

Sport/ Hong Kong

Charity football tournament helps refugees and asylum seekers in Hong Kong feel more at home than away

Branches of Hope, a local charity, helps refugees and asylum seekers in Hong Kong adapt to new lives through “Home and Away” tournament

Tournament looks to use sport to help bridge the gap for those who have had to feel their homeland



Patrick Blennerhassett

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Hongkongers came out for Branches of Hope’s “Home and Away” charity football tournament at King’s Park. Photo: Handout

Hong Kong’s football community came out for the annual Home and Away charity football tournament at King’s Park on Thursday.

The yearly event helps to raise funds for Branches of Hope, a local charity serving refugees, asylum seekers and human trafficking victims in the city.

Executive director Aman Yee said that the charity hosted the first event back in 2014 and its aim is to help break the divide between the concept of “home and away” for refugees and asylum seekers in Hong Kong.

He added that the universal language of sport is a great place to start, however he would like to see the government be more welcoming to them.



Aman Yee, the executive director of Branches of Hope, which helps refugees in Hong Kong. Photo: Branches of Hope

“The policies in Hong Kong basically make them more marginalised and deprive them of their rights,” said Yee. “So through our programmes we hope to give them access to more opportunities. I think the idea with this is to showcase the talents of refugees and asylum seekers – and football is one of those ways. Sport is such a common language and it can cross barriers and helps people interact with each other.”

This year’s tournament featured 16 teams and more than 300 participants.



Branches of Hope's annual charity tournament took place at King's Park and featured more than 300 participants. Photo: Handout

According to government statistics, there are around 13,000 protection claimants in Hong Kong. There have been 231 substantiated claimants out of 22,737 torture/non-refoulement claims in the past 11 years, which is a one per cent substantiated rate.

During the last 10 years, 67 per cent of refugees have been granted status under the 1951 Refugee Convention globally and Europe's granted rate is 38 per cent. Most protection claimants in Hong Kong come from countries in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

Robson, who is originally from Pakistan and is an asylum seeker, has been in Hong Kong for 14 years and regularly helps with Branches of Hope. He said that this is his second time playing football as he regularly plays cricket. He said moving to a new country under difficult circumstances is never easy, but hopes others hold onto hope.



Branches of Hope has been hosting the charity event since 2014 and funding goes to a number of programmes which help refugees and asylum seekers in Hong Kong. Photo: Handout

“It’s very tough when you move somewhere where you don’t know anyone,” he said. “And you are in a new place and you don’t have any friends or family, and you just left your country because of problems, so it is one of the very tough challenges of life.”

He credited organisations such as Branches of Hope for being a big part of refugees’ lives and helping them transition to new communities while learning the culture and language.

Hong Kong claimants need to enter the city as a tourist and overstay their visa, they then surrender their status and file an application stating reasons why they cannot return to their home nation. The process generally takes six weeks, according to Branches of Hope’s website. If they are successful, they can then start receiving government subsidies.

Hong Kong’s International Social Service is commissioned by the government to provide social assistance and then applicants then start the Unified Screening System and file a non-refoulement claim. This process generally takes years, and claimants cannot work or volunteer during this time, and many are forced into relying on government subsidies and have to live under the poverty line.

Muhammed, who originally came from Gambia seven years ago and is a refugee, said he is grateful for being able to leave his country, though he hopes Hong Kong can continue to support refugees.

“I think things can always get better,” he said. “(Refugees) have potential and they can contribute to the community and society if given the chance. But there needs to be opportunities for refugees.”

Branches of Hope’s website states there is no “blanket permission for substantiated claimants to take up paid work in the territory” and that Individual applications are done on a case-by-case basis. The charity noted approval through this process is quite low and that well over half of the cases are denied, withdrawn or stalled.