

By email

Security Bureau9/F, East Wing, Central Government Offices
2 Tim Mei Avenue
Tamar
Hong Kong**Attention: Hon. Secretary for Security Lai Tung Kwok, SBS, ISSM, JP,**

23 November 2016

Honorable Sir,

Ref. Demand for “rent guarantors” is irrational

As stated on the website, “the Security Bureau is responsible for a wide-ranging policy portfolio, including exercising effective and efficient immigration control”. We understand that your portfolio comprises various policies and procedures relating to non-refoulement claimants – hereafter generally referred to as refugees.

Vision First is a NGO concerned with the wellbeing of refugees as they await determination of asylum claims in Hong Kong. In this capacity, we respectfully draw your attention to the demands raised on 21 November 2016 by a group of refugees, the Refugee Union, at the head-office of the Social Welfare Department in Wanchai (SWD). A brief report by Vision First is available [here](#).

We are informed that the Refugee Union requested an urgent response to 3 (three) petitions lodged with the SWD head-office on [18 July 2016](#), on [8 August 2016](#) and on [14 November 2016](#). For your convenience, the petitions are available through the hyperlinks of their respective dates. We understand that no substantive reply was received in four months despite the dire conditions suffered by refugees.

As indicated in the last petition, challenged by rapidly rising rents, the Refugee Union requested that the SWD, “*Arrange our Tenancy Agreements be signed by ISS-HK case-workers with the rental burden shifted to Hong Kong Government because we refugees are destitute and don’t have the right to seek employment.*”

On 21 November 2016, I witnessed a SWD officer repeatedly assuring a refugee delegation that the problems raised in their petition would be “handled with the Security Bureau”. As of consequence, we assume that the SWD has hit a ceiling in its administrative capacities and is thus referring these matters to your bureau.

While we trust the Security Bureau is assessing an increase of the refugee assistance, last determined in January 2014, we seek clarity on a disturbing new policy deployed by the SWD contractor for the provision of assistance to the refugee community, the International Social Service (ISS-HK).

It is widely reported that ISS-HK caseworkers currently demand that refugees identify and contract RENT GUARANTORS, who must be holders of Hong Kong ID card, in order to approve the disbursement of the rental assistance for new or renewed tenancy agreements for the often illegally subdivided flats that refugees, like many local poor, inhabit.

In our view, this is an unreasonable demand.

Refugees are by definition persons who are forced to leave their country and, as such, should not be expected to form and maintain trusting friendships with residents who are willing to shoulder their long-term financial burdens. This policy is particularly irrational considering that the levels of assistance afforded to refugees fail to meet their basic needs – despite government documents stating that preventing destitution is the objective of the current in-kind humanitarian assistance programme. Further, academics in Hong Kong have noted that this level of assistance, aggravated by the method of its distribution, is below what is deemed necessary to lift a person out of poverty.

Given the above evidence, we believe that it is unfair to blame and criminalize refugees for trying to scrape a living, often by working unlawfully, when their basic needs are not sufficiently met by Hong Kong Government; their rental allowance is forfeited when refugees are unable to locate a good-willed resident, who will pay for their rental surplus in an increasingly unaffordable city for the lower classes; and refugees are widely depicted negatively by the media as abusive welfare cheats and criminals. Against such a terrible public imagine, it is very unlikely that 11,000 refugees will secure the ongoing financial support of legal residents without a high profile encouragement drive by Hong Kong Government.

We are afraid that a housing crisis is looming. As a result, thousands of refugees may soon lose their homes, enlarging the scores of homeless that abound in this city. We all know that where poverty and desperation tangle, criminality thrives. We hardly believe this to be a wise and advisable development for your bureau and Hong Kong.

Vision First would be grateful for an urgent review of the legal, social and security implications of demanding that refugees identify RENT GUARANTORS to shoulder the rent surpluses that ironically are created by an assistance vacuum engineered by Hong Kong Government for refugees who are nonetheless incarcerated for up to two years for working illegally.

In this respect, it is further noted that refugees have been arrested and sentenced also for hawking fresh mangos and inexpensive clothes on the side of the streets – a common sight generally tolerated in Hong Kong.

Vision First respectfully requests that the Security Bureau reformulate its overall welfare and protection policies towards the refugee community, to ensure that adequate assistance and protection are offered to foreigners who entrust their lives in the hands of Hong Kong Government.

Sincerely yours,

Cosmo Beatson

Cosmo Beatson
Executive Director

cc. Social Welfare Department