



Refugee Council of Australia

BULLETIN FOR MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS

10 June 2009

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

Paul Power, CEO, Refugee Council of Australia

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NEWS FROM THE REFUGEE COUNCIL

Australia prepares to celebrate Refugee Week

More than 100 events will be held around Australia as the nation celebrates Refugee Week 2009 from next Sunday, June 14. The 2009 theme is "Freedom from Fear", drawing attention both to the freedom experienced by those who have found permanent safety after persecution and the quest for a future from fear still being experienced by millions of displaced people and refugees. The calendar of events includes concerts, seminars, public debates, cultural events, picnics, community celebrations, book launches, sporting events, film festivals, religious ceremonies and art exhibitions. On Monday, June 15, public launches of Refugee Week will be held in three cities – in Sydney at Customs House, Circular Quay at 11am; in Adelaide at University of South Australia at 10.30am; and in Melbourne at Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Federation Square at 6pm. Details of how to participate in these and other events can be found at www.refugeecouncil.org.au/newsevents/rw_index.html or in the program attached to this email.

RCOA would like to thank its Refugee Week sponsors [Victorian Multicultural Commission](#), [AMES Victoria](#), [NSW Community Relations Commission](#), [City of Sydney](#), [ACL](#), [AMES NSW](#), [Leichhardt Council](#). Special mention must be made of [Migrant Resource Centre of SA](#) which coordinates a truly impressive program of events in South Australia.

Refugee Week coincides with World Refugee Day (June 20), which this year is focused on the theme "Real People, Real Needs". For details, see www.unhcr.org.au/WorldRefugeeDay.shtml

Australian NGOs take concerns to UNHCR annual gatherings

Concerns about forgotten groups of refugees in Africa, refugees in precarious situations in Asia, the protection of women and girls at risk, questions of "integration" in refugee resettlement and alternatives to detention will be raised by Australian NGO representatives this month in Geneva at UNHCR's 2009 NGO Consultations and Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement. In all, 25 Australian representatives will take part in the two meetings, including nine interns from the University of NSW Centre for Refugee Research (CRR) who will help to document the NGO Consultations. For the past three months, RCOA and CRR have been coordinating the Australian delegation's planning process, drawing together research and discussion papers for dissemination at the meetings. Among the delegates will be representatives of the African Women's Advocacy Unit and Burmese Rohingya Community in Australia, who will take concerns of their communities to senior UNHCR officials in Geneva. Other NGOs participating in the meetings include Foundation House, Amnesty International Australia, Settlement Council of Australia, act for peace, ACCES Services Inc, AMES Victoria and International Detention Coalition. RCOA will be represented by president John Gibson and CEO Paul Power.

Audit Office recommends improvements to Settlement Grants Program

The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) has released a report of its investigation of Settlement Grants Program (SGP) administered by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). ANAO

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The Refugee Council of Australia represents
non-government organisations and
individuals working with and for refugees
in Australia and around the world

concludes that the program is generally well managed but makes six recommendations for improvements to DIAC's management of SGP. Criticisms include:

- a failure to develop or implement an effective performance management to monitor the performance of individual projects and the whole program;
- the need to provide more meaningful settlement needs information to assist applicants; and
- poor documentation of the basis of funding recommendations.

RCOA was consulted by ANAO and raised concerns about the high percentage of one-year grants under SGP and the very late notice given to SGP providers prior to the beginning of the new funding year. The report notes that organisations apply for funding seven months prior to the funding announcement and are given notice of funding decisions only one month prior to the new financial year. Commenting on the high proportion of one-year grants (62%), ANAO notes: "Short term grants impact on grant recipients in terms of, inter alia, decreased ability to plan, difficulty attracting and retaining competent staff and disruptions to service provision. There is also an administrative impact on DIAC of granting a higher percentage of one year grants." ANAO suggests DIAC review the balance of one-year and multi-year grants. The full report can be viewed at http://www.anao.gov.au/uploads/documents/2008-09_Audit_Report_36.pdf

