

**For Immediate Release**

**Contact: Aideen McLaughlin 5365 7654; [amclaughlin@hkrac.org](mailto:amclaughlin@hkrac.org)**

## **Hong Kong Refugee Advice Centre to relaunch as Justice Centre Hong Kong**

### **NGO extends its services in face of ‘wholly inadequate’ refugee screening mechanism**

Hong Kong Refugee Advice Centre is to relaunch as Justice Centre Hong Kong at the end of March, to meet the increased need for their services and address the gaps in the new screening mechanism for refugees and other protection claimants in Hong Kong, which starts this week.

Since it opened its doors in 2007, HKRAC has provided life-changing services to over 2000 refugees going through the UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) system in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Government is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention and where they refused to hear refugee claims here, the UNHCR has up-until-now filled that function.

The Hong Kong Government has however recently been forced by the Court of Final Appeal to screen protection claims themselves. In response, they have set up a new system which brings refugee claims (referred to by the government as ‘persecution’ claims) together with torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (CIDTP) claims under one process. These will be collectively known as ‘non-refoulement’ claims.

Leveraging HKRAC’s experience over the past seven years, Justice Centre Hong Kong will extend its services to offer high-quality, independent information and assistance in different languages to **ALL** protection claimants going through the new system. It will also provide individualised support and legal information to the most vulnerable people, those most at risk of falling through the cracks, to ensure their needs are met.

In the absence of concrete information about the new system, for the past two weeks HKRAC has been holding information sessions at its centre in Sai Ying Pun, which have been filled to capacity with anxious refugees, torture claimants and other people seeking protection here.

Some, but not all claimants, who have already filed a torture claim with the Hong Kong Government have been sent an official letter from the Immigration Department telling them what they should do next. The letters are in legal language and in English, so many cannot understand them.

Refugees who have gone through the UNHCR system only have not received any official correspondence from the government, but have been advised by UNHCR to write a letter to the Immigration Department registering their desire to lodge a protection claim in Hong Kong. They are not being offered any legal

or other help from the government at this stage of the process to enable them to do this. UNHCR is no longer accepting claims.

HKRAC's Executive Director **Aleta Miller** said:

*"This is a shambles. The government is doing the bare minimum to meet their obligations under the order from the Court of Final Appeal, but nothing more. For people fleeing from serious human rights abuses such as war, torture and rape, this is wholly inadequate. The decisions the government will make under the new system could mean the difference between life and death for the people we work with and it's extremely difficult for them to get clear information on how to even enter it.*

*"This is a system with no direct means of access. There is no information for NGOs or claimants, no dedicated telephone number, no website, no public counter, no frontline staff. It seems this is a deliberate ploy by the government to make it as difficult as possible for refugees and other people seeking protection here to access it. It's a farce with the most dire of human consequences at stake. The government must do better."*

HKRAC is currently helping those who cannot speak or write English with letters to the Immigration Department. When it relaunches as Justice Centre Hong Kong at the end of March, it will introduce additional information sessions to address the broader concerns of the protection community. With the addition of a new advocacy officer to the team, it will also step-up its efforts to pressure the government to improve the system to ensure people seeking protection here are not sent back home to face torture, persecution or even death.

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**Notes to Editors:**

Hong Kong Refugee Advice Centre is a human rights organisation that protects and promotes the rights of refugees in Hong Kong [www.hkrac.org](http://www.hkrac.org)

HKRAC is currently running independent and accessible information sessions in different languages on the new screening mechanism for all people seeking protection in Hong Kong. Protection claimants can reserve a place by calling 3109 7359.

HKRAC will operate as Justice Centre Hong Kong from March 24, 2014.

Justice Centre Hong Kong is a not-for-profit human rights organisation striving fearlessly to protect Hong Kong's most vulnerable forced migrants. Justice Centre Hong Kong will tackle issues that affect refugees, other people seeking protection in Hong Kong and survivors of trafficking.