



Refugee Council of Australia

BULLETIN FOR MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS

May 15, 2008

Welcome to the latest bulletin from the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA). We welcome feedback, ideas or information worth sharing. Please contact us at info@refugeecouncil.org.au.

Paul Power, CEO, Refugee Council of Australia

NEWS FROM THE REFUGEE COUNCIL

Australian Government to end temporary protection system

The best news from the Federal Budget was that the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) system will be abolished. Since TPVs and Temporary Humanitarian Visas were introduced in 1999, more than 11,000 recognised refugees have been subject to the mental anguish of living for years without an assurance of security and, in many cases, separated from family members. The system will cease on October 1. RCOA, which has been advocating for the abolition of TPVs since their introduction, immediately welcomed the announcement. Just after the new Australian Government took office in December, RCOA and A Just Australia wrote to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans, outlining a series of issues of immediate concern on asylum policy. This is the second significant asylum policy change since then, the first being the closure of offshore processing centres. We will continue to lobby the Minister on work rights for asylum seekers, giving priority to family reunion for former TPV holders, maximising alternatives to detention and reviewing Australia's refugee status determination process. However, we did not let the moment pass without writing to the Minister to express our organisation's support for his announcement – something we would encourage others who support this change to do. (Never underestimate the value of affirming good policy change. As a rule, politicians get volumes of critical mail and little praise for even the most enlightened decisions.)

For more information on this announcement, see the Minister's statement <http://www.minister.immi.gov.au/media/media-releases/2008/ce05-buget-08.htm> and RCOA's media release http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/releases/2008/080513_TPv_abolition.pdf. DIAC has established a website to provide updated information on how the conversion of temporary visas to permanent visas will occur: http://www.immi.gov.au/refugee/tpv_thv/index.htm.

The Minister's office points out that the 1000 or so former TPV and THV holders have been counted in the refugee and humanitarian intake of previous years and will not take places in the 2008-09 program.

Other Budget measures

Other announcements in the Budget included:

- Increasing the refugee and humanitarian intake in 2008-09 from 13,000 to 13,500, to include 500-600 Iraqis whose safety has been put at risk by assisting Australian defence forces.
- Increasing the intake in 2009-10 to 13,575, with 575 extra Special Humanitarian Program places.
- \$49.2 million over four years for improved vocational English and traineeships for Adult Migrant English Program participants.
- \$1.1 million for redevelopment of the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre.
- A 12 month extension to the Community Care Pilot.

RCOA will be producing a Budget briefing shortly. See: <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au>

Ministerial intervention

A number of member agencies have contacted RCOA to discuss concerns about clients whose requests for intervention by the Immigration Minister have been rejected. Reiterating our support for change to the refugee determination system, RCOA has written to the Minister asking for more open dialogue

about how the process currently works and about plans for reform. Our statement on this issue is at http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/releases/2008/080513_Min_intervention.pdf

Refugee Week 2008: June 15-21

Don't forget that Refugee Week 2008 is just a month away. RCOA is planning launches in Sydney (June 13) and Melbourne (June 16), MRCSA is coordinating a full calendar of events for South Australia and VoRTCS is planning a big community celebration in Brisbane (June 22). Many other organisations are planning local events all around Australia, with the national theme being "A Place to Call Home". Over coming weeks, we will be building up a national calendar of events on our website and distributing information on activities to media outlets across the country. We rely on local organisers to send us details to help build this calendar, so please forward information ASAP to info@refugeecouncil.org.au. This address is also the place to order copies of the Refugee Week poster, which is now available. To keep up to date with plans for Refugee Week as it draws closer, see <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/newsevents/refugeeweek.html>

NSW Refugee Humanitarian Awards

One of the events being planned for Refugee Week is the 2008 NSW Refugee Humanitarian Awards on June 19. Coordinated by STARTTS and supported by RCOA, the awards recognise the community contributions of people of refugee background, people of any background who support refugees and organisations involved in innovative projects to support refugees. Nominations for these awards close on June 1. For more details, visit <http://www.friendsofstartts.org/nominate.html>. For more information, contact Gary Taylor at president@friendsofstartts.org

A word of thanks to our volunteers

As this is National Volunteer Week, we would like to express our thanks to all of our wonderful volunteers. RCOA has a small team of salaried staff, just two full-time and four part-time staff divided between our Sydney and Melbourne offices. In fact, many visitors to our offices express surprise at how small our organisation is – but the secret of our success, we tell them, is our dedicated team of volunteers. Their invaluable contribution to our work includes assistance with research and policy, coordination of library resources, building membership, assisting with coordination of Refugee Week and administrative support. RCOA volunteers, take a bow. We couldn't survive without you.