On May 29, the Federal Government announced \$34 million in funding for the Settlement Grants Program in 2009-10. For the full list of grant recipients, see <http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/settlement-grants/2009-10-grants-recipients.htm>

Parliamentary Committee recommends changes to bridging visa system

The Federal Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Migration has released its second report, "Community-based alternatives to detention". The majority report, supported by four Labor Parliamentarians and Liberal MP Danna Vale, made 12 recommendations, including:

- Reform of the bridging visa system, enabling it to be used in lieu of community detention until a person's immigration status is resolved;
- Providing information on grounds for refusal of bridging visas and access to merits review;
- Improved access to means-tested migration counselling and legal advice;
- Providing indicative processing times and criteria for the ministerial discretion process and providing reasons for ministerial decisions;
- Establishing an ongoing voluntary repatriation program, accessible to people in detention or on bridging visas;
- Ensuring bridging visa holders have, where needed, access to health care, basic income assistance, housing support and community orientation information;
- Ensuring that children have access to appropriate accommodation with their guardian, basic necessities such as food, health care and schooling;
- Allowing all adults on bridging visas to work, conditional on compliance with reporting requirements;
- Developing a stock of open immigration housing for bridging visa holders unable to meet their own housing needs.

Liberal MP Petro Georgiou and Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young supported these recommendations but raised concerns about children being detained in alternative forms of detention, addressed the need for judicial review of decisions regarding bridging visas to increase transparency and advocated for enhanced access to legal advice. Liberal Shadow Immigration Minister Dr Sharman Stone opposed some of the main recommendations, saying that the committee report "fails to send a message to people smugglers that Australia should not be targeted as a favoured destination". The fourth Liberal on the committee, Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, said she was unable to endorse the report conclusions as, having joined the committee only in February, she had not participated in the majority of the inquiry process.

The committee's third report later this year will focus on transparency, infrastructure and service provision under the immigration detention system.

The "Community-based alternatives to detention" report can be viewed at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/mig/detention/report2.htm

Two more councils become Refugee Welcome Zones

Burwood Council in Sydney's inner west and Gosford City Council on the NSW Central Coast will become Refugee Welcome Zones later this month. This will take the number of local councils around Australia

which have made this declaration to 71. For more information on RCOA's Refugee Welcome Zones initiative, see www.refugeecouncil.org.au/current/index.html#zones

RCOA takes Australian resettlement experience to refugee forum in Japan

The Refugee Council of Australia will participate on June 12 in a Regional Refugee Week symposium in Tokyo, hosted by the Japan Association for Refugees. Titled 'Refugee Protection in the New Era and Civil Society', the symposium will bring together delegates from six Asia-Pacific countries and the USA to discuss effective models for refugee resettlement, as well as challenges and opportunities relating to refugee protection in Asia. RCOA National Policy Director, Tamara Domicelj, will provide a briefing on the Australian experience of resettlement to a workshop of government, UNHCR and non-government delegates, and participate as a panellist in an open symposium. The event has been convened in the context of Japan's decision to undertake a three-year refugee resettlement pilot, commencing in 2010. Ninety refugees from Burma will be settled in Japan (30 per annum).

Five people recognised for work with refugees

Five Australians were honoured for their work with refugees (among other community contributions) in the Queen's Birthday Honours List. They are: Margaret Jessie Baikie AM of Howrah, Tasmania; Henry Chan OAM of Valentine NSW; Beryl Mary Horwood OAM of Bruce ACT; June Isabel Mickleburgh OAM of Deakin ACT; and Joseph Frederick Pereira AM of Castle Hill NSW.

We need your support to continue our work

As a small not-for-profit organisation which has operated without core funding from government since 2001, the Refugee Council relies on financial support from the public to sustain its work. In an often challenging political environment, an informed and independent voice on refugee policy is vital. With the financial year drawing to a close, now is an excellent time to make a tax-deductible donation to support our national work of research, coordination and representation. For more information about making a tax-deductible donation or becoming a member of the Refugee Council, see <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getinvolved/index.html> or phone our offices in Sydney on (02) 9211 9333 or Melbourne on (03) 9348 2245.

