

Refugee Raneem, 18, shows the diary in which she has shared her feelings on everything from fleeing persecution in Iraq to studying for her final exams in Australia. Opposite page: Sahro cherished a photograph of her missing father, while she and her sister lived in a Kenyan refugee camp.



IN MY HANDS

Every year, *their young lives shaped by war*, or their hearts broken by loss, hundreds of *children* make the *journey to freedom* in Australia. Here, some of them *share their stories* – and display *the only possession* they brought with them. By Nicole Partridge

CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS



“I carried around a picture of my dad, which reminded me of happier times”

Sahro (Sara), 17, fled Somalia when she was 10. After her parents went missing, she took care of her sister while living in a refugee camp before coming to Australia when she was 13.

“I was nine when my mum and dad went to work and never came home. On the first night, I stood in front of my house looking down the road for my parents to return, until our neighbours called me inside. The next morning, I waited outside for six hours. On the third day, I knew in my heart that something bad had happened to them.

“Some people from our neighbourhood told me they had seen some dead bodies and that my dad might be one of them. Another lady told us our mum couldn’t get back to us. After that, my little sister, who was eight, stopped talking for weeks. She just sat in the corner of the room staring. I was strong for her, but I would go around the corner and cry.

“After that, I carried around a picture of my dad, which reminded me of happier times; playing hide and seek and falling asleep on his lap.

“After my parents disappeared, we lived in a refugee camp in Kenya until my cousin sponsored us to come to Australia. Three years later, we arrived here and the next day they took us to see the Opera House, but I didn’t care, I just wanted to find my mum.

“After a year, I got a call from the Red Cross telling me that they had found my mum in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. I called her on her neighbour’s phone. When I hear her voice, I cried for an hour. She told me that bad things had happened and she couldn’t get to us. I just kept saying, ‘Mam! Mam! Mam!’ I was crying and she was crying. I found my mum, but somehow I lost the picture of my dad.” When I finish school, I will get a job and sponsor my mum to come to Australia.”



“I miss playing soccer with my friends”

Sabit was six when he and his family left war-torn Sudan. They spent seven years in a refugee camp in Uganda before being granted refugee status, and arriving in Australia in February.

“I miss playing soccer with my friends in Sudan, but it was not safe. The rebels were everywhere – I saw many people die. I was five when they killed my father and I ran away with my mother and brothers. But I can’t talk about that.

“We went to a camp in Uganda, but it was no good. The water was dirty and we were always hungry and scared at night. I heard stories about the rebels taking children to be child soldiers. Then one day, my older brother went missing. He was 16. I was so scared and Mum was wailing and stopped eating for many days. Even now we don’t know where he is. Leaving Uganda without my brother made me very sad.

“We lived in the camp for seven years, until we came to Australia. Before I left Uganda, I bought these blue shoes at the market. I wore them on the plane. We met my sister and people from Settlement Services International at the airport. They took us to a home with furniture and food and everyone was nice to us.

“Australia is beautiful and peaceful. No war. No violence. I am learning the language at school. I play soccer in Australia – just as I did in Sudan. My brother would have liked Australia.”

“We left all my toys behind”

