

Plight of the Sierra Leone Athletes

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The West African country known as the Republic of Sierra Leone, bordered by Guinea, Liberia and the Atlantic Ocean, made its Commonwealth Games debut in 1958. Since then it has made eight further appearances, with its most recent being at the Manchester and Melbourne Commonwealth Games.¹

During the Melbourne Commonwealth Games, the athletes from Sierra Leone received widespread media attention, not due to their feats on the track, but rather because of their ability to run and hide. In fact, if hide and seek was a recognised Commonwealth Games event, Sierra Leone would be the defending games champion.

Sierra Leone was represented at the Melbourne Commonwealth Games by 22 sportspersons and 13 officials. On 22 March 2006, it was reported that seven athletes from Sierra Leone had gone missing. A further seven Sierra Leone athletes also went missing during the course of the Games, bringing the total runaway count to 14. Eleven athletes from other nations – Cameroon, Bangladesh and Tanzania – also fled the village. At the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester, 21 of the 30 strong Sierra Leone team went missing.²

On request of Sierra Leone games officials, the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) cancelled the missing athletes' Games accreditations, allowing the Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) to cancel their visas at midnight on Monday, 27 March 2006, and to begin investigating the disappearance of the athletes. On the same day six of the athletes were discovered in Sydney.³ Without hesitation, all six indicated they wished to seek political asylum in Australia. These six were granted bridging visas by DIMA while their refugee applications were being considered.

The athletes base their application on the fact that they claim to have been subjected to violence and torture in their home country. As an example, 17-year-old female athlete states that she fears she could be forced into female mutilation⁴ if she returned, her sister recently having died from the ritualised procedure.⁵

Eventually, the remaining missing Sierra Leone athletes turned themselves into immigration officials in Sydney. All 14 athletes have been granted bridging visas.

Ironically, the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) has at its heart the following three core values:



Sierra Leone athletes seeking asylum in Australia.

- humanity;
- equality (clearly the medal tallies do not exhibit equality); and
- destiny.⁶

For most of the competing athletes, these core values would have involved:

- comradeship;
- attaining ones goal at attempting to write your name into the history record books; or
- simply competing on the same event as a recognised athletic superstar.

For the Sierra Leone athletes, the core values meant something totally different:

- a desire not to be treated in an inhumane manner, thereby avoiding their often predetermined fate of torture, mutilation and circumcision; and
- where equality was not sought on the playing field but rather on a day-to-day basis (a fundamental right taken for granted by so many).

The irony of the situation is that the Sierra Leone athletes have chosen to place their destiny in the hands of

Leone athletes are willing to take. This may be something the Western World cannot truly begin to comprehend.

When does a human decide that the risk that you may lose your life travelling on an overcrowded and undersupplied boat, only to be shipped offshore to an immigration detention centre, outweigh the acceptance of enduring the status quo? Likewise, in what circumstances does an individual subject themselves to the rigours of qualifying as a member of the Sierra Leone Commonwealth Games team outweigh the enjoyment of everyday events?

A brief historical account of Sierra Leone may provide only a glimmer as to why the Sierra Leone athletes are prone to remain in Australia. Sierra Leone has only recently emerged from a decade of civil war, and then only because of the help of Britain and a large United Nations peacekeeping mission.

The civil war left Sierra Leone in disarray. Not only were there more than 50,000 people left dead, but a large portion of the population were left disabled. The rebels' trademark during the civil war was to hack off the hands of their victims. Additionally, Sierra Leone faces ongoing problems of poverty, corresponding unemployment, continued tribal rivalry and official corruption, all of which originally caused the war.¹⁰

Given this background, a stay at an immigration detention centre would seem like a weekend away at the Hilton, but only where the stay was short-term. Any extended processing time will only result in one form of inequality and deprivation of human dignity being substituted for another.

The plight of the Sierra Leone athletes' highlights the freedoms taken for granted on a daily basis by so many of us. There is undoubtedly justification in ensuring that any asylum application is meritorious in an attempt to prevent an uncontrollable influx of unwanted migration. Whether an applicant has a meritorious claim or not should at least be determined within the realms of equality. To afford an individual different treatment based upon the chosen (or in most cases only) form of transport is arbitrary and in no way represents any notion of fairness or equality.

1. www.thecgf.com/countries/intro.asp?loc=SLE.

2. www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200604/s1610638.htm and the following figures represent

previous Commonwealth Games disappearances: 21 Sierra Leoneans, five Bangladeshis, one Pakistani all went missing in Manchester 2002. At the Asian Games: 12 Nepalese, three Sri Lankans and one Mongolian went missing in S Korea. At the 2000 Sydney Olympics: 80 officials and athletes overstayed visas.

3. "Seven athletes do a runner", *Herald Sun*, March 23, 2006. "Sierra Leone athletes found", *The Age*, March 27, 2006.

4. Female genital cutting (FGC) refers to amputation of any part of the female genitalia for cultural, rather than medical reasons.

5. www.abc.net.au/sport/content/200603/s1601888.htm.

6. www.thecgf.com/home.asp.

7. www.theage.com.au/news/national/proposed-migration-laws-unforgivable/2006/05/11/1146940659132.html.

8. www.smh.com.au/articles/2006/04/14/1144521487389.html.

9. Note 8 above.

10. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1061561.stm and www.abc.net.au/sport/content/200603/s1601888.htm.

an immigration system that some argue is regarded as verging on becoming inhumane and unforgivable.⁷ Under changes to immigration law, any refugees entering Australia illegally by boat, would be sent to one of three detention processing centres offshore.⁸

Interestingly enough, the new processing approach would not apply to the Sierra Leone athletes, as they arrived by plane and not boat. The adoption of an offshore processing system and arbitrary distinction between arriving by plane or boat may in fact mean that Australia is in breach of its international obligations.⁹ All asylum seekers ought to be treated equally.

The inhumanity of the asylum seekers being shipped offshore or being treated unequally is a chance the Sierra



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