COMING EVENTS

Sunday 14 – Saturday 20 June 2009 – Many locations Australia-wide

Refugee Week 2009: 'Freedom from Fear'

Over a hundred Refugee Week events will be held across Australia, from film festivals, forums, soccer tournaments, art exhibitions, performances and other celebrations. As there are so many events, we have not listed them in full in this e-bulletin, but we have attached a National Calendar of Events to this email for your convenience. Alternatively you can find the listings, state by state, on www.refugeecouncil.org.au/newsevents/rw_index.html.

Friday 15 June 2009 - national

Deadline for submissions to the National Human Rights Consultation

This is an important opportunity to share your views on the safeguarding of human rights in Australia, including those of refugees and asylum seekers.

Information: www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/charter_of_rights/index.html

Friday 26 June 2009 - Sydney

Refugee Enterprise Facilitation project launch

STARTTS invites you to the launch of Enterprise Facilitation - a new scheme that provides support to local entrepreneurs with refugee and refugee-like backgrounds wishing to start or expand small businesses. Guest speakers are Patricia Forsyth (Sydney Chamber of Commerce) and Barbara Perry, (Member for Auburn).

Details: 3.30 pm for 4 pm start, Theatre, NSW Parliament House, Macquarie St, Sydney

For more information about Enterprise Facilitation visit www.startts.org.au/default.aspx?id=434

Saturday 27 June 2009 - Sydney

7th Annual Jesuit Refugee Service Winter Solstice Ball

The JRS Winter Solstice Ball is a key fundraiser which allows JRS to continue its work. Ben Fordham, Channel Nine Presenter, will be Master of Ceremonies for the evening and Kir Deng, a former refugee from Sudan and distinguished graduate of St Ignatius' College, Riverview, will be the Guest of Honour. Mr Deng was a student in the Riverview Bursary Programme and has been well supported by JRS. Funds raised this year will go to the JRS asylum seekers' homeless shelter in Sydney, and to education and peace building programmes in southern Sudan. Tickets are \$150 each with tables of 10-12 available. Buy tickets online at <http://gofundraise.com.au/jrs2009> or through the JRS Head Office on (02) 9356 3888. *Details: 6:30 for 7 pm, Hilton Hotel, 488 George St, Sydney*
Contact: Catherine Marshall on CMarshall@jespub.jesuit.org.au or 0447 440 939; or Hugh Simpson on hasimpson@bigpond.com or 0402 255 319.

Saturday 4 – Sunday 5 July 2009 - Adelaide

Human Development in the Context of Movement Within and Across National Boundaries

This workshop will examine the developmental implications and broad consequences of migration within the Asia-Pacific region, including forced migration, voluntary migration, temporary migration and within-border migration.

<http://guest.cvent.com/EVENTS/Info/Custom.aspx?cid=17&i=76820f08-2fc0-4c7a-8204-22ea702e90e2>

Friday 10 July 2009 - Sydney

Talk: Refugee Crisis - Promoting Humanity or Re-igniting Fear?

Professor Mary Crock and Mr David Bitel will be the speakers at this Politics in the Pub discussion. See www.politicsinthepub.org.au for more information.

Details: 6 pm, Gaelic Club, Lvl 1, 64 Devonshire St, Surry Hills 2010.

Friday 17 July 2009 – Melbourne

2009 Human Rights Conference

Venue: State Library of Victoria. Keynote speaker: Federal Attorney-General Robert McClelland.

Information: www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre

Tuesday 21 – Thursday 23 July 2009 – Melbourne

Beyond the Refugee Journey: A Humanitarian Settlement Conference

The conference will focus on settlement models and refugee achievements and will present an opportunity to: explore innovative and effective models of settlement service provision; assess the impact of pre-arrival experience on settlement; and celebrate the lives of refugees who have made Australia their home.

Details: BMW Edge, Federation Square (21 July) and Melbourne Cricket Ground (22–23 July).