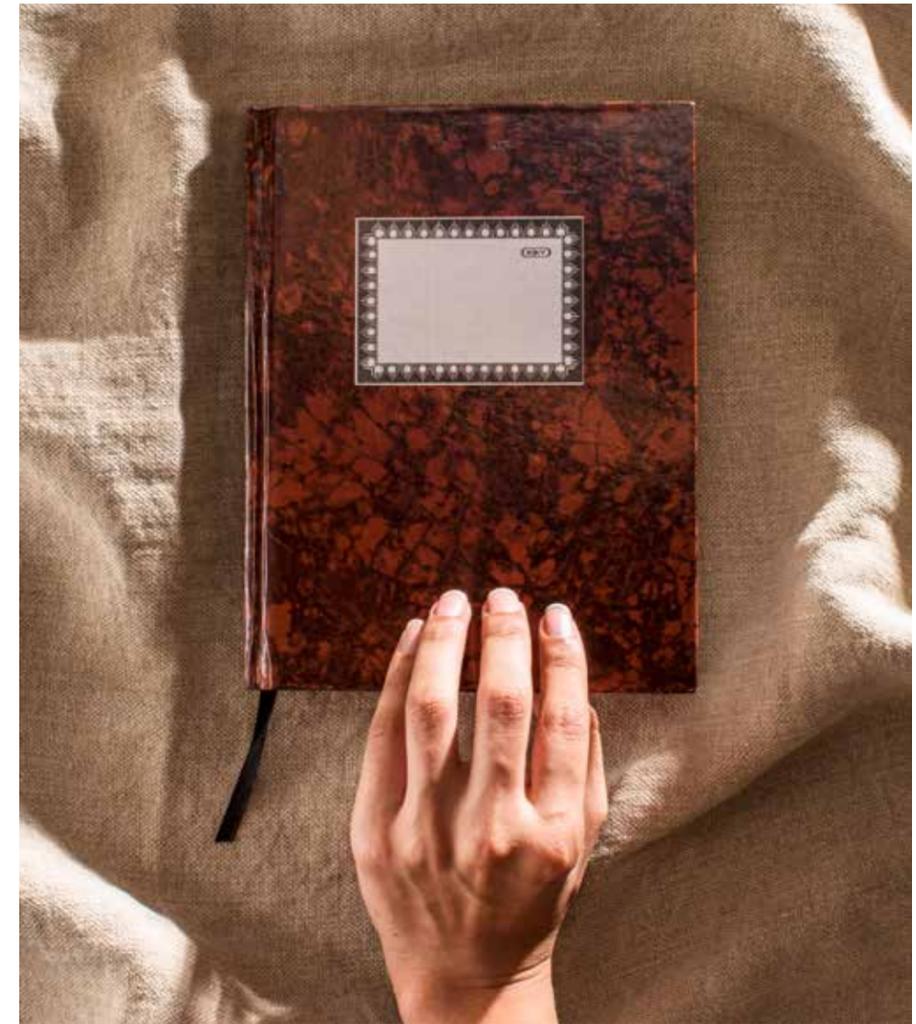
Abdullah, 14, fled wars in Iraq and Syria, before arriving in Australia two years ago with his mother and sister.

“I had a cupboard full of my favourite toys in Iraq, but we left them all behind. My cousin, who lived in Syria at the time, gave me one of his toys – this red and yellow car. I carried it with me every time we moved from Syria to Iraq and back because of war. Eventually, it wasn’t safe for us to live in Iraq or Syria.

“In Iraq, I saw bombs exploding, people being shot and many dead bodies lying on the streets; I was scared and didn’t want to leave my house. One time, I was walking down the street when a bomb exploded next to me. There was blood everywhere and I was taken to hospital. Now, I have a scar under my chin. In 2008, my dad was taken by [a criminal gang]. My mum cried. A lot. I was thinking, ‘Now, we have no-one to protect us.’ Four years later, we applied to live in Australia and left Syria not knowing if my dad was dead or alive. We took nothing except our clothing and my car – I played with it on the plane.

“When we arrived in Australia, I thought, ‘It is beautiful, like Syria,’ but in my heart I wished my Dad was with us. Then last year, we got a phone call from my uncle who told us my dad was free. We were so happy. I spoke to him on the phone and cried. He will be coming to Australia soon.”

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS. *THE IMAGE FEATURED IN THIS STORY AND ON THE PREVIOUS PAGE HAS BEEN USED FOR REPRESENTATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY



“Reading my diary makes me realise just how far I’ve come”

Raneem, 18, and her mother and father fled Iraq when she was 11. She spent four years in Indonesia before coming to Australia in 2011.

“A friend gave me this diary in Indonesia and I wrote in it every day. On the day the embassy called with the news we could go to Australia, I remember writing, ‘Finally, I will be able to go and make my dreams come true. Finally, I will be having a normal life.’

“Up to this point, life had not been normal. We fled Iraq because of persecution. My father was Sunni and my mother was Shiite and in our country the two don’t mix. We left for Indonesia, where I lived for the next four years while waiting to be processed.

“Living there was hard for me. I didn’t speak the language and wasn’t able to go to school. We applied to the UN to come to Australia, but it was taking too long, so my father decided to take

the risk to come by boat. ‘I want you to have a good education and I want you to have a good place where you can feel safe and happy,’ he said to me before he left.

