

# EIGHTY THOUSAND ENTRY POINTS

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## An Interview with Antje Missbach

With over 80,000 kilometers of borders, Indonesia has become a transit hub for migrants hoping to reach Australia. However, as Australia tightens its entry and immigration policies under Prime Minister Tony Abott, many migrants have found themselves stuck in this archipelagic country. Some surrender to authorities immediately and end up in detention centers, while others live in secrecy. Dr. Antje Missbach is a research fellow at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, who has been studying these migration flows since 2010. She spoke with the *Journal* about trends that she has seen from her fieldwork over the last few years.

**Journal of International Affairs:** *How did Indonesia become such a big transit center for migrants? Is it purely because of its geography and proximity to Australia, or are there other factors involved as well?*

**Antje Missbach:** Indonesia's unique geography, an archipelago that consists of more than 17,000 islands, makes it relatively easy to enter the country clandestinely. A typical route for asylum-seekers is, for example, to take a boat from Malaysia and cross over to the Riau Archipelago (close to Singapore) or to the Island of Sumatra, which can be done in a night. However, not all asylum-seekers use the maritime entry spots; many also arrive in Indonesia by plane with tourist visas and genuine travel documents. From this perspective their entry is regular, and only if they overstay their visa do they become "irregulars." Using fraudulent papers and bribery is, of course, another possibility to gain entry into Indonesia.

Until September 2013, it was also relatively easy to exit the country by boat in order to reach Australia's nearest outposts, such as Christmas Island and Ashmore Reef. Given that the entire length of the Indonesian borders spans more than 80,000 kilometers, it is obvious that border protection can never be all encom-

passing, as the Indonesian navy, maritime police, and migration authorities are generally understaffed and under-equipped.

Although Indonesia has tried to enforce more border protection measures over the last years, there are still many loopholes that allow asylum-seekers to come in undetected. Many asylum-seekers prefer to be stuck in Indonesia rather than in Malaysia. Not only because the living costs are a lot less and the processing of

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their applications for protection is often deemed to be faster, but also in Indonesia there are no corporate punishments for so-called “illegals.” In Malaysia, immigration offenders not only risk jail time but they also face caning for repeated migration offenses. Although it is a lot easier to find jobs in the informal economy in Malaysia, an important aspect for asylum-seekers who are stuck in transit for many years is that in Indonesia, asylum-seekers and refugees have more chances to receive financial and material support. For example, those under the care of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) receive a monthly stipend and free housing.

It is hardly surprising that the IOM receives a lot of project funding from Australia, which wants to keep out unwanted asylum-seekers.

As the world’s largest Muslim nation, Indonesia is also attractive to Muslim asylum-seekers, such as those from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. Even though most Indonesian Muslims are Sunni, the Sunni-Shia divide has so far not mattered very much, at least not among the asylum-seeking population. Most Indonesians might not even be aware of the fact that many Hazaras are in fact Shia. However, based on my observations in the field over the last five years, Muslim solidarity definitely has its limits, too. This has become obvious in the number of evictions of asylum-seekers from communities where they used to be tolerated by the local population. Despite some xenophobic sentiments, Indonesia is, for most asylum-seekers, relatively safe due to the government’s “benevolent neglect.”

Indonesia is an important transit country for asylum-seekers in Southeast Asia, as it is seen as the closest stepping-stone to Australia. However, judged by the numbers, there are far more asylum-seekers and refugees stuck in limbo in Malaysia and Thailand. In December 2014, there were 6,916 asylum-seekers and 4,270 refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Jakarta. Even though the actual numbers might be slightly more than that, as of the end of November 2014, there were some 150,460 refugees

and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Kuala Lumpur and, as of July 2014, 141,174 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Bangkok, not to speak of more than half a million stateless people also lingering in Thailand.

**Journal:** *Australia seems to have further restricted their policies towards letting in asylum-seekers in recent years. How has this affected relations with its neighboring countries?*

**Missbach:** Since Australia has implemented Operation Sovereign Borders in September 2013 under Tony Abbott, the number of asylum-seeker boats to Australia has sharply declined. Under this military-led operation, asylum-seeker boats have been forcibly turned away and towed back not only to Indonesia, but also to Sri Lanka. While carrying out these forced return operations in early 2014, the Australian navy has on several occasions entered Indonesia's twelve-mile zone. These breaches of Indonesia's sovereignty were protested vehemently by Jakarta. Since the spying affair in November 2013, in which it was revealed that Australia had been tapping the mobile phones of the Indonesian president, his wife, and several senior ministers, the Indonesia-Australia relationship had already reached rock-bottom. Thus, the intrusions by the Australian navy aggravated the relationship further. In order to avoid further territorial breaches, Australia nowadays uses so-called lifeboats, on which the asylum-seekers are transferred and then sent back once the navy has reached the maritime border. Incarcerated in these plastic capsule boats, asylum-seekers cannot even manipulate the motor in order to avoid their return.