Information: www.ames.net.au/settlementconference

Monday 10 August 2009 - Melbourne

“Knowing Her Better”: Modules 1 & 2

‘Knowing Her Better’ is a series of three training days about immigrant and refugee women’s health, aimed at health and allied professionals interested in improving the health and wellbeing of immigrant and refugee women and their health experiences in Australia.

Module 1: Communication with Immigrant and Refugee Clients

Module 2: Using Interpreters & Bilingual Health Educators in Sexual and Reproductive Health Services

Details: 9am - 4pm, Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, Suite 207, Lvl 2, Carringbush Building, 134 Cambridge St, Collingwood. Price: \$154 per person (or 10% less if all 3 modules taken)

Contact: Dr Salma Al-Khudairi, (03) 9418 0999 or Salma@mcwh.com.au

Wednesday 12 – Friday 14 August 2009 - Townsville

International Unity in Diversity Conference

The Conference will explore the potential benefits of diversity that bring rich outcomes and possibilities; develop a unified cohesive approach to address the current and emerging global crisis; and consider how cultural diversity must be seen as a key platform of the government’s social inclusion agenda.

Information: www.unityindiversityconference.com

Thursday 27 August 2009 - Melbourne

'Healthy Living for Immigrant and Refugee Women'

This seminar focuses on healthy living and illness across a range of cultures. This includes: the relationship between nutrition, good diet, physical activity and environment and healthy living; exploring major issues affecting immigrant and refugee women's health such as diabetes and obesity; raising health awareness among immigrant and refugee women in a culturally sensitive manner; and an overview of related resources. Women from different communities sharing their healthy living experiences will be a seminar highlight. This seminar will benefit health and allied professionals, welfare and community development workers, social workers, teachers, students and those with an interest in the health and wellbeing of immigrant and refugee women.

Details: 9am - 2pm, Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, Suite 207, Lvl 2, Carringbush Building, 134 Cambridge St, Collingwood. Price: \$65 per person (includes lunch)

Contact: Dr Salma Al-Khudairi, (03) 9418 0999 or Salma@mcwh.com.au

Thursday 1 - Friday 2 September 2009 - Perth

1st Australasian Refugee Health Conference

The 19th Mental Health Services Conference (TheMHS), the 3rd Western Australian Transcultural Mental Health Conference and the 1st Australasian Refugee Health Conference will be held together for the first time. This event will link concepts of the interrelatedness of individuals, families and communities, providing connections which can strengthen and support mental health and well being. TheMHS Conference is an international mental health educational forum, attracting over 1000 mental health clinicians, managers, consumers, carers, researchers, educators and policy makers, annually. For further information please contact TheMHS Conference on (02) 9810 8700 or info@themhs.org or visit www.themhs.org.au.

Monday 14 September 2009

"Knowing Her Better": Modules 3 & 4

'Knowing Her Better' is a series of three training days about immigrant and refugee women's health, aimed at health and allied professionals interested in improving the health and wellbeing of immigrant and refugee women and their health experiences in Australia.

Module 3: Building Trust with Immigrant and Refugee Clients

Module 4: Cultural Awareness in Sexual and Reproductive Health

Details: 9am - 4pm, Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, Suite 207, Lvl 2, Carringbush Building, 134 Cambridge St, Collingwood. Price: \$154 per person (or 10% less if all 3 modules taken)

Contact: Dr Salma Al-Khudairi, (03) 9418 0999 or Salma@mcwh.com.au

Friday 2 October 2009 - Sydney

2009 Protecting Human Rights Conference

This one day event will discuss developments in the legislative protection of human rights in Australia. Leading Australian and international speakers will consider the National Human Rights Consultation, and provide an update of developments in the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, the ACT Human Rights Act and in NSW human rights law. In addition, the conference will address the constitutional dialogue model that is a feature of the human rights statutes in many countries of the British Commonwealth. The conference will also consider some crucial further challenges in relation to human rights protection, including: the rights of Indigenous people; the protection of economic, social and cultural rights; and protecting the human rights of people with a disability. For more information and to register see www.gtcentre.unsw.edu.au/events/index.asp?type=&name=558&year=2009

Monday 12 October 2009

"Knowing Her Better": Modules 5 & 6

'Knowing Her Better' is a series of three training days about immigrant and refugee women's health, aimed at health and allied professionals interested in improving the health and wellbeing of immigrant and refugee women and their health experiences in Australia.