“After arriving in Australia, he was put in detention. He saw terrible things: people who were depressed, some who tried to hurt themselves. Even now, my father can’t forget the naked young man clinging to an electricity pole for two days refusing food and assistance until he was given information about his case.

“My dad was released after three months and sponsored us to come to Australia. When I saw him at the airport, I hugged him tightly. To be honest, it has been very hard here. At school, nobody understood me and, at times, I felt like people aren’t happy with me living in this country. I cried a lot.

“I am stronger now and studying my HSC. I still write in my diary. Reading it makes me realise just how far I have come.”

“Everybody was praying ... I was crying”

Murtaza, 15, and his family are Hazara people and came to Australia by boat from Pakistan in 2011.

“It was very dark outside when we left. We didn’t say goodbye to anyone and we didn’t take anything with us. When we got in the car, the agent said, ‘Shhh! Be quiet. I am taking you to a good country.’

“In Pakistan, I was always scared. I saw bomb blasts and dead bodies all the time. I found out recently my good friend, Mehdi, was killed by a bomb.

“After leaving Pakistan, we travelled to Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. After that, the agent said, ‘Let’s go to the boat, it’s a boat to Australia.’ I had never seen the sea before, so when we got on the boat my dad put me on his shoulders as we walked into the water. It was night and I was very scared. On the boat, a man gave me half an apple and some bread, but I wasn’t hungry. Everybody was sick. The boat was [heaving] and crashing and we saw a shark. Everybody was praying, ‘God help me!’ I was crying.

“After three days we reached Australia and they took us to Christmas Island. I saw the mountains and trees. I was really happy and thought, ‘Oh my God, I am in Australia. I am really lucky.’ They gave us shoes and clothes and told us to have a shower. We stayed there for five months and now we live in Hobart and I go to school. My new life is good, although I miss my friend Mehdi.”



“At night, on the boat, it was freezing. I am glad for my jacket”

Bashir, 17, an orphan, travelled from Afghanistan to Australia alone when he was 15. He came by boat and ended up in detention.

“I didn’t want to leave my country, but I had no choice. My father was murdered by the Taliban and my mother got sick and died. At first, I went to live with my uncle, but we had no safety. I couldn’t go to school or leave the house because I would have been killed by the Taliban. I slept a lot and cried. Then my uncle, he said to me, ‘Bashir, if you cry ... nothing will change.’ He tells me there is no hope in Afghanistan, and he sold my dad’s grocery shop to pay for me to travel to Pakistan.

“On the day we left, we stopped at the Kabul markets. My uncle said, ‘You will be cold, Bashir, I will buy you this jacket.’ At the border, he put me in a taxi and told the driver to take me to Pakistan. From there I went to Indonesia. On the day we left on the fishing boat, a man told me to take nothing: ‘We have everything you need, my friend.’ There was nothing. No food. No water. I sat upright on

a wooden bench with 70 people for seven days and nights. I am vomiting and crying. I thought this is the end of the line. By day, we are in hot sun. At night, it was freezing. I am glad for my jacket.

“Finally, we arrive in Christmas Island in 2011. I am so happy – and then they tell me I am in detention. This was shock to me: you have been through so much and they lock you up in a small, crammed room with six other children. It was the worst experience of my life. I got very anxious about my future. Even now, I have nightmares.

“Every day I’d asked, ‘How long do I need to be in detention?’ They could not tell me. Once I was on an excursion from the detention centre and we passed a school with children playing, and I am wishing I could be free like them.

“Life is better now, I am living in Sydney and studying for my HSC. If my mum and dad were here I know what they would say. They would tell me: ‘We are very proud of you, Bashir, that you did this journey and came all the way by yourself – you are very brave!’” ▷



“Maybe my son will play again”

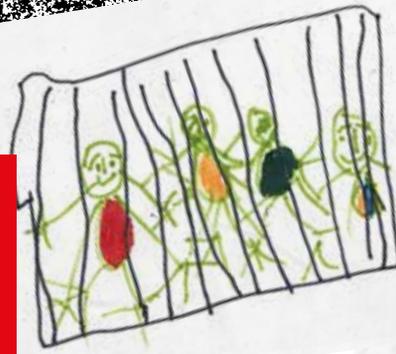
Veestal, 21, who has a mild intellectual disability, came to Australia when he was 12 after fleeing Iran with his mother and father. They arrived by plane. His father tells his story.

