond to complaints. However, it seems that no systematic mechanism is in place to deal with such complaints. 37% had made a complaint, but of these 69% did not get any reply from the UNHCR about the complaint. The lack of any complaints mechanism makes it difficult for asylum seekers to have their cases reassessed if any procedural unfairness has taken place.

- *The UNHCR are slow in processing claims*

According to the guidelines initial decisions made by the UNHCR should be issued within one month following the interviews. However, many have to wait for a long time before getting the results from the UNHCR. 43% had to wait for 7 months or above before they got the first rejection and as many as 22% had to wait between 13-24 months after the appeal before they got a second rejection.

#### **4.5 No Legal aid for asylum seekers and torture claimants**

No legal aid is granted to asylum seekers, refugees or torture claimants. This applies both regarding the refugee status determination procedures and the Convention Against Torture (CAT) procedures.

#### **4.6 No valid identity papers**

At the moment asylum seekers are basically illegal immigrants when their visas expire. If they approach the Immigration Department to extend their visas or get recognizance they are often rejected and will be asked to leave Hong Kong, which they are unable to. Furthermore most asylum seekers are afraid to contact the Immigration Department as they are most often detained. Thus they are left without any valid identity documents. The UNHCR does issue identification papers about their status as asylum seekers, however, these documents are not recognized by the

Hong Kong government. Those who do get identity documents because they somehow had to contact the Immigration Department are on recognizance. However, the recognizance is nothing more than a recognition by the HKSAR that the refugee is an offender for overstaying and enjoys no rights. The recognizance states that they are detained or liable to be detained. Although carrying the recognizance letter, the Immigration Department may still charge them for overstay. Thus this stance essentially amounts to non-recognition, which is against all international humanitarian standards.

#### **4.7 Detention**

Asylum seekers and torture claimants are arbitrarily detained. The Immigration Ordinance does not have specific provisions to protect refugees, and basically treat refugees as regular overstayers. Thus Immigration Ordinance doesn't comply with article 28 and 41 of the Basic Law which protects non-residents against arbitrary or unlawful arrest, detention or imprisonment. Furthermore the Bill of Rights Ordinance (Part III, para. 11) does not cover immigration legislation as regards persons not having the right to enter and remain in Hong Kong.

Furthermore for those who may be released on bail, they are obliged to find a guarantor who is a permanent resident of Hong Kong. This poses great problems, as the network of asylum seekers seldom extends to local Hong Kong people.

#### **4.8 Detention conditions**

Many asylum seekers and claimants of torture, who have been detained by the Immigration Department or the Correctional Services Department, have complained that they were ill-treated during detention. The same complaints also existed in the detention cells controlled by Correctional Services Department. Reports of sleeping on the floor, bad hygiene arrangements, and punishment for making complaints are common. The government has no culturally sensitive services nor does it seem to provide any kind of training for against racial discrimination.

Secondly, given the fact that refugees may suffer from post-traumatic-stress-syndrome (PTSS) it is highly questionable to detain refugees, especially because the detainees do not receive specialist treatment for PTSS. The medical services only general symptoms and the doctors do not seem to be aware of PTSS symptoms.

#### **4.9 Domestic violence and rape left unreported**

The fear of detention results in the fact that female asylum seekers, who are victims of violence or harassment (including sexual and domestic violence) in Hong Kong do not dare to report the case to the police. In 2005, UNHCR received around 5 claims of rape and domestic violence, which occurred in Hong Kong. However, UNHCR reports that the majority of victims, although counseled about the possibility to lodge complaints, choose not to do so mainly for fear of arrest by the police. Thereby asylum seekers are easy targets of rape and domestic violence, and furthermore the perpetrator goes unpunished, and the victims are left without any proper channels for

counseling. Lastly, without proper protection the victim may live in continued fear of being further subject to victimization.

Furthermore there are no shelters to which female asylum seekers and refugee victims of violence can safely be sent to and cared for. At the moment the victims are solely dependent on NGOs and UNHCR. NGOs and UNHCR have had to find accommodation for the victims in which they could hide.

The government should immediately protect women asylum seekers against prosecution and provide protection under the law against sexual and domestic violence.

#### **4.10 Deportation – lack of safeguards against *refoulement*<sup>15</sup>**

##### *No adequate protection under the CAT*

The Hong Kong government ignores its obligations to set up a screening procedure to process asylum claims, and has left it to the UNHCR. However, while such claims are being assessed there is no protection against *refoulement* through the UNHCR procedure. Only some protection against *refoulement* is only given to people who make claims of torture at the Immigration Department under the Convention Against Torture (CAT). However yet, the CAT procedure is wrought with problems and offers no adequate protection against deportation.

There is no adequate legal protection against *refoulement*. The procedures under CAT are non-statutory and The Crimes (Torture) Ordinance does not specifically incorporate the principle of non-*refoulement*. Additionally the definition of “torture” is inconsistent with the definition in the Convention Against Torture.