Module 5: Isolation and Immigrant and Refugee Women

Module 6: Health Service Provision for Immigrant and Refugee Women

Details: 9am - 4pm, Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, Suite 207, Lvl 2, Carringbush Building, 134 Cambridge St, Collingwood. Price: \$154 per person (or 10% less if all 3 modules taken)

Contact: Dr Salma Al-Khudairi, (03) 9418 0999 or Salma@mcwh.com.au

NEW RESEARCH, STATEMENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

Report on the potential of migrant and refugee community organisations to influence policy

'Change from Experience' addresses the ways in which migrant and community groups can use their own history and experience to develop the skills to bring about change. It challenges ideas about these organisations as 'comfort zones' and places them at the centre of debates about identity, gender, migration and cohesion. This report looks at how a partnership based on 'critical pedagogy' was created; methods and processes; the experiences of the three organisations involved; what did and did not work in the processes and why; core elements in the curriculum that are useful to organisations wishing to change themselves; and why migrant and refugee organisations struggle with policy. This report was written by Sue Lukes with help from Vaughan Jones and Yesenia San Juan. Find the report at www.jrf.org.uk/publications/migrant-refugee-community-organisations-influence

***It's Your Right!* – New resource about human rights and responsibilities for adult learners**

It's Your Right! is a resource tailored to the needs of people who are newly arrived in Australia and who are learning English as a second language. This resource teaches English and at the same time raises awareness of human rights and equal opportunity laws in Australia that protect people against unfair treatment and discrimination, using real life stories to get the messages across. Download the resource, or watch a 90 second sample video clip, at www.humanrights.gov.au/education/esl. Developed by the Australian Human Rights Commission in partnership with AMES Victoria.

New multilingual living skills website for young people and their workers

This website provides living skills information, for young people or workers, in six languages – Arabic, Amharic, Dinka, Swahili, Karen and English. It providing tips to young people about managing their money, mood, meals and what they do with their mates. It also features an interactive 'make your own budget' tool. The website is a resource you can use in your work with young people as they learn about housing, managing mobile phone bills, getting legal advice and staying happy and healthy. Look out for recorded interviews with young people – they'll be added to the site by the end of the month. Livesmart is an initiative of Iramoo Youth Refuge (Melbourne). Call them to arrange a time for them to explain the website - call Trudy on (03) 9687 0733 or 0404 661 293. See www.livesmart.net.au

New online forum to Human Rights Consultation

A new online forum enables Australians to post their views and engage in discussions about human rights in Australia. Posts and discussions published on the forum, together with the submissions made via the roundtables, mail or website, will be considered by the National Human Rights Consultation Committee in their report to Government in August this year. The forum can be accessed by going to www.openforum.com.au. While the closing date for written submissions is 15 June 2009, the National Human Rights Online Consultation will continue until 26 June 2009. For more information about the consultation process, see www.humanrightsconsultation.gov.au

Providing aid in insecure environments: 2009 Update

The Overseas Development Institute has released this report on trends in violence against aid workers and the operational response. See www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/3250.pdf

OPPORTUNITIES

Special film offer to five RCOA members

Thanks to the generosity of Icon Films we have 5 double in-season passes to RCOA members only to a screening of *Disgrace*. To win a double pass you need to be one of the first five people to respond to this email at info@refugeecouncil.org.au. Please include your name and contact phone number. For information on *Disgrace* go to www.iconmovies.com.au/disgrace. Winner of the International Critics' Award at the Toronto Film Festival 2008, based on the Booker Prize winning novel by J. M. Coetzee. Release date 19 June 2009.