“My son’s favourite instrument was his recorder, which we brought with us from Iran. But now, my son has stopped playing. A few years ago, he got angry and was diagnosed with depression. We think he had a breakdown. He had lots of pressures of learning a new language, going to a new school and living with the memories of our hard life in Iran.

“After the [Islamic] revolution, everything changed and many were persecuted because of their beliefs. We are Baha’i [Faith], and I lost my job. My son’s teachers left the school and were replaced by muftis [Islamic teachers]. My son was mistreated; the children would taunt him and the teachers would yell at him. One time my son went on an excursion and because he was a little bit slow, the teacher got upset with him and said, ‘If you are not going to keep up with the other kids, I am going to dig a hole and bury you in it!’ My son came home crying and stopped speaking after that.

“There was no future for my son in Iran, so we made the decision to come to Australia. We knew Australia was a good country and we could have freedom. Maybe my son will play the recorder again; that would make me very happy.”

Drawings by children in Australian detention depict a sad story of young lives in limbo. It has been reported that some children sign their pictures with ID numbers rather than their names.



CHILDREN IN DETENTION

For a variety of reasons – especially if they arrive by boat – a significant proportion of underage asylum seekers wind up in immigration detention. Ten years ago, a national inquiry by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) found that not only was Australia breaching international law by locking up such children, it was placing them at risk of serious mental and physical harm.

Despite this, there are still hundreds of children in detention. At the end of June this year, 892 were being held in detention centres. (As of March 31, they had been detained for an average of 231 days.) Although the government announced plans to release some into the community by the end of the year, hundreds will remain locked up on Christmas Island and Nauru.

In February, AHRC president Professor Gillian Triggs announced a fresh inquiry “to investigate the ways in which life in immigration detention affects the health, well-being and development of children.”

In a series of public hearings, doctors, social workers and psychologists have advised that children in detention face a high risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, nightmares, bedwetting, stuttering and twitching. As Elizabeth Elliott, professor of child health at The University of Sydney, explains, children have often fled trauma and violence before coming to Australia. Detaining them and their families in inhospitable surrounds with little information about what will happen to them next is “re-traumatising”.

In one submission, an anonymous staff member on Christmas Island described the

area where families are detained as filled with rubbish, rats, mosquitoes and stinging centipedes.

Professor Triggs, who made two trips to Christmas Island during the inquiry, says toys and games are scarce. “Children are wandering around the dust with the chickens,” she says. “They’re bored out of their minds.”

They are also unwell. When Professor Elliott visited in July, many of the children had chest or gut infections. She concedes that children in the community also get sick, but families on Christmas Island live so close together that “this makes it almost impossible to control the spread of diseases”.

The inquiry has also heard disturbing evidence of inadequate medical care for the children there. This includes a three-year-old girl who had her epilepsy medication taken from her family when they arrived on Christmas Island. It is standard practice for asylum seekers to give up their drugs on arrival, but replacement medication was not found quickly enough and the girl had seizures.

Between January 2013 and March 2014, there were also 128 reported incidents of children self-harming in detention.” The inquiry heard of children banging their heads, putting plastic bags over their heads, drinking detergent, jumping from heights and of cutting and hanging themselves.

Immigration minister Scott Morrison says that the Coalition government has reduced the numbers of children in detention by about 35 per cent since winning the election last year, and is “continuing to improve” services for them. He also says the government will consider the AHRC report when it is released later this year. □

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS. ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY JUDITH IRELAND. *A LAST RESORT: NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN IN IMMIGRATION DETENTION 2004. **NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN IN DETENTION 2014. MAREE CLAIRE WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING ORGANISATIONS FOR THEIR ASSISTANCE IN COMPILING THIS STORY: AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, ANGLICARE, SETTLEMENT SERVICES INTERNATIONAL, AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS AND WELCOME TO AUSTRALIA