

Social Welfare Department

8/F, Wu Chung House
213 Queen's Road East
Wanchai

18 July 2016

Attn. Ms. Aegean Chan

Dear Ms. Chan,

Ref. Request for the urgent increase in levels of assistance

The Refugee Union is extremely concerned about the suffering of asylum seekers who depend exclusively on Hong Kong Government's assistance through services provided by the Social Welfare Department (SWD). The levels of assistance were last revised in January 2014 and amount to HK\$1200 in food coupons and HK\$1500 in rent assistance. **These amounts fail outrageously to meet our basic needs and prevent destitution, as demanded by law.**

The High Court Usman Butt Judgment (HCMA 70/2010) stated that, *"A genuine torture or refugee claimant deserves sympathy and should not be left in a destitute state during the determination of his status. His basic needs such as accommodation, food, clothing and medical care are provided by the Government ... The provision of that assistance clearly removes the need of a genuine claimant to seek employment pending the determination of his claim"*.

Refugees are banned from working. We are increasingly arrested for attempting to survive within restrictive legal boundaries that appear designed to make our life impossible in one of the world's most expensive cities. For example, we understand that an elderly refugee lady from Vietnam was recently sentenced to 15 months imprisonment for recycling discarded soft-drink cans sold for a handful of dollars a kilo. Every week there is more troubling news of refugees arrested for working illegally to supplement the insufficient aid distributed by your department.

The Refugee Union has tried in vain to request additional assistance from SWD for suffering refugees, yet our pleas invariably fall on deaf ears. We are told that the SWD is unable to offer further assistance because the levels of assistance are set outside your department. We are however unaware of any advocacy by the SWD in meeting its broader mandate of assuring 'social welfare' to the most vulnerable men, women and children living and suffering under its watch in Hong Kong.

The Refugee Union respectfully request your immediate intervention to:

1. Have rent paid in full and Tenancy Agreements signed by ISS case-workers;
2. Increase the food coupons value to HK\$1500 a month;
3. Replace the wasteful distribution of substandard toiletries with one HK\$100 coupon;

We look forward to collaborating with your department to resolve these pressing problems.

Sincerely,
Refugee Union