It is hard to say how many boats and how many asylum-seekers exactly have been returned by Australia against their will. The Australian government's Department of Immigration and Border Protection keeps most details of on-water operations secret, supposedly as any briefing could potentially compromise current or future operations. Not only is the Australian public deprived of proper information on what happens at sea, in fact, as has just been revealed, journalists who have been reporting on the Australian government's asylum-seeker policies have been repeatedly referred to the police in attempts to uncover confidential sources and whistleblowers.

Limiting the freedom of press has always been a substantial part of Australia's anti-asylum-seeker policies; this is why asylum-seekers are incarcerated in very remote immigration detention centers. Since the reopening of the centers in Nauru and Manus Island [Papua New Guinea] in late 2012, thousands of asylum-seekers have been locked away indefinitely in these camps. News about their protests, hunger strikes, and violent attacks by locals on the camps only reach Australia slowly. Nevertheless, asylum-seekers waiting in Indonesia have heard some of

the horrible news from the Pacific camps and therefore decided not to cross. The measures of deterrence do show some results. For the time being, asylum-seekers are better off in Indonesia than in the Pacific camps. However, this is not a proper long-term solution, something which is so very much needed.

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**Journal:** *What realities do migrants who have become “lost in transit” face in Indonesia? Do many continue to be held in immigration detention centers, and for what length of time? Is Indonesia deporting people, or are there many cases of indefinite detention?*

**Missbach:** In the past, the majority of asylum-seekers were housed in immigration detention centers, of which there are thirteen all over Indonesia. They have a capacity for 1,300 inhabitants in total, but usually they are overcrowded. The conditions in these detention centers vary from center to center, but generally are deemed poor. Some have been refurbished recently with funding from Australia. Nevertheless, detainees complain about low-quality food and insufficient hygiene and lack of care. In

2012 and 2013, there have also been some fatal incidents, in which nine inmates have died due to beatings by guards or violent attacks from other inmates.

By the end of 2014, there were 3,356 asylum-seekers and 812 refugees, of whom 686 were female and 1,284 were children (with 687 being unaccompanied minors and separated children) in detention. Given that the duration of being in transit has become much longer since 2013, more and more people report themselves to the Indonesian immigration authorities in order to be detained, as they have run out of financial resources and thus face homelessness and hunger. For me, this was a very surprising change to witness. In the past, any asylum-seeker would try very hard to avoid immigration detention in Indonesia, as that would severely slow down their journey, and the bribes for speeding up the release were quite substantial. In 2014, more than 2,600 asylum-seekers reported themselves to immigration authorities and, in fact, there have been cases where the Indonesian authorities had to send away asylum-seekers who surrendered themselves, as they had no space to keep them. As all immigration detention centers have surpassed their capacity, more and more asylum-seekers are housed in temporary facilities under the supervision of the Indonesian immigration authorities and also in special community housing schemes under the IOM.

Although asylum-seekers are allowed to live in specially designated housing

schemes temporarily, permanent integration is not available to them in Indonesia. Indonesia always views them as temporary guests only. Indonesia is also not keen on spending large amounts of money on accommodating asylum-seekers. Therefore, a lot of the funding comes from Australia, which channels it through the IOM. However, asylum-seekers and refugees can only receive financial support from the IOM for up to ten years. What happens to these people then is unclear, as they are forbidden by law from working in Indonesia.

Most asylum-seekers hope to reach a safe resettlement country. As hardly any boats are leaving for Australia at the moment, undergoing the proper status determination process and resettlement process are the only options available. This is, however, very time-consuming, as the UNHCR in Indonesia is notoriously understaffed and underfunded. According to the UNHCR in Jakarta, the average waiting period from registration to first instance interview currently ranges from between eight and eighteen months. Receiving the outcome of the application can take another sixteen to twenty-four months. Generally, recognition rates are very high in Indonesia—up to 75 percent and higher for asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Iraq, while only 40 percent for Sri Lankans and Iranians. Overall in 2014, 839 refugees have been resettled; 527 were sent to Australia, and the remaining went to New Zealand, Denmark, the United States, and Germany. On 18 November 2014, the Australian government announced that asylum-seekers who registered with the UNHCR in Indonesia on and after 1 July 2014 would no longer be eligible for resettlement in Australia. Also, the Australian annual resettlement quota for refugees waiting in Indonesia will decrease in 2015. Last but not least, 259 people decided to accept the voluntary repatriation offers from the UNHCR and return to their countries of origin. Given that Australia is seeking to decrease resettlement numbers, the Indonesian government has started to consider more seriously carrying out deportations. So far, the number of deportations has been widely restricted due to lack of funding.