Secondly, the determination procedure only allows two weeks for claimants to make petitions against the determination to the Chief Executive. Two weeks however, is not sufficient time for claimants to make appeals. Even UNHCR allows 1 month to make appeals.

Third, The Bill of Rights (article 9) does not confer a right of review in respect of a decision to deport a person not having the right of abode in Hong Kong or a right to be represented for this purpose before a competent authority.

In addition to the above mentioned problems, in fact most victims of torture are deterred from making a CAT claim at the Immigration Department, since, if they are overstayers, they are usually detained.

#### **4.11 Welfare**

The government has failed to provide adequate housing and food to the asylum seekers. While there are more than 1,800 asylum seekers in Hong Kong, the new project by the Social Welfare Department has only been designed to support around 80 people on a trial basis at a budget of \$1,800-1,900 per person per month. According to the government the project is only on a trial basis and meant to be small scale. It has stated that when the project finishes it is still unclear whether new

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<sup>15</sup> The principle of non-*refoulement* includes that no refugee should be returned to any country where he or she is likely to face persecution or torture.

projects will be set up. The lack of any long term planning clearly ignores the plight of the asylum seekers.

### **Risk of detention when seeking welfare assistance**

Access to welfare is highly questionable as the risk of detention is ever present when approaching the Social Welfare Department for assistance. Asylum seekers without immigration papers who approach the Social Welfare Department for assistance, are asked to reveal their identity to the Immigration Department. If they do not agree to do so, in most cases the Social Welfare Department will not refer their cases for assistance from the International Social Service. Some asylum seekers who did not want to approach Immigration have been told by the Social Welfare Department not to approach them again unless they had immigration papers and that they would call the police if they approached again.

### **Welfare assistance discriminatory**

Secondly, it is extremely discriminatory to only support asylum seekers on a budget of around \$1,800-\$1,900 per month. According to the Social Welfare Department, the Comprehensive Social Security Allowance is designed to support only local residents. Thus asylum seekers are not eligible for CSSA. However, a singleton on CSSA receives around \$2,800 which is meant to cover basic needs. First of all it is discriminatory to provide assistance which is \$1,000 lower than the assistance provided to local residents. Secondly, it is very clear that \$1,800 is not enough to even cover the basic needs of asylum seekers. Asylum seekers do not receive cash to buy their own food but are instead asked to collect food items every ten days at designated spots. For a single person, he/she will only receive food worth a total of \$900 per month. Even worse, families with children are not given food for the children but only for the adults. Thus a family of four will only receive food to cover two people. The food is unvaried and cannot cover the essential nutritious needs of the asylum seekers. For instance, the asylum seekers are only given tomatoes but not other vegetables. Also, because the food is only provided every 10 days, some of it gets bad and has to be thrown out.

When it comes to housing, they are supported at a maximum of \$1,000. With the high house rent in Hong Kong it is extremely difficult to find housing at such a rate. The support given by the Social Welfare Department does not cover electricity, water or gas, nor does it cover clothing, pocket money, transportation costs or other basic needs.

The government now runs some shelters in Yuen Long for asylum seekers and torture claimants. In the first shelter there are around 13 people, and the other there are 5 people. However, these are poorly managed by the government. In fact women, men, children and unaccompanied minors all live in the same shelter without any consideration of the safety of the individuals. It is not proper to let both men and women live in the same shelter. Secondly, the shelters only have one kitchen and one bathroom which all residents have to share. This arrangement is quite inconvenient and the residents have to line up to use the kitchen and bathroom. Lastly, the shelters only have one refrigerator. This is clearly not enough for so many people, especially when the food they collect covers 10 days. Often they are forced to throw out some of the food because of lack of space.

#### **4.12 Children left without any education**

Asylum seeking children are not eligible to study in the public schools in Hong Kong given their legal status. Currently there are 31 asylum seeking children and 31 refugee children. The Government does not recognize the right to education of these children migrants. There is no clear policy or guidelines to offer school placements to these children. The Education Department will not offer school placements to these children unless their eligibility has been confirmed by the Director of Immigration. Such applications are dealt with on a case-by-case basis. That is to say, the right to public education of these children is vested in the discretion of the Director of Immigration. Several children who are not on recognizance from the Immigration Department currently do not attend school.

#### **4.13 No support from the Student Financial Assistance Agency**

The projects by the Social Welfare Department does not support expenses related to children's education. Previous applications to the government's Student Financial Assistance Agency have been under process for even 1 year without any answers. It eventually meant that children had to rely on support from NGOs or private individuals. It is only recently that the Student Financial Assistance Agency invited asylum and refugee children to apply. However, they are actually not considered eligible for financial assistance from the agency, which only offers assistance to student-applicants who are Hong Kong residents. The agency has stated that only where strong humanitarian and compassionate groups exist, will it consider applications on a case-by-case basis. So far only a few cases have been accepted.