COMING EVENTS

Friday 16 May – Sydney

Quiz Night: Asylum Seekers Centre NSW

With MCs Tony Squires and HG Nelson

Venue: North Sydney Leagues Club, 12 Abbott Street, Cammeray

Details: 7.00pm for 7.30pm start, for further information and ticket bookings, please visit

<http://www.asylumseekerscentre.org.au/> or phone 02 9361 5606

Wednesday 21 May – Sydney

Author's Talk: Maurice Whelan will talk about his debut novel Boat People, published in March 2008.

Venue: Auburn Library, 1 Susan Street, Auburn.

Details: 3.30pm to 4.30pm, Please call 02 9735 1250 for bookings

Thursday 22 May – Sydney

Book Launch: Mahtab's Story by Libby Gleeson

Venue: Auburn Library, 1 Susan Street, Auburn

Details: 6.00pm, Please call 02 9735 1250 for bookings

Wednesday 28 May – Sydney

Canterbury Bankstown Employment Expo

Learn about employment opportunities; Learn about training and volunteering; Meet potential employers; Meet Job Network employment agencies.

Venue: Bankstown Town Hall, Cnr Rickard Rd & Chapel Rd Nth, Bankstown.

Details: 10.00am to 1.00pm, lunch provided. For further information please contact: Miguel on (02) 9707 9863 or Cheryl on (02) 9789 9441

Wednesday 28 May – Melbourne

Refugee Health Research Centre Seminar: The Landscapes of Homework Clubs: Sites of Possibility

With Dr Kirsten Hutchison, School of Education Studies, La Trobe University.

Venue: Foundation House, 6 Gardiner St, Brunswick

Details: Registration 5.00pm, seminar 5.30pm to 6.30pm, RSVP to (03) 9388 0022

Thursday 29 and Friday 30 May, 2008 - Italy

Conference – Best Practices for Refugee Status Determination 2008 - Italy

Venue: Monash University, Prato Centre, Italy

Details: For further information and registration forms please visit:

<http://www.conorg.com.au/conferences2008/index.html>

Friday 30 May – Sydney

Art for Refugees Exhibition and Sale

Organised by the Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) team at the University of Western Sydney, this exhibition will raise money for Strategic Community Assistance to Refugee Families (SCARF) projects. The organisers are also looking for artists to exhibit their paintings, sculpture, photography, textiles, woodwork or ceramics.

Venue: Ian Turbott Building, University of Western Sydney, Parramatta Campus

Details: For further information please visit: www.scarf1.org.au or contact Stephanie Borg via email at 15931476@uws.edu.au

Saturday 31 May – Wangaratta

Conference: 2008 ECCV Regional Conference - Cultural Diversity and Harmony: Regional Victoria Today.

Presenters include: Todd Harper - VicHealth Chief Executive Officer; Ghassan Hage - Professor of Anthropology and Social Theory; James Merlino MLA - Minister Assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs; Nick Kotsiras MLA - Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs

Venue: Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE (GOTAFE) Docker Street, WANGARATTA

Details: 9.00am to 4.15pm; FREE; for more information or to register your interest, please contact either Molly Peterson 03 9349 4122 or Frances Salenga 03 5722 0726

<http://eccv.org.au/doc/InvitationREGIONALCONFERENCE2008.pdf>

Friday 6 June – Wollongong

SCARF Fundraising Event: Art for Literacy

Art exhibition to raise money for Strategic Community Assistance for Refugee Families (SCARF) and raffle competition.

Venue: Beach Art Gallery, 269 Lawrence Hargrave Dr, Thirroul.

Details: For all details, please contact Carol at carolwarilla@optusnet.com.au or 02 4296 5149

Wednesday 25 June – Melbourne

Refugee Health Research Centre Seminar: Removing Failed Asylum Seekers: Australian and International Practice With John Gibson, President, Refugee Council of Australia.