**Journal:** *You have written about how job permits and access to education for asylum-seekers could mitigate the problem. Does Indonesia have the resources to support such an influx of asylum-seekers as long as they contribute to the economy? Has this idea gained any traction?*

**Missbach:** Given that transitioning through Indonesia often takes much longer than asylum-seekers assume at the beginning of their journeys, a lot of valuable time gets lost during people's journeys in search for protection. Children lose out on education; adults lose valuable skills. Access to primary and secondary education is only provided for recognized refugee children. Even when they are allowed to attend school, many refugees find it difficult to register their children

at school—and not just because of language barriers. Although the Indonesian government has been more open to propositions by the UNHCR with regard to facilitating education, the government seems more reluctant to hand out work permits to asylum-seekers and refugees, as this could facilitate de facto integration. Another reason for Indonesia's reluctance is its high rate of unemployment. Unlike in Malaysia, where cheap laborers are required on plantations and in construction, Indonesia can cover this demand with its domestic work force. Even though the

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number of asylum-seekers is relatively small, it is questionable whether the informal market could easily absorb most asylum-seekers. For example, some asylum-seekers have tried to work as motorbike taxi drivers, but their attempts have been opposed by members of the local population who feared losing customers. Others work clandestinely in bakeries and restaurants, but this puts them at risk of detection and exploitation.

Rather than coming up with progressive ideas, at the moment the Indonesian government has resurrected a previously mothballed plan of finding an uninhabited island in the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago to accommodate the asylum seekers and refugees currently registered with the UNHCR. The idea has been circulated in Indonesia for several years already, but was set aside twice because of funding issues and disagreement from Canberra. Australia viewed this plan with suspicion, given that Sumba Island, one of the poorest and most isolated areas in Indonesia, is less than 700 kilometers from the Australian coast. More significantly, relocating asylum-seekers to a remote island somewhere in Indonesia's poor east for an undetermined period of time does not promise any effective protection for them at all.

**Journal:** *How has the smuggling business been affected by the situation, from what you have seen? Are there more smugglers operating and charging steeper prices to get to Australia? Or have the country's policies forced the number of operators to decline?*

**Missbach:** At the moment, we can see that many smugglers have gone out of work. However, that does not mean that they will not come back into business when the situation becomes more conducive again, i.e., when Australia stops returning the boats to Indonesia and when the camps in the Pacific get closed down. Although the international criticism keeps increasing, it remains unlikely that such changes can occur under the current Abbott government.

However, if we take a more long-term view, we will see that people-smuggling networks are not that easily eradicated. People smuggling in Indonesia took off in the late 1990s, when Iraqi and Afghan asylum-seekers started to come. Back then, people smuggling in Indonesia was rather amateurish, spontaneous, and fairly unstructured. Many fishermen who helped the asylum-seekers reach Australia saw it as doing a good deed. During the years of the so-called Pacific Solution [2001–08], when Australia blocked entry into its territory, most smuggling networks in Indonesia fell dormant, only to be revived when the irregular transport became feasible again.


Since 2008, many new smuggling networks have come into being, but some of the old players are also still in business. People smuggling nowadays requires much more sophisticated operations and structures. People-smuggling networks have become more professionalized and involve the active support of corrupt police, navy, and immigration officers. What used to be a rather amateurish, opportunity-based delinquency has now become a more sophisticated crime. That is why prices have increased quite significantly over the last decade, not only because the journeys are longer but also because more bribes need to be paid.

Despite stricter law enforcement against people smuggling in Indonesia, smugglers are always able to find alternative routes. Arrested and imprisoned boat crews are easily substituted with new recruits. Even though there are hardly any boats leaving from Indonesia at the moment, some smugglers still make money from asylum-seekers, by promising them high-quality fake travel documents and air tickets.

**Journal:** *What responsibility do you think the United Nations has to handle this? Does the international community need to pay more attention to the issue and help resettle a greater percentage of migrants? Do other obstacles remain?*

**Missbach:** Given the millions of refugees around the world waiting for resettlement, it could take an entire lifetime to resettle all of them with the help of the current intake quotas. Ideally, resettlement countries would drastically increase their annual intakes for refugees and asylum-seekers, but this is unlikely to happen. In the last decade, many resettlement countries in Europe have been reluctant to take refugees waiting in Indonesia, as they were often regarded to be “Australia’s problem.” However, starting last year this has begun to change a bit, presumably because of Australia’s relaunched Pacific Solution, which rules that no unauthorized maritime asylum-seeker will ever be resettled into Australia. Against the criticism from the UNHCR, Australia also has been aggressively campaigning to convince Nauru, Papua New Guinea, and even Cambodia—one of Southeast

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Asia's poorest states—to accept refugees for permanent resettlement. Rather than hoping for higher resettlement quotas in the West, Australia is interested in “permanent solutions” in the Asia-Pacific region. The often-applied rhetoric of burden sharing is supposed to disguise what it actually is: burden shifting. 

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> This interview is a condensed and edited version of the exchange between the *Journal* and Antje Missbach.