



Refugee Council
of Australia

2007-08 AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT BUDGET: SPENDING ON PROGRAMS RELATED TO REFUGEES

In the 2007-08 budget papers, the Australian Government announced new spending initiatives for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) totalling \$359 million. The main budget changes relate to skilled migration, the introduction of the citizenship test, border control and increased settlement services for refugees and humanitarian entrants.

Immigration Intake

The 2007-08 migration program will offer 152,800 places. The skilled migration stream will increase by 5000 places to 102,500. The family preferential stream will remain at 50,000 places. The humanitarian program will remain at 13,000 places with 6,000 places for the refugee component and 7,000 for the Special Humanitarian Program. This continues the recent trend of the humanitarian program remaining stable while the overall migration intake increases.

Funding for Settlement Services

An allocation of \$209.2 million of the budget over four years is targeted to deliver additional support to recently arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants and to implement the key recommendation of the Australian Government Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) on humanitarian settlement. This committee, established in April 2006 and made up of the heads of a number of Australian Government Departments, was charged with developing measures to strengthen government support for refugees and humanitarian entrants in order to promote successful integration.

Specific initiatives include:

- The allocation of an additional \$127.8 million over four years earmarked for humanitarian students under the English as a Second Language – New Arrivals Program – for both primary and secondary students. This initiative is particularly welcome as it doubles the per capita rate of government funding for students.
- An additional \$35.2 million over four years to establish a Complex Case Support Network (CCSN) to deliver specialised and intensive case management to help humanitarian entrants with intensive needs to integrate, and to provide them with targeted support. The details of how this model will operate have not yet been decided. However it will be an independent service targeting a small proportion of humanitarian entrants with specific needs.
- Increased support amounting to \$16.6 million over four years for proposers under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP). New minimum requirements will be established for future proposers. It has not been officially confirmed, but it seems that these requirements will include minimum periods of residency in Australia and employment for future proposers. The budget allocation will be used to establish a Proposer Support Program which will assist potential proposers who do not meet the minimum requirements, to

access the SHP. These proposers will be assisted and supported by voluntary and community groups throughout the application process. There will be additional consultations about the adoption of a specific model.

- The allocation of \$6.4 million over four years to provide improved access to Centrelink on arrival crisis payments, in the way of a one-off cash payment for newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants.
- Additional funding of \$5.3 million over four years to subsidise the cost of rent and utilities during the first month of humanitarian entrants' stay in Australia under the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS). This will be complemented by the allocation of an additional \$3.2 million to provide public transport tickets during the first month of arrival.
- Additional allocations of \$12.2 million over four years for torture and trauma counselling services, increasing the capacity of services.
- \$1.5 million over four years to support sustainable settlement of refugees in rural and regional areas and to identify and foster potential employment opportunities.
- Additional funding over four years for promoting integration – \$0.5 million for education on Australian law and promoting good relationships with the police and \$0.4 million to encourage new interpreters in emerging community languages.

Border protection

A substantial allocation of the immigration budget will be directed to border control and combating people smuggling. Specific initiatives include:

- The allocation of \$12.1 million over four years for additional Airline Liaison Officers at overseas airports to reduce the potential of entry to Australia of people without relevant visas.
- \$7.7 million in 2007-08 to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to care for people intercepted or in transit in Indonesia and to enhance regional border security. This is coupled with an allocation of an additional \$1.2 million for IOM to care for asylum seekers while they have their claims considered in transit countries in the region, and to discourage them from travelling to Australia by sea.
- \$3.3 million over four years to combat trafficking in Thailand, through the appointment of two more senior immigration officials in Bangkok. These officers will combat people smuggling and act as deterrent to potential traffickers in the region.
- An additional \$2 million in 2007-08 to stabilise displaced populations and promote durable solutions to those refugees in critical need throughout the world. This is a very welcome initiative; however, more substantial resources need to be allocated on this front.

The Refugee Council supports efforts to control people smuggling but believes that the above measures need to be carefully monitored to ensure they do not prevent the access of asylum seekers to a fair Refugee Status Determination process or result in delayed access to permanent protection for those who need it. We note that, in its documents on the improved arrangements in transit countries, the Australian Government continually refers to asylum seekers as prospective illegal immigrants, when this is not the case under international law. We also note that many of the transit countries are not signatories to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, which clearly affects the standards of protection that they receive.

Citizenship

The Australian Government will allocate \$123.6 million over five years for the introduction of a citizenship test. This test will require applicants for Australian citizenship to have an

understanding of the history, values, traditions and institutions in Australia. Of these funds, \$107.4 million will be allocated to introduce and implement the citizenship test, \$6.2 million to produce the “Australian way of life booklet” and \$10 million to produce the “Australian values statements”.

The Refugee Council believes that such a large allocation of funds would be able to achieve far more if directed to initiatives to improve the integration of new arrivals. Unfortunately, the introduction of a formal citizenship test will act as a significant barrier to many refugees wanting to attain citizenship and fully participate in the Australian community. Specific measures are needed to consider alternative ways for refugees to obtain citizenship.

Overseas Aid¹

The overall aid budget has been increased by \$209 million or 21.7% in real terms, raising the level of aid expenditure to 0.30% of GNP. This is another move in the right direction, after a long-term decline in Australian aid relative to GNP.

The Refugee Council believes the Australian Government could do substantially more to connect its priorities for overseas aid with its priorities for refugee resettlement. With the Government promising a steady increase in the aid budget over the coming years, there is greater capacity for Australia to commit more funds to development, aid and human rights initiatives in countries which have seen massive displacement. We believe that the “whole of government” philosophy used in determining improvements to support for humanitarian entrants needs to be applied to Australia’s global work in aid, human rights and refugee resettlement. Unfortunately, there is little sign of a strategic connection between the budgets of DIAC and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID).

There was only a \$1 million increase in core contributions to the UNHCR bringing the total to \$8.3 million. The International Red Cross (ICRC) also received an increase in core contributions to \$12 million, representing an increase of \$5 million over two years. UNICEF received a significant increase from \$8.5 million to \$13.7 million.

Unfortunately, contributions to the World Food Program (WFP), responsible for supply of food to refugee camps, remained static at \$32.8 million. Likewise, the allocation to the International Refugee Fund (IRF) has remained at \$15 million since 2002-03, representing a significant decrease in real terms.

Regionally, the Pacific and East Asia were a major focus for the budget, with increased aid spending in the Philippines, East Timor, PNG and Indonesia. Indonesia received the largest allocation with an increase of \$114 million bringing the total to \$458.8 million. As a point of comparison the poorer nations of Cambodia and Laos received \$54 million and \$27.2 million respectively.

In South Asia, Bangladesh received an increase of \$11 million bringing the total to \$47.7 million. However, aid to Sri Lanka, where there has been an increase in conflict and displacement, will decrease to \$25 million.

Afghanistan received a welcome increase of \$65.7 million bringing the total to \$99.6 million. The allocation to Iraq remained a low \$22.5 million. However, this should be viewed in the context of the \$334 million dollar debt relief in the previous financial year.

Unfortunately, Africa, where the largest number of Australia’s refugees have come from in recent years, received only a \$12 million increase, bringing the total for the entire continent to just \$94.4 million.

¹ Compiled from AusAID Budget statement and ACFID Budget Analysis