Venue: Foundation House, 6 Gardiner St, Brunswick

Details: Registration 5.00pm, seminar 5.30pm to 6.30pm, RSVP to (03) 9388 0022

Thursday 26 and Friday 27 June – Adelaide

Conference: Making a Difference – Social Inclusion for New and Emerging Communities

Hosted by the Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia

Venue: Banquet Room, Adelaide Festival Centre, King William Road, Adelaide

Details: Register by Wednesday 14 May for 'early bird' prices, otherwise by Wednesday 4 June, For any further information and registration forms please contact Matti Spellacy, Migrant Resource Centre of SA, Tel: (08) 8217 9510, Fax: (08) 8217 9556, Email: matti@mrca.com.au

Tuesday 1 to Friday 4 July – Byron Bay, NSW

International Conference: Activating Human Rights and Peace

Venue: Byron Bay Community and Cultural Centre, Byron Bay, NSW

Details: For further information and registration details please visit:

http://www.scu.edu.au/research/cpsj/human_rights/index.html

Donations for Sierra Leone

Sierra Unite Inc. is currently doing a second drive to collect goods to be shipped to schools, colleges and IDP camps in Sierra Leone. Any new/second hand items in usable condition are welcome. Please call Murray Kanneh on (02) 9630 5052 or 0431 301 384 to arrange collection of goods.

NEW RESEARCH, STATEMENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

New Book: Forced Migration, Human Rights and Security

Edited by Dr Jane McAdam, Director of International Law Programs at the Faculty of Law, UNSW this collection responds to some of the contemporary challenges faced by the international protection regime, with a particular focus on the human rights of those displaced. The international protection regime for refugees and other forced migrants seems increasingly at risk as measures designed to enhance security – of borders, of people, of institutions, and of national identity – encroach upon human rights. Contributing authors include: Guy S Goodwin-Gill, Savitri Taylor, Susan Kneebone and Erika Feller. Published by Hart Publishing, Oxford. For further information, please visit:

<http://www.hartpub.co.uk/books/details.asp?isbn=9781841137704>

New DVD Resource for African Women

This DVD in Somali, Dinka and Arabic was developed to inform and encourage women to present early for antenatal care and make full use of services offered by antenatal clinics. This resource aims to improve antenatal health and subsequent birth outcomes of women and their babies from small and emerging African communities. For further information or a free copy of the DVD, please contact: Monique Wakefield; Ph: (02) 9840 3376; Monique.wakefield@swahs.health.nsw.gov.au

New Book: The Rug Maker of Mazar-E-Sharif

Robert Hillman tells the story of how Mazari, when confronted with persecution and possible death at the hands of the Taliban, decided to leave his wife and young child, flee across the border to Pakistan, make his way across the Indonesian archipelago, catch a leaky boat, reach Darwin and then be buffeted by the overtly political and less-than-happy experiences of being transported to Adelaide and the refugee camp at Woomera before being recognised as a legitimate refugee, settling in Melbourne, establishing an Afghan carpet and rug shop and finally bringing his wife and child to Australia. Published by Insight Publications.

New report: Mapping Social Cohesion

Monash University's Institute for the Study of Global Movements has released its report on the first round of major longitudinal survey on social cohesion in Australia. Providing insights into community attitudes to immigration, multiculturalism and social cohesion, the report also examines complex attitudes to immigration and multicultural society, including assistance to ethnic groups, and levels of discrimination. A copy of the report and further details can be found at:

<http://www.globalmovements.monash.edu.au/>

New Book: Harvesting Hope

By Christian Ayling, this novella tells the story of Yasemin Sandulli whose life is turned upside down when her brother is accused of murder. Set in a predominantly Christian country, Harvesting Hope provides the reader with a thought provoking insight into the ideological and cultural turmoil faced by many Muslims in contemporary Western society. Published by Ginniderra Press.

Fire Prevention and Community Safety Information

The NSW Fire Brigades have a range of community safety program resources and information sheets for culturally and linguistically diverse communities that are translated into a number of community languages. Information sheets and additional details about sessions provided by Community Safety Officers can be found at: <http://www.fire.nsw.gov.au/page.php?id=207>

REFUGEE ISSUES IN THE MEDIA

A busy person's digest of some of the recent Australian media coverage of refugee issues:

(Inclusion in this summary does not imply that RCOA agrees with the article's content or vouches for its accuracy)

Report calls for tougher TB testing of migrants

Refugees and other migrants from high prevalence countries should be screened for TB on arrival and then followed up with another test ten year later, recommended in a new report from the Victorian Department of Human Services. (*West Australian, May 5*)

A new breed of refugees

Antonio Guterres, UNHCR describes the growing complexity of global refugee issue and that the definition of a refugee is changing. Issues such as the environment, economic situation and poverty have all come into play in affecting the movement of people. Mr Guterres argues, however, against a review of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention concerned that opening a revision of the Convention would not necessarily lead to better outcomes, but that governments and international bodies such as the UN need to address these issues in a constructive way, without relying on ad hoc solutions. (*Adelaide Advertiser, May 3*)