#### **4.14. No support to unaccompanied minors**

At the moment there is no special support given to unaccompanied minors. Unaccompanied minors are children to arrive in Hong Kong alone without their parents to seek asylum. There are nearly 20 unaccompanied minors who are left on their own. There is no shelter with supervision and management to take care of this vulnerable group. At the moment most of them do not attend school because of lack of immigration papers, and they live scattered around in small room, living by themselves or with others.

The government should immediate find a solution to provide a managed shelter, education and support to these children.

#### **4.15. Risk of detention when approaching hospitals**

There have been changes in the possibility of access to health care in hospitals for asylum seekers. Prior to September 2005 all asylum seekers were able to access hospital care by showing their UNHCR identity documents. However a new hospital policy was implemented in September 2005, which meant that asylum seekers without valid visas or recognizance from the Immigration Department would be reported to the police. Thus, an asylum-seeking woman who was pregnant was reported to the police although she had a valid UNHCR identity document. She was arrested by the police and detained by the Immigration Department. However, after the incident was reported in the news, it seems that the hospitals have loosened up on the policy and accepted the UNHCR document. Still, the hospitals' general policy is to ask for

passports or recognizance papers as proof of identity. It is only if the asylum seeker is unable to provide these that the UNHCR document is accepted as a valid document.

However, the Hospital Authority has stated that persons whose applications for refugee status have been rejected by the UNHCR will be reported to the Police or the Immigration Department if they fail to produce a passport with a valid visa or a recognizance paper when seeking medical attention at public hospitals and clinics. Thereby asylum seekers, who have been rejected by UNHCR are clearly discouraged from seeking medical attention when needed because of fear of detention.

#### **4.16 Medical waiver system for asylum seekers impractical**

The existing system for medical charges distinguishes between eligible and non-eligible persons. While eligible persons are charged a subsidized rate, non-eligible persons are required to pay higher fees. For instance eligible persons pay HK\$ 100 for Accident & Emergency care while non-eligible persons need to pay HK\$ 570 for such care.

Local residents who receive CSSA are waived from payment of their medical expenses given the fact that they do not work. These are usually given on a half-year basis, so that a waiver needn't be obtained each time a hospital visit is made. However, asylum seekers and refugees are considered to be non-eligible persons and the Hospital Authority only considers exceptional waivers on a case-by-case basis.

There are examples of asylum seekers who have been presented with bills they were unable to pay, although the hospitals knew that they were asylum seekers. For instance a pregnant asylum seeking woman was presented with a bill of HK\$ 20,000 because she was going to deliver her baby. There are also examples of people who have been told by doctors that operations couldn't be provided because it would be too expensive. While waivers are granted in most cases out-patient cases, it is discriminatory against asylum seekers that they are not considered to be eligible persons, as they by law are not allowed to work.

Secondly, it is administratively also a waste of resources and stressful for asylum seekers to have to apply for a medical waiver each time they need to access health care services rather than being given a waiver on a half-year basis similar to that of local CSSA recipients.

## **5. Recommendations**

1. Amend the proposed Race Discrimination Bill so that it includes the following:
  - The status of being a new immigrant from Mainland China as a ground of discrimination.
  - Language as a ground of discrimination and a cancellation of the exemptions on language as mentioned in clause 58 of the proposed Race Discrimination Bill.
  - Religion as a ground of discrimination.
  - A positive duty to provide special measures in the bill, especially in relation to employment and access to government services (such as provision of interpreter in hospitals) and the educational sector (including vocational training).
  - Reduction of the 3-year sunset period for businesses and employers to a maximum of 1 year.
2. The Hong Kong government should immediately sign the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and formulate a coherent fair asylum policy to deal with aspects of immigration, refugee status determination, food, accommodation, education, health, and legal aid.
3. Amend the existing residence rules for allocation of public housing and CSSA in order to ensure the full enjoyment of the right to housing and social security.
4. Review and amend the Immigration Ordinance and its 1997 amendment, which discriminates against the family members of Hong Kong residents in the Mainland.
5. Provide translation and interpretation services for ethnic minorities in order to ensure full access to government services. Especially interpreter services in the Labour Department and the hospital services should be provided.
6. Create more job and training opportunities and programmes for new immigrants from Mainland China and ethnic minorities.
7. Ensure that admissions to schools are made easy for migrant children, and opportunities provided for them to learn their mother tongue.
8. Provide training on race and cultural sensitivity for government staff, especially those of the Social Welfare Department, Hospital Authority, Immigration Department, Police Force and the Correctional Services Department.
9. Create more effective public education programmes on racial discrimination, human rights issues and the value and contribution of new immigrants and ethnic minorities to Hong Kong society. These should target both perpetrators of racial discrimination – the civil service, education system and employers – and the affected groups themselves. They should be created and monitored through pre-established consultative task forces comprised of the affected groups, community groups and NGOs.