

“She [the FASSTT worker] grabbed me and took me out of the abyss and stabilised my psychological

state, then

focussed on

referring

me to doctors

and helped

me to find

this country

could be my

home. I will

never be the

person I was,

but I feel with this help I will reach the

stage of being able to take care of myself”

## Out of the Abyss

Australia's Program  
of Assistance to  
Survivors of Torture  
and Trauma



## The Refugee Experience

“ I was tortured for many years and spent two years in prison. I was tortured and watched my friends tortured and executed. They covered my eyes for six months. We were not allowed to sleep and were allowed only one shower per month. When I came to Australia I felt guilty for being here and I did not trust anyone, not even my family. At [my local FASSTT agency] I got counselling and went to a support group.

Over time they helped me to find the right doctors and specialists for physical help. They helped me to forget my past, and to trust people again, be independent and think there could be a future for me and my children. In the group I met people from other places who had been through the same experiences. I never thought I could trust a stranger, but I did. Now I feel something released from my body and “ I feel happier and more comfortable.

Refugees flee the violence of war or direct persecution. Such persecution can take many forms including torture, imprisonment and the denial of the right to express one's religious and cultural identity.

Persecution and violence occurs by or with the complicity of the authorities. Many of Australia's refugee and humanitarian entrants also spend considerable periods in the harsh conditions of refugee camps in countries of asylum before being accepted for permanent residence in Australia.

Apathy, disbelief or complacency are the best friends of the torturer. If we do not recognise a survivor's need for support and provide services

to assist them, the goal of the torturer is sustained and enhanced.

Survivors of torture experience its impact in many different ways. Torture has a profound, immediate and long term impact on physical and psychological health. A high percentage of torture and trauma survivors suffer from extreme levels of depression and anxiety which manifest in many ways. These can include sleep disorders, recurring and intrusive memories, poor self-esteem, difficulty in concentrating, sadness, fear, anger, guilt, psychosomatic complaints, and breakdown in family and personal relationships. These impacts can present profound barriers

to settlement in a new community. They can make it difficult for survivors to learn a new language, seek and keep employment, and make new social connections. FASSTT agencies work with survivors, service providers and communities to overcome these barriers and help survivors build a new and productive life in Australia.

The fact that most refugees have survived horrific experiences, yet re-establish their lives in Australia is evidence of their enormous survival strengths. Nevertheless, they suffer a higher incidence of physical and mental health problems than migrants and people born in Australia. This arises from negative influences on their health before, during and following their forced

movement. They are less likely than other migrants to have family and community support in Australia to assist them in accessing mental health care and related services; generally have lower levels of literacy in their first language and are less proficient in English; and face greater challenges in finding housing and employment. Although FASSTT agencies provide training and consultations for health and community service professionals, Australian health care providers are not routinely trained to identify and deal with issues of particular concern to refugees.

## FASSTT Agency Services

FASSTT agencies work to reduce the impact of torture and trauma by providing direct services to survivors in the form of counselling and other therapeutic interventions, advocacy and group work. FASSTT agencies also:

- train other service providers who have contact with survivors of torture and trauma
- develop resources to assist health, welfare and education professionals in their work with refugees

- work with State and Federal governments to ensure policies and services are sensitive to the needs of refugees (see Advisory Bodies below)
- build the capacity of refugee communities through community development initiatives
- conduct research to enhance understanding of the needs of survivors of torture and trauma and inform service development
- raise community awareness of the experience of refugees and the incidence and effects of torture and trauma

Australia resettles 13,000 people each year under its refugee/humanitarian program

Source: DIMA

Over the past 5 years the number of refugees, asylum seekers or internally displaced people has averaged approximately 19 million people per year worldwide

Source: UNHCR



PHOTO: UNHCR



## Advisory Bodies

A key means by which FASSTT agencies provide expert advice to government is through the representation of FASSTT members on advisory bodies. FASSTT agencies are also routinely called upon by government to provide input to policies and strategies. FASSTT members are represented on or have contributed to the following:

- Detention Health Advisory Group
- Immigration Detention Advisory Group
- Multicultural Mental Health Australia

- Multicultural Mental Health Policy Development Steering Group
- National Depression Strategy
- National Health Promotion and Prevention Strategy
- Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council
- UNHCR Executive Committee Australian Government Delegation (1997, 1998, 1999, 2003)

## Profile of FASSTT Clients

The national origins of people entering Australia under the Humanitarian Program have changed significantly over the last five years and this is mirrored in changes in the profile of FASSTT clients (see Figure 1).

In 2004/5, 66% of FASSTT agency clients came from Africa, 20% were from the Middle East and less than 10% were from Europe. By contrast, five years earlier, in 2000/1, nearly 40% per cent of our clients were from Europe, 34 % were from the Middle East and only 15% from Africa.

As Figure 2 demonstrates, the number of humanitarian arrivals and proportion of FASSTT clients who are under the age of 20 has also increased considerably over the past few years. FASSTT agencies have also found that the extent and depth of torture and trauma among children and adolescents of recent refugee arrivals has been more severe than previous intakes.

As their demographic profile has changed over the past few years, the needs of FASSTT clients have become more complex. A high proportion of recent clients have experienced:

- lengthy periods in refugee camps
- extreme trauma, torture and loss

- very large family groups with a high degree of dislocation and single-headed households
  - lack of familiarity with Western health systems.
- In addition to these complexities, Commonwealth and State Governments have sought to increase the level of refugee resettlement in rural and regional communities.

