

REPLY TO APPLE DAILY NEWS REPORTS ON 12 AND 13 NOVEMBER ABOUT AN ALLEDGED REFUGEE COUPON SCAM

Apple Daily is often a voice for the powerless, challenging inequalities and injustices in Hong Kong society. However, the Refugee Union is deeply displeased that Apple Daily recently depicted refugees as culprits in a major scam involving food coupons distributed by the government contractor ISS-HK to refugees as part of our humanitarian assistance.

The news reports failed to cover the issue in a comprehensive manner. They failed to explain to readers the complex situation that refugees face in Hong Kong. Worse yet, they further stigmatized us, arguably inciting the very discrimination and bias Apple Daily generally opposes.

It should be stressed that refugees are forbidden by law to work and face harsh penalties for doing so. And yet we wait several years, sometimes ten or more, for our asylum claims to be determined by the Immigration Department. The author failed to consider how refugees are supposed to live for years without income, in a foreign city, where few are willing to help with the cash we desperately need on a daily basis. Who lives without cash in Hong Kong?

The Hong Kong Government provides us with meagre assistance that is seriously inadequate and egregiously fails to meet our basic daily needs. It consists monthly of \$1500 in rental allowance, \$1200 worth of food coupons, \$300 for electricity and water fees, and up to \$300 for transportation. This assistance has been calculated to be more than 30% below what is necessary to lift a person out of poverty. This means that the government assistance leaves us destitute for years!

Further, not all refugees receive assistance and in some cases this is denied or delayed. And the rental allowance is insufficient to even rent the cheapest “coffin room”, now offered at a minimum of \$1800.

It is hardly unreasonable that some refugees may cope with financial hardship by selling food coupons. There is no way refugees can profit from selling the coupons at two-third of their actual value. Sometimes this is the harsh reality we face. We must sell the coupons to pay for rent, utilities, clothing and other necessities that are not sufficiently provided through government assistance. As a matter of facts, some landlords are only too glad to have rent surpluses paid in food coupons – at 70\$ for each 100\$ note. It is indicative of resident exploitation of vulnerable refugees.

The fact that some refugees sell their food coupons does not imply that we can do without the government food assistance. Quite to the contrary, Wellcome is expensive, and the food we are used to eating is not necessarily available in

supermarkets. Refugees might therefore get better value for their money by selling their coupons, using the cash for other necessities and then purchasing groceries at cheap ethnic stores. Such is the harsh economics of survival for refugees prohibited for working and jailed 15 to 22 months for such an ‘offense’.

Further, Apple Daily labeled such refugees as part of “South Asian gangs”, or as being part of a specific ethnicity, highlighting a “Pakistani man” in a headline. This is misleading to say the least. Are all Pakistanis, refugees? Are all refugees, gangsters? Are all gangsters, Pakistanis?

The article emphasized the lack of regulation by the ISS-HK, and that selling and buying the coupons is illegal. Yet, even here, the author might have consulted more than a lawyer, or inquired if any refugee or resident has been convicted for trading such coupons. We have not heard of any. The Refugee Union brought this issue to the attention of the public on several occasions already. It is hardly new information and might not even be newsworthy.

It is grossly unfair that the reporter failed to understand the unjust policies that force refugees to sell their food coupons. Recently, refugees in Hong Kong have been targeted by some media outlets, politicians, and government as “faked refugees.” Regrettably, no media has yet pushed for an understanding of the responsibility of cosmopolitan Hong Kong to protect the human rights of refugees.

Hong Kong’s current refugee policies create a situation in which opportunities are created for people who will not hesitate to profit from the vulnerability of others, yet refugees are the ones that get blamed. We hope that Apple Daily will investigate the problem in a fair and thorough manner.

The Refugee Union looks forward to replying to any questions the reporter might have on the matter. Thank you.

Refugee Union

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