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This is not District 9



A promotional poster for the film District 9

By [Larry Stillman](#)

I saw the film last night but this is not *District 9*.

I write this in Johannesburg, out of touch with the latest “boat’ people crisis” back in Australia, but nonetheless very concerned. Despite the distance it seems to me that we cannot see the wood for the trees.

‘Unlawful arrivals’, ‘illegal refugees’, the order to not call detainees by name, and numerous other documented abuses, the lies of the faked Children Overboard scandal, the housing of children in jails, the Cornelia Rau scandal – all were part of a deliberate attempt to separate people in desperation from other human beings (that is, us). The Rudd Government has adopted similar tactics with its hard line against Tamil asylum seekers.

The latest ‘flood’ of rickety boats makes it is easy to gain the impression that Australia is under siege from an Asian-cum-Islamic invasion, with the possibility that terrorists may be sneaking in too. The fact that many of these refugees have paid money to shady characters only adds to a public perception of criminality. One letter I saw in the Herald Sun argued that ‘those people’ are spending the same amount of money as a first-class airfare to London, as if to say, ‘aren’t they really the same as rich tourists?’

The reality is that these people are desperate and will do anything to escape persecution and a life of limbo, trapped in Indonesian refugee camps. In case we have forgotten our legal and moral obligations, we need to remind ourselves of Article 33 of the Refugee Convention of 1951:

“No Contracting State shall expel or return... a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”

Public perception of refugees causes razor sharp public anxiety with every boat arrival. Yet after rigorous scrutiny by the UNHCR or Australia's Immigration Department, the vast majority of asylum seekers can in fact be classified as genuine refugees. Australia's situation must be also seen from a global perspective. The five or ten thousand people who come in Australia in this way are just a drop in the ocean of global population movements. These movements are an international reality from which Australia, one of the world's most affluent countries, cannot be isolated.

We must not forget that the Jews who fled Hitler were not offered a welcoming hand from this country either, with its restrictive immigration policy and racist stereotypes. This was despite the fact that all of these Jews clearly had a 'well founded fear of persecution' (to quote the UN). Jewish tradition and memory also records that we were slaves in Egypt, and we celebrate the liberation from slavery each year at Pesach.

In South Africa there are at least one million refugees, who have fled countries such as Zimbabwe and other African countries. In total there are at least 17 million refugees in Africa, almost the size of Australia's total population. Many of the refugees in South Africa live in tin shack shantytowns, some of the most squalid and heart-wrenching conditions imaginable.

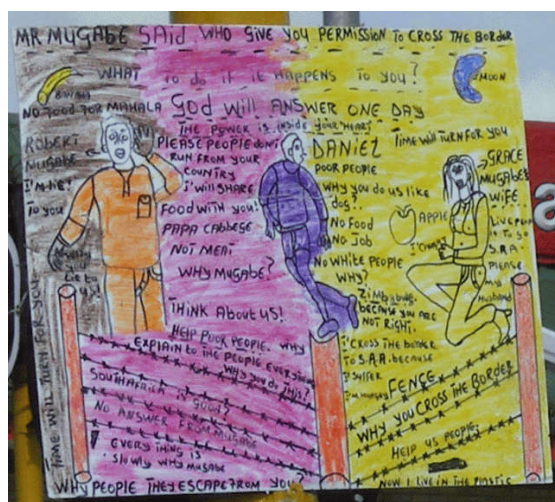


Photo by Larry Stillman - [click to enlarge](#).

Just down the road from Monash University's South Africa campus is the Zandspruit 'informal settlement'. It wouldn't surprise me if the film *District 9* had been made there. At least fifty thousand people live here cheek by jowl, inhabiting hovels the size of garden sheds, without running water, electricity or proper sewerage. There are piles of garbage. Fleas and lice are endemic and then there are the rats. There are only a couple of health clinics here, each with huge queues of mothers and babies desperate for basic health care. If someone is seriously ill, ambulances cannot get into the camp because roads are almost non-existent and the lane ways are tiny. Instead, people must be piled into wheelbarrows and brought out. The chances of dying en route are high. It is bad enough when it rains, but when there is a downpour (like tonight, when I drove home to middle-class comfort), Zandspruit becomes a sea of filth and mud. Because of the struggle to survive, Zandspruit is very violent and there have even been killings.

There are some non-government organisations involved in supporting the community. The people who work for the NGOs are extraordinary, and the local white councillor (who at first site seems like a relic of the apartheid regime), is an ANC member and a tireless advocate on their behalf. Monash University gives homework assistance to two hundred children and runs fun activities every Saturday morning. Amazingly, some of these kids are even making it to university, despite their struggles.

I have gone into such detail because it is easy to forget how horrible life can be for people whose displacement is no fault of their own, just as it is easy to fall into cold governmental language that dehumanises these people. Just as the Nazis found good for use for bureaucratic language, Australians have a penchant for a similar characterization of supposed enemies, aided by venal politicians and enthusiastic bureaucrats.

Australians should make every effort to cut down the razor wire, and help such people who 'choose life for themselves and their descendants' (Devarim 30.19), instead of a slow death.

The numbers of people who get to Australian 'illegally' are tiny compared with what happens in the rest of the world, and we can afford not only to treat them better, but also to invest in civil reconstruction and development abroad so that they needn't flee in the first place.

This piece was written by Larry in a personal rather than professional capacity and does not reflect the views of Monash University.