Traditional craft practitioners wanted

Craftsouth (based in Adelaide, South Australia) is currently recruiting traditional practitioners who are able and willing to teach their skills in the workshops. In 2009 Craftsouth plans to research and develop a series of workshops in which members of emerging communities (including refugees) will share their traditional craft skills with contemporary craft, design and visual art practitioners. The workshops will link traditional craft practitioners with local artists and other members of the public. Craftsouth can provide any necessary training and/or interpreters. All practitioners will be paid for their services. If you or anyone you know has craft skills such as needlework, basketry, weaving, carpet weaving, painting, or other traditional skills and might be interested in the workshops please contact Kirsty Darlaston on 0439 505 850, or (08) 8410 1822 on Thursdays between 9:30 and 12:30, or kirsty.darlaston@craftsouth.org.au

Free driving lessons for Sudanese women

Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre in Preston is offering 2 free L Permit Educational driving lessons for Sudanese women particularly those in the North region. Learners will need to pay for the participants test. Phone Wambui on (03) 9496 0200 to register.

REFUGEE ISSUES IN THE MEDIA

A busy person's digest of some recent 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)

Asylum seeker boat blast victims named to help confirm identities

Northern Territory police have taken the unusual step of releasing the names of the five Afghans killed in the asylum seeker boat explosion off Ashmore Reef in April despite not being able to match the names to individual bodies. Formal identification is being hindered by the current war status in Afghanistan, so NT police released the five names in the hope that this will elicit information which will further assist them with the identification process. The five are believed to be Awaz Nader, 50, Baquer Husani, 26, Mohammed Amen Zamen, 38, Mohammed Hasan Ayobi, 45, and Muzafar Ali Safarali, 45. (*ABC News*, 10 June)

People smuggling ambassador appointed

Peter Woolcott has been appointed the full-time ambassador overseeing people smuggling issues. The position was boosted from part-time to full-time in this year's budget "in recognition of the significant challenges that Australia is facing as a result of difficult conditions in source locations such as Afghanistan, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area and Sri Lanka", said Foreign Affairs Minister Stephen Smith. Mr Woolcott is a senior DFAT officer and has held a position as the first assistant secretary of the South-East Asia division since 2007, serving as the Australian ambassador to Rome for three years before that. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June)

Asylum seekers intercepted off Indonesia

A boat carrying 59 asylum seekers was intercepted by Indonesian authorities when it became stranded by bad weather off the east coast of the island of Sumba in eastern Indonesia. The asylum seekers, believed to be from Afghanistan and Pakistan, were attempting to reach Australia. (*ABC News*, 4 June)

AFP strike teams to target people smugglers in Indonesia

Senior Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers met this week with Indonesian National Police counterparts to discuss how to spend new Australian Government funding, announced in last month's budget, to help Indonesia tackle people smuggling. The AFP will help Indonesian police train and equip new specialist strike teams, spread out across the country, that will target people smugglers. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 June)

Opposition set to block proposed detention debt legislation

The Joint Standing Committee on Migration's first report into Immigration Detention, released in December 2008, recommended that the Australian Government introduce legislation to repeal the detention debt regime. In March, the Government followed this recommendation and introduced the

Migration Amendment (Abolishing Detention Debt) Bill 2009 into the Senate. However the Opposition has now indicated that it intends to oppose the bill's passage, despite Shadow Immigration Minister Sharman Stone being a member of the Committee that recommended this reform. (*The Age*, 1 June)

Five Afghans drown after boat sinks off Indonesia

Five Afghan asylum seekers drowned and another 17 are missing after a boat sank yesterday in the Malacca Strait. The Indonesian navy said fishermen found the wooden boat off Indonesia's westernmost island of Sumatra early yesterday soon after it sank and rescued more than a dozen people from the water. Some of those rescued, several of whom were badly hurt, told authorities they wanted to seek political asylum in Indonesia because of the security situation in their homeland. (*The Australian*, 29 May)

Malaysian detention centres 'violating rights'

Two Burmese immigration detainees in Malaysia have died from leptospirosis, a disease caused by exposure to contaminated water, prompting renewed concern over the conditions under which detainees are held in Malaysia's detention centres. Last year, Malaysia's Human Rights Commission identified medical care as an overriding reason why 1,300 detainees (in prisons as well as immigration detention centres) have died over the last six years. Lack of hygiene and overcrowding are other key factors. (*Australia Network News*, 28 May)

