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To the Editor,

Each year I go to Thailand to teach refugees in camps on the Burmese border. Amongst them are the best and brightest students I have ever encountered. They would walk into any Australian university. But they can't. Not one of them has been in camp for less than 5 years. Some have been there for 25 years. That's because there are 350,000 Burmese refugees on the border.

There is no queue. The handful of UNHCR staff can process only the smallest fraction of those seeking escape from Burmese persecution. Refugees wait and despair. Camp can be a life sentence. It's the same for Afghans, Iraqis, Sri Lankans, Somalis.

Some take their courage in their hands and flee, pressed by hopelessness to try for a new beginning elsewhere. Maybe, even in Australia. Now what will await them?

If they arrive by boat on the shores of one of the most privileged countries on earth, they'll be sent back to the darkness and futility of camps in Malaysia - to 'go to the back of the queue'. No protection guaranteed by the Refugee Convention, or Australian or Malaysian law. This is cruelty, plain and simple.

I'm pleased that we will take 4000 more mainly Burmese refugees from Malaysia. But since plainly we can, why didn't it happen before? Instead, we create an unjust exchange at the cost of great and further suffering. I am so ashamed.

Professor Spencer Zifcak

President  
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