



Refugee Council of Australia

BULLETIN FOR MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS

6 MARCH 2007

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.

In our previous bulletin, we wrote about our submission to the Australian Government on the 2007-08 Refugee and Humanitarian Program. This comprehensive view of national refugee issues is now on our website at http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/resources/submissions/2007-08_intakesub.pdf

Paul Power, CEO, Refugee Council of Australia

NEWS FROM THE REFUGEE COUNCIL

Sri Lankan asylum seekers on Christmas Island

In the past fortnight, HMAS Success intercepted an Indonesian boat carrying 83 Sri Lankan and two Indonesian citizens 50 nautical miles off Christmas Island. The Success took the boat passengers to Christmas Island on February 24 where it is understood that the Sri Lankans made claims for protection. Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews publicly raised the possibility of Australia returning the group to Indonesia for their claims to be assessed by UNHCR. Some Indonesian and Sri Lankan Government officials expressed the view that the Sri Lankans would be returned promptly to Sri Lanka. The Refugee Council of Australia joined with Uniting Justice, Amnesty International, Jesuit Refugee Service, Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office and TEAR Australia in writing to Mr Andrews, advocating for the asylum claims to be processed on Australian territory. We pointed out that a return of the asylum seekers to Indonesia was against the spirit of the Refugees Convention and could result in a direct breach of the Convention if asylum seekers were returned to Sri Lanka without their claims for protection being given a proper hearing. On February 24, the Refugee Council issued a public statement, which can be viewed on www.refugeecouncil.org.au. We await a response from Mr Andrews and remain in contact with UNHCR's Canberra office, which continues to advocate for Australia to abide by the Refugees Convention.

NGO dialogue with Minister for Immigration and DIAC

On February 22, the Refugee Council was one of 17 non-government organisations which participated in a dialogue with Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews about issues related to the 2007-08 refugee and humanitarian intake. The first occasion for many to meet Mr Andrews in his new role, the meeting was constructive and cordial, with the Minister spending much of the 1½ hour meeting listening to the feedback, ideas and concerns of the non-government representatives. The issues discussed covered many aspects of the refugee and humanitarian program, from the framing of regional priorities for the refugee intake through to issues faced by refugees some years after arrival in Australia. Mr Andrews promised to maintain as open a dialogue as possible with a wide range of people in the field. Some of the many points of note in the discussion were:

- Recommendations from the Federal Inter-Departmental Committee on refugee resettlement are currently before the Minister and will be taken to Cabinet soon.
- Mr Andrews sees employment as a priority for new arrivals, bringing a sense of dignity, but he notes the importance of opportunities for language learning and education.
- A similar approach to previous years will be taken in deciding what numbers of refugees are taken from which countries, with the program's geographic diversity to be maintained.
- Mr Andrews is working to clear by Easter a backlog of requests for ministerial intervention under Section 417 of the Migration Act. He is open to discussing possible changes to the process.

On February 23, the Refugee Council and 11 other organisations participated in the Department of Immigration's bi-annual NGO dialogue with senior DIAC officials. A summary of the issues discussed will be sent shortly to Refugee Council members.

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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

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Human Rights Dialogue

On February 28, the Refugee Council's CEO participated in DFAT's regular dialogue with NGOs on human rights issues. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Alexander Downer, joined the gathering for 1½ hours, responding to many questions and comments from NGO reps present. A summary of the issues discussed will be sent shortly to Refugee Council members.

COMING EVENTS

Thursday, 8 MARCH - Melbourne

Public lecture: "Human Rights Challenges in Trying Grave Crimes", Monash University Law Chambers.

The Castan Centre for Human Rights Law invites you to a public lecture to be presented by Howard Morrison QC, an international criminal law expert, on Thursday 8 March at Monash University Law Chambers between 6 and 7 pm, light refreshments will be provided following the lecture. Mr Morrison will speak on the topic "**Human Rights Challenges in Trying Grave Crimes**". RSVP required to castan.centre@law.monash.edu.au or phone (03) 9905 3327.

Details <http://www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre/events/morrison-flier.pdf>.

