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Insight

Asylum seeker
Dil has turned
to farming at
Two Wells
to support
his family.
Picture: TRICIA
WATKINSON

LOST in no man's land

Unable to get jobs and with no safety net, they are defying the perception held by some that asylum seekers are living on handouts. The support system for thousands of asylum seekers has been cut, leaving many new arrivals desperate for help.
REBECCA DIGIROLAMO meets some of those left stranded. **Story, page 60-61**



Trapped and vulnerable as lifeline cut

REBECCA DIGIROLAMO



DIL is not afraid to get his hands dirty in the increasingly dry, hard, Two Wells soil. The novice farmer is banking on a decent zucchini crop to support his wife and three children, aged two to 11.

If he's lucky, he might be able to net \$2/kg from a dealer.

"Farming – it's not something I know," he says in broken English. "But, I'm trying."

Before fleeing to Australia, Dil had never sown a seed. He and his wife were women's and children's clothing merchants in Myanmar.

The family are stateless Rohingya Muslims – one of the most persecuted religious minorities in the world.

More than 700,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar military and Buddhist extremists in recent years after villages were razed, women raped and thousands killed.

Dil and his family arrived in Australia by boat in July 2013 and after a few months in detention

received bridging visas to settle in Adelaide's western suburbs.

Up until last year they were receiving assistance from the federal government's only funded support scheme for vulnerable asylum seekers called the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program.

The modest \$35 a day payment helped with rent (\$1400 a month), bills, food, transport and health care. The support payment is 40 per cent below the \$408 weekly poverty threshold calculated by the South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS).

Equally important though was SRSS access to case workers and trauma and torture counsellors who had been helping Dil move towards future employment and self-sufficiency while undergoing visa processing – a process that can take several years.

However this safety net was cut without notice or explanation after the family's Safe Haven Enterprise Visa application was rejected. They do not have the funds to appeal through the Federal Court, which has a backlog of more than 7000 migration cases.

"I want to work but nobody will employ me on a bridging visa – it is very hard – I want to earn money myself," Dil says through an

interpreter.

He says employers do not want to invest time and money training an employee without a secure future. Without recognisable qualifications and significant language barriers, Dil decided to employ himself.

He rents a 1.2ha plot in Two Wells and is learning by trial and error how to farm.

"Living in Myanmar I can find a manual job easily but here it is very difficult," he says.

He has no family in Australia and has been living off the generosity of charities and friends since being ejected from the program. He is

racking up a significant debt, which is unlikely to be paid off.

"I'm feeling very sad and blue. Many of my friends all have their visas and I cannot go back to Myanmar – I don't know what else to do.

"I cannot do anything. I'm stuck.



"Two or three times I wanted to kill myself," says 32-year-old "Alan".

Alan, from Iran, says he has slept rough many times – once for 20 consecutive nights under a bridge in Henley Beach.

He says he does not want to be identified after Iranian government officials from whom he fled to



Australia contacted him following his arrival by boat in May 2013.

“I felt I had to leave to save my own life,” he says of running away from a job, family and friends in Tehran.

Alan (whose name has been changed to protect his identity) was granted a temporary protection visa with work rights while his application for residency was being processed. After 10 months on the SRSS program, Alan found work in a Seaton bakery. He rose up the ranks to supervisor.

But in 2015, his application for a humanitarian visa was rejected, he was placed on a six-month bridging visa, his work rights were removed and he was taken off the SRSS program. He had no way to survive as his visa application appeal sits in the Federal Court waiting to be heard. Iran will not accept any citizens repatriated against their will.

“In my country I had friends and family to help me, but here I have nothing,” Alan says.

After several months of homelessness, by word of mouth and desperation, he connected with the Mercy House of Welcome, run by the Sisters of Mercy – a Catholic order of nuns, in Kilburn, and the St Vincent de Paul Society’s Migrant Refugee Centre, in Hindmarsh.

Earlier this year Alan was regranted work rights but the bakery he once worked for had relocated to Victoria.

“No one will hire me with a six-month bridging visa,” he says.

He is currently surviving on hand-outs from the refugee community and asylum seeker support services and he says he’s not alone.

“You can’t see them but there are many people in this situation.”

A Refugee Council of Australia report released this month estimates changes to eligibility criteria for the SRSS program will affect 497 asylum seekers in South Australia.

The report says the 7000 asylum seekers expected to be cut from the SRSS program nationwide are at significant risk of homelessness and are being driven further into poverty. It says only 20 per cent are

employable and a \$7.5 million financial burden will be placed on SA charities and sector-wide health and welfare bodies already struggling to cope with rising local demand.

Changes to the SRSS program were first announced last year by Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton under the then Turnbull government.

The Home Affairs Department says the program is not a welfare system and that asylum seekers capable of supporting themselves while they work their way through the appeals process should find their own way.

The financial stress is taking its toll on asylum seekers and support networks alike.

“We don’t know where the next lot of money will come,” says St Vincent de Paul Society Migrant Refugee Centre co-ordinator Mary Ireland.

Ms Ireland says she’s not sure whether the charitable centre – which relies solely on donations – can cope with taking on more asylum seekers.

“We wish we could do more but we can’t and we’re thinking how long can we stretch this piece of string,” she says. “If we can’t assist these people, we are going to see whole families homeless.”

In the past year, the centre has assisted 45 people cut from the SRSS program — the most recent an asylum seeker from Pakistan on a temporary protection visa.

The centre provides rental assistance, food cards, non-perishable food and toiletries.

Australian Red Cross SA manager of migration and emergencies Jai O’Toole says more than 123 asylum seekers have sought help from the charity’s emergency relief service since July.