Out of the refugee camps of Sudan to the homeless land of promise

Refugee families are becoming another face of Australia's housing crisis with many African families unable to secure affordable, appropriate housing facing discrimination because of their large family size or reliance on welfare. As of June 30 2007, the waiting list for public housing in South Australia was for 22,339 people. "There is a strong general unwillingness on the part of landlords to lend to bigger families," said Kevin Liston, Director of the Australian Refugee Association. (*Adelaide Advertiser, May 2*)

Stop refugee appeals racket, says former judge

Former Federal Court Judge, Rodney Madgwick has said that appeals by refugees should only be heard by the Refugee Review Tribunal if there was a substantial injustice. Mr. Madgwick said that, "a complete rethink of the way these claims are handled would be valuable, and it may be that a complete review of the administration of the immigration system would be warranted." (*Australian Financial Review, May 2*)

Teach Instead of test, says ECCV

Executive Officer of the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, Peter van Vliet argues that new migrants, particularly refugees, should take classes on the important aspects of citizenship, rather than focusing on a test if the desired outcome is to be true social inclusion. (*The Age, April 30*)

Minister rejects Australian skilled migrant study

Immigration Minister, Chris Evans has said that a study conducted by Monash University examining census data claiming that many skilled migrants cannot find work in their relevant professions is out of date and does not take into consideration that changes have already been made to the skilled migration program. (*ABC Radio, April 29*)

Citizenship test scary, and silent on the Don

Immigration Minister has said that the test will continue to be conducted in English, but that applicants may have the opportunity to see the test before they sit. While questions about cricketer Don Bradman remain contentious, Senator Evans revealed that the question has never actually been asked on the test. Figures from the Senator's office also show that applications for the test fell from 35,929 in July-September 2006 and after the test was introduced only 9043 people applied in October to December last year. (*Courier Mail, April 29*)

Some plain talking needed on migration

A new report released by Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban Research says that rather than increasing migration, the Rudd Government should invest in ensuring that skilled people from non-English speaking countries who are already in Australia are able to obtain professional positions. The research by Bob Birrell and Ernest Healy shows that of the 200,000 migrants with degree qualifications to arrive between 2001 and 2006, only 36% held professional or managerial positions. (*Australian Financial Review, April 29*)

Citizenship test snapshot results

Results from a second report on the citizenship test have shown that the pass rate for skilled migrants has been 99%, a pass rate of 91% for those entering through the family migration stream and for humanitarian program entrants the pass rate has been 82%. (*Media release, Immigration Minister, April 28*)

DNA demand adds to Abi's nightmare

A Sierra Leonean refugee is facing a bill for \$1850 for DNA tests in order to bring her husband and child to Australia under the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program. The case has been complicated by the apparent loss of files and while the Immigration Department said it was working to resolve the case, DNA tests were offered because satisfactory documentary evidence was not available. (*Sydney Morning Herald, April 28*)

Review to ask if citizenship test is just not cricket

A seven-member committee, headed by the former head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Dick Woolcott, will review the Howard government's citizenship test over the next 4 weeks. The Rudd government has said it would review the test after figures showing more than a fifth of those sitting it had failed. Mr Woolcott said when the citizenship test was introduced, the debate became "an unsubtle political attempt to emphasise cultural differences at the expense of community harmony, inclusiveness and tolerance". (*Australian Financial Review, April 28*)

Research finds Immigration makes Australia stronger

Monash University research shows that 69 per cent of those surveyed believe that immigration makes Australia stronger and "maintaining a strong immigration program with integrity is critical to Australia's future," Senator Evans said. (*Media Release, Immigration Minister Chris Evans, April 23*)

Concerns on Immigration continue to linger

Despite overall anti-immigration sentiment declining, findings released by Monash University's Institute for the Study of Global Movements show that more than one third of Australians think that immigration levels are too high. (*The Age, April 22*)

Refugee's \$200,000 family reunion fee

An Iranian refugee is being asked to pay a \$200,000 debt to the Commonwealth in order to be reunited with his wife and two children. Hossein's family were detained at the Curtin detention centre in WA for 3 years before they agreed to return to Iran to avoid exposing their children to any further psychological trauma associated with detention. Despite the Australian Government granting refugee status to Hossein and now approving a spouse visa for his wife and children, the Government is still demanding he repay detention costs. Legislation introduced by the Keating Government that stipulates detention costs be passed on to detainees will be reviewed by the current Government, says Immigration Minister Chris Evans. (*The Australian, April 22*)