National Audit Office questions political influence in funding decision

The National Audit Office has raised questions about the influence the federal Labor MP Laurie Ferguson may have exercised over the Immigration Department in securing money for Settlement Grants Program projects in Western Sydney and Gippsland. Poor documentation of how migrant support services were awarded 'spare' money after last year's budget led the audit office to recommend more transparent decision-making. They found a lack of evidence of a merit-based ranking procedure for deciding who should get the funds. Mr Ferguson, the Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs, said he didn't recommend the projects but the ethnic groups that required further assistance. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 May)

Statistics on asylum seeker interceptions in Indonesia

A Senate Estimates hearing yesterday heard that 887 suspected asylum seekers were intercepted in Indonesia in the past eight months, thought to be on their way to Australia. The Australian Federal Police Mick Keelty also said that he expects a further rise in people smuggling because of the global financial crisis. (*The Canberra Times*, 27 May; *The Australian*, 27 May)

Committee report shows Liberal split

Divisions within Coalition ranks on immigration matters have become apparent with the release of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's second report. The Shadow Minister for immigration, Sharman Stone, broke away from the committee's majority, saying that its recommendations sent the wrong message to people smugglers. However Liberal MP, Petro Georgiou, splintered the other way, saying reforms should go further. A third Liberal Committee member, Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, refused to endorse any report by the Committee or her two Liberal colleagues, saying she had joined the inquiry too late. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May; *The Age*, 26 May)

Joint Standing Committee on Migration releases second report on alternatives to detention

The report recommends a range of reforms to the current bridging visa system to make it more accountable and to give asylum seekers the opportunity to support themselves in the community. It recommends that people who are currently held in community detention be granted a bridging visa and given access to health care and work rights. (*The Age*, 26 May; *The Canberra Times*, 26 May)

Boat intercepted north of Ashmore Reef

The navy has intercepted a boat carrying 73 suspected asylum seekers and four crew six nautical miles north of Ashmore Reef off Australia's north-west coast. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May)

Australia signs Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture

The federal Attorney-General announced today that Australia has signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

“By signing this agreement, Australia has agreed that all places where people are kept in detention should be monitored to make sure that the treatment of those in detention meets human rights standards,” said AHRC President Catherine Branson QC (*Australian Human Rights Commission Media Release, 22 May*)

Diplomatic tension may grow over Tamil refugees

Australia faces a diplomatic rift with Sri Lanka after its high commissioner yesterday warned the Rudd Government not to accept Tamil refugees from its civil war. Mr Senaka Walgampaya said that he saw no justification for Australia accepting any Tamil asylum seekers on either political or humanitarian grounds. "Sri Lanka is perfectly safe for Tamils and Sinhalese equally ... The Government is adequately providing for (displaced Tamils). I do not accept (Tamil) claims that they are not being treated well." As many as 300,000 people, mostly Tamils, have been displaced by the recent conflict. Australia has in the past accepted Tamil refugees, however Australian immigration officials confirmed on 27 May that Australia has no special program for Tamil Sri Lankans. (*The Australian, 22 May; DIAC Media Release, 27 May*)

Overwhelming majority of recent boat-arrivals have meritorious claims

New figures from the Immigration Department showed the vast majority of recent, unauthorised boat arrivals processed so far had been given refugee status. Of 169 cases that were this week, 150 had been resettled in Australia after they were found to be owed protection, while 14 were refused and five were sent home. (*The Australian, 21 May*)

Sri Lankan refugee crisis continues

UNICEF yesterday claimed Sri Lanka was hosting the world's most populous refugee camp in the northern city of Vavuniya, eclipsing even those camps in Africa's war-torn Darfur region. Up to 130,000 people - many sick or wounded - are believed to be squeezed into 'Manik Camp'. According to UNHCR estimates the overall number of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Sri Lanka is now 280-300 thousand people. (*The Australian, 21 May; Asia News, 25 May*)