He says while the impact of SRSS changes is still being understood, over 80 per cent of people seeking support were not eligible under SRSS.

“We’ve seen an increase in people presenting who are homeless, without financial support and basic necessities like food and medication,” he says.

Bowden NGO (non-government organisation) Welcome to Australia

“I have to sacrifice a lot of my own food, my own medication to provide food for my children or to pay for rent.”



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 Welcoming
Australia

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STRUGGLING: Farough with her three daughters Forozan, 5, Fryal, 11 months, and Ferdos 9, whose support payments have been cut and they cannot access Medicare. Picture: MATT TURNER



says it has assisted up to 80 people impacted by SRSS cuts since May, with more and more people walking through the door.

“Every week we are seeing more and more people who are no longer eligible for SRSS and they have increasingly complex needs,” founder Brad Chilcott says.

“They are contending with higher power bills, a lack of affordable housing – particularly for families and the vast majority of them are not ready for employment.”

“Without income they will almost certainly be at risk of losing the rooves over their heads, being unable to feed their families and will be reliant on the generosity of emergency relief services and a small band of thoughtful supportive citizens,” SACOSS chief executive Ross Womersley says.

“Add to that the fact they will not be given further assistance to find work, they will of course be extremely vulnerable to all manner of proposals to obtain an income including from any employers who seek to take advantage of their vulnerability.”

SACOSS’s parent body ACOSS is among almost 100 Australian organisations now lobbying the Government to reverse the SRSS program cuts. “It is an unsustainable system,” St Vincent de Paul Society Migrant Refugee Centre Special Works Committee chairman Henrietta Wighton says.

She says asylum seekers are keen and desperate to work but many have no local work experience, no local contacts, they have language barriers and their experience and qualifications from abroad are often unrecognised.

She says asylum seekers can’t afford to invest in education or training and are often forced into exploitative situations and underpaid work to pay for rising utility bills and food insecurity, and a lack of affordable housing – all without any assistance.

“They are not living off the welfare system as the government would want us to believe. There needs to be a change in policy,” Ms Wighton says.

“I don’t think it’s achieving anything by treating people like this – this is how you create people who are despairing and without hope.”

■ ■ ■

Asylum Seekers Resource Centre director of advocacy and campaigns Jana Favero says the scale of unmet need is “distressing” to asylum seeker support services now close to or at capacity.

“We are expecting that over 7000 people nationwide will be impacted, leaving them destitute and without access to basic necessities such as food and housing,” she says. “So far, mostly single people have been impacted, (but) we are expecting the cuts to continue to roll out from early next year, with a focus on families.

“The impact is not only being felt by organisations working with people seeking asylum but also mainstream agencies due to the number of people now presenting in such destitution.”

While many of the state’s mainstream homelessness and emergency relief agencies contacted by the *Sunday Mail* say they are yet to see a spike in asylum seekers across their services, any increase in demand would be challenging.

“Could homelessness services assist an extra 500 people? Absolutely not!” Shelter SA executive director Dr Alice Clark says.

“We would struggle to support any increased demand on our service,” Salvation Army emergency relief program SA director Margaret Davies says.

“The demand for assistance across the range of Vinnies services is growing year on year, so any significant additional demand will potentially reduce the support we are able to offer individuals,” St Vincent de Paul Society SA chief executive officer David Wark says.

“It is our hope to never turn anyone away, but we don’t have an infinite supply of goods and funds – something has to give.”

■ ■ ■

Meanwhile, mum of three daughters Farough, from Iran, and her husband have been foraging for assistance from several church groups and charities since February when their SRSS payments were removed.

Food and making rent are Farough’s biggest worries and feeding her 10-month-old girl.

“I have to buy formula for baby because I have no milk,” she says.

Farough’s husband – a coffee merchant in Iran – has been in and out of work.

“He has applied for many places but they all tell him that he has to wait until he gets a full visa,” she says.

Farough also suffers from anaemia and hyperparathyroidism, which affects the kidneys, muscles, bones and digestive system. She has no access to Medicare.

“It’s been very difficult. I have to sacrifice a lot of my own food, my own medication to provide food for my children or to pay for rent,” she says.

Unable to return to Iran, Farough and her family are pinning their hopes on a change in the visa policy.

“I can’t return to my country — I don’t know what else we can do.”



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Case studies

From St Vincent de Paul Society SA

FAMILY

Mother, father and two children
(aged 4 and 5).

From Vietnam
Bridging Visa

Migrated to Australia by boat in 2011
Were detained for one month at Christmas
Island

Now living in Adelaide's western suburbs
Appealing rejection of Safe Haven Enterprise
Visa application. Hearing date not before
2019.

Special benefits (SRSS) cut, no work rights.
Living off family, friends and charities.

Charity worker says: "The impact of trying
to make ends meet to support themselves
and their children, together with the uncer-
tainty over their future has had an enormous
and ongoing effect on their mental and
physical health."

SINGLE MAN (since married)

Aged 29

From Afghanistan
Bridging Visa

Migrated to Australia by boat in March 2013
Detained at Christmas Island and Western
Australia for two months

Now living in Elizabeth.
Appealing rejection of Safe Haven Enterprise
Visa application in 2017. Hearing date not
before 2019.

Special benefits (SRSS) cut.

Married this year and has a young child.
Living off wife's family, friends and charities.

Charity worker says: "He is no longer
eligible for any case work support and has
found it difficult to secure employment given
the current state of his visa application."



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STATELESS: Dil is trying his hand at growing vegetables to get by.
Picture: TRICIA WATKINSON



STRETCHED: Asylum seeker "Alan" with Mary Ireland from St Vincent de Paul Society SA.