Race attack

A submission to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission by the Southern Ethnic Advisory and Advocacy Council has accused police in the Greater Dandenong area of racism against young African people in the area. The submission is part of an ongoing inquiry by the Commission's "African Young People Research Project" with a report due for release by the end of June. Helen Szoke, Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission has said the project was in response to reports that young African people in the area were experiencing discrimination based on their race and religion. (*Dandenong Journal, April 21*)

Refugee families move from the suburbs

Gippsland Multicultural Services has said that over 300 Sudanese refugees have moved to the La Trobe Valley in the last 18 months seeking a better lifestyle for their families with better opportunities away from perceived drug and alcohol related problems of Melbourne's suburbs. Victoria Police last year advised the Department of Immigration to settle refugees in regional areas rather than existing trouble spots such as the Housing Commission estates of inner Melbourne. (*The Australian, 16 April*)

Working towards a future of social inclusion

Samah Hadid, researcher and owner of a non-profit community magazine has put forward her solution to some of the problems faced by newly arrived refugees and migrants in the form a national strategy bringing together settlement services to the 2020 Youth Summit in Canberra. *(Sydney Morning Herald, 14 April)*

Young refugees have stars in their eyes

120 young people from refugee backgrounds recently took part in a soccer clinic run by Adelaide United players, unearthing some considerable talent and providing an opportunity for the participants to connect with their local community. Organisers, while impressed with the level of skill on display, are frustrated by a lack of resources in local clubs to support and nurture young talent. *(ABC Online, 14 April)*

Migration does not spread tuberculosis

The popular perception that tuberculosis is commonly spread by migrants and refugees has been contradicted in research published recently by the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health. The research has criticised the role of the media and says that negative media articles linking TB with migrants often means that those in most need of treatment are stigmatised and may not be accessing appropriate medical care. *(ABC Radio, AM Program, 11 April)*

Lawyer questions visa plans for Iraqi interpreters

Human rights lawyer and advocate Greg Barnes has raised concerns about Government plans to issue visas for approximately 600 local engaged staff in Iraq who have assisted Australian troops. Mr. Barnes has urged the Government to equally address the plight of the many thousands of refugees who have been displaced by the war in Iraq, not just those who have given Australia assistance. *(ABC News, 9 April)*

Safe haven promise for Iraqis who helped troops

The Rudd Government has said that up to 600 visas could be issued to locally engaged Iraqi staff who have assisted Australian troops. The commitment to the visas, which will also include the families of local staff has come amid concerns for the security and safety of Iraqi citizens who may be targeted because they have assisted Australian troops. Many Iraqi locals have been employed by Australian forces to act as translators and interpreters. *(Sydney Morning Herald, 9 April)*

Australia's Pacific refugees policy 'inhumane'

Australia's response to climate change refugees from the Pacific region was a key agenda item at a recent UN meeting of international experts in Darwin. UN Indigenous Forum Chairwoman, Victoria Tauli-Corpus has said that there is not enough support from the international community for Pacific Islanders who are at risk of losing their homes and land to rising sea levels. *(ABC News Online, 5 April)*

Sudanese refugees 'offered unaffordable home loans'

Following a recent survey which showed that 60 per cent of bank and finance workers felt pressured to approve loans to customers who did not have the capacity to repay, claims have been made that Sudanese refugees are among groups that are seen as "easy targets" being offered loans of up to \$500,000. *(ABC News, 4 April)*

Ombudsman questions 'pay for time' asylum policy

The most recent report from the Commonwealth Ombudsman has reinforced calls from refugee advocates to scrap the policy of making asylum seekers pay for their time in detention. The report shows that in the last financial year the cost of detention was \$28 million and that the method of debt recovery from asylum seekers was unsatisfactory. Commonwealth Ombudsman Prof. John McMillan has said that "it is a legitimate topic for analysis as to whether detention debts should be imposed". Refugee Council of Australia CEO, Mr. Paul Power has said that the policy is akin to UNHCR charging refugees for the time they spend in refugee camps and that it is a waste of time and money. *(ABC News, 2 April)*

Commonwealth Bank 'exploited refugees'

The Consumer Action Law Centre in Melbourne has accused the Commonwealth Bank of issuing loans to vulnerable Sudanese refugees who were often unemployed and had limited financial understanding. In one case, the loan applicant spoke no English and already had 8 people in his family to care for. The majority of the loans have now been waived following a series of complaints. *(ABC Online, 31 March)*