These changing settlement patterns mean that there are significant costs for metropolitan-based FASSTT agencies working to develop and augment service provision in rural/regional areas.

People from refugee backgrounds have a higher rate of physical and psychological conditions than other migrants or people born in Australia

Source: DIMA

25% of refugees have been physically tortured or subjected to severe psychological violation prior to their arrival in Australia, seven in ten will have been subject to less severe, but nevertheless traumatic, experiences in violent circumstances

Source: FASSTT

Figure 1: Dramatic increase in proportion of clients from Africa

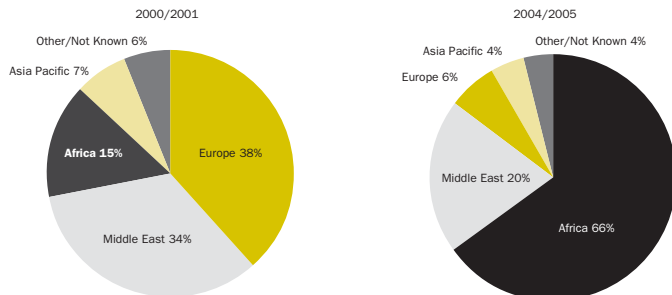
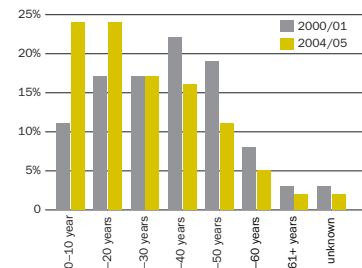


Figure 2: Significant increase in child and adolescent clients over last five years



Source: FASSTT Agency databases

## Phoenix Support Service for Survivors of Torture and Trauma

- Location: Hobart, Tasmania
- Date Established: 1991
- Status: Program of Hobart Migrant Resource Centre (Incorporated NGO)

The Phoenix Centre is a program within the Migrant Resource Centre (Southern Tasmania) in Hobart, and provides services to people who have suffered torture and war related trauma. As part of its mission statement, the MRC undertakes to provide quality services to all migrants in southern Tasmania, with the objective of encouraging participation by migrants in relevant aspects of the

community. Phoenix Centre staff collaborate with other MRC staff to ensure that clients access programs which support their participation in society and their trauma recovery.

Phoenix receives funding from various Federal Government programs.

In 2004/5 Phoenix provided direct service and support to approximately 550 refugees and humanitarian entrants from 20 countries.

### Selected Key Achievements

**1999** Managed the on-site counselling and therapeutic activities for 400 Kosovar refugees housed at the Brighton Barracks as part of the Australian Government's 'Operation Safe Haven'

**2000** Commenced a contract with DIMA to provide early health assessment and short-term torture and trauma counselling to new arrivals

**2001** Began a natural therapies and massage program for clients

**2002** Employed professionally qualified bi-cultural workers as health workers and counsellors located at the Launceston Migrant Resource Centre, allowing integrated state-wide service delivery for torture and trauma counselling

**2003** Formalised the interaction between Phoenix and the MRC, with the Phoenix coordinator taking a management role within the MRC, and joint projects being undertaken between MRC and Phoenix staff

**2004** Established a multi-disciplinary specialist team including a natural therapies practitioner, counsellor/music therapist, psychologist/narrative therapist, social worker, qualified sexual health counsellor and qualified bi-cultural workers

### Ali's Story

Ali is a young man from the Middle East. His family belonged to a minority sect, forcing their removal to a neighbouring country where they were ostracised as unwanted aliens. Declared stateless, Ali made many attempts to leave and finally journeyed to South East Asia. Finally, after many years of frightening and humiliating experiences, he arrived in Tasmania.

He contacted the Phoenix Centre because of panic attacks and suicidal ideation following a relationship breakdown. He also reported the trauma symptoms of flashbacks, nightmares and hyper-arousal. He had ten

individual weekly counselling sessions that initially focussed on his grief reaction to the broken relationship, then extended to his grief at losing his family to whom he had been very close. Gradually he talked more openly about his trauma experiences from his many years 'on the run', and engaged in stronger emotional work, achieving resolution on a number of issues. Four months after beginning counselling his panic attacks and trauma symptoms had ceased. Ali is now enjoying and succeeding in his studies, is making new friends and has a positive outlook on life.

### Music Therapy

The Phoenix Centre uses music therapy for both group and individual interventions when it suits client needs. Using singing and musical instruments, music therapy is a non-verbal approach that is particularly useful when working in mixed-language groups or with clients whose degree of trauma is such that talking about their experiences may be difficult or impossible.

A significant majority of refugees interviewed by a Phoenix Centre researcher identified music as an important coping mechanism during stressful and traumatic times. In 2005 a music therapy group was established of African women from four different countries. The group aimed to give the traumatised women an opportunity for emotional

expression and support and to reduce their sense of isolation. The group shared traditional songs from their cultures and improvised new songs, rhythms and melodies. They sang about their new life in 'cold Tasmania' where they 'need lotta clothes' and 'have to go to school and read lotta words'. They also sang of Tasmania as a 'lovely country, friendly people, good education, good food and very quiet'. The group enabled the women to cross cultural boundaries, express themselves, validate their experiences and appreciate common ground while singing, laughing and drumming together. The group has been re-formed in 2006 with the addition of men (at the women's request) and is being integrated into the program at the local Adult Migrant English Service.

### Phoenix Clients Countries of Birth 2004/5