Thursday, 8 MARCH – Adelaide

International Women's Day celebration, MRCSA Hall, 59 King William St, Adelaide

The Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia (MRCSA) in association with the African Communities Council of SA and the Middle Eastern Communities Council of SA is hosting an International Women's Day celebration with special guest Justice Robyn Layton.

Details: <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/current/SA%20IWD.pdf>

Tuesday, 20 MARCH - Sydney

Chatting in Harmony, St Mary's Cathedral Crypt, Sydney

As part of Harmony Week, Bridge for Asylum Seekers Foundation has organised a free event with refugee advocates and refugees telling their stories in conversation with ABC journalist Geraldine Doogue. The event will be held at The Crypt, St Mary's Cathedral, from 12-2pm, for more enquiries contact www.asylumseekersfoundation.com or phone (02) 9810 5826.

Wednesday, 21 MARCH – National

Harmony Day (Australia) and **International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination**. Beginning of Week of Solidarity with the Peoples Struggling against Racism and Racial Discrimination (March 21-27). The Department of Immigration and Citizenship is coordinating a national calendar of events for Harmony Day. Details: <http://www.harmony.gov.au/whats-on/index.htm>

Wednesday, 28 MARCH – Melbourne

Flight Rights and Refuge, Foundation House, 6 Gardiner St, Brunswick

La Trobe University's Refugee Health Research Centre is holding a series of monthly seminars on research into human rights, asylum processes and refugee resettlement. On Wednesday 28 March from 5.30pm to 6.30pm, the topic is "Refugee Processing and Mental Health: How far does the duty of care extend?" Key speaker is Tania Penovic, lecturer, School of Law, Monash University. For more information contact rhrc@latrobe.edu.au or phone (03) 9479 5874

Wednesday, 28 MARCH – Canberra

Dinner and evening with Jack Smit of Project SafeCom, Australian National University

Project SafeCom's founder and co-ordinator Jack Smit is hosting an evening on sharing ideas, suggestions and thoughts for asylum seekers, human rights and issues for concern for social justice. This is an opportunity to reflect on issues in the light of the upcoming Federal elections. The event will be held at Vivaldi's, Australian National University, from 6.30pm. For more information, contact Marion Le's office on (02) 6258 1419 or Jane Keogh (02) 6249 8613.

Thursday, 29 MARCH – Melbourne

'My Dress Image Choice', Kingston City Hall, Moorabbin

"My Dress Image Choice" is an open space for women only to promote relationships and further understanding between Muslim and Non-Muslim women. The event, hosted by the Migrant Information Centre of Eastern Melbourne, South Central Regent Migrant Resource Centre and the City of Kingston includes an opportunity for dialogue, a fashion parade and lunch. Bookings essential.

Details: <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/current/fashion%20parade%20Kingston.ppt>

31 MARCH & 1 APRIL – Canberra

“A Weekend of Ideas: A Fair Go for Refugees”, Manning Clark House, Forrest.

An opportunity to explore and debate the issues of Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers, with more than 40 prominent thinkers on asylum issues. Speakers include Dr Eva Sallis, Julian Burnside QC, Prof Frank Brennan SJ, Peter Hughes, Prof William Maley, Ronald Merkel QC, Marion Le, Prof Aamer Sultan, Dr Mary Crock, David Marr, Phil Glendenning and Arnold Zable. Entry \$20 per day. Enquiries (02) 6295-9433. Details: http://www.manningclark.org.au/events/diary_events.html#woi07

11-13 APRIL – Melbourne

African Resettlement in Australia 2007 Conference, University of Melbourne

The African Think Tank Inc will coordinate the inaugural **African Resettlement in Australia** Conference, at the University of Melbourne from 11 to 13 April. The conference, “Walking together at same speed: A forum to dialogue... a cultural journey”, will explore topics such as settlement needs, community building, acclimatisation, gender roles, health and wellbeing, employment, youth, education, African family values and cultural awareness. Details: <http://www.union.unimelb.edu.au/conferences/att/>

17-23 JUNE – Refugee Week

In 2007, Refugee Week will be celebrated from Sunday 17 June to Saturday 23 June, to coincide with World Refugee Day (Wednesday 20 June). The national theme for Refugee Week is “The Voices of Young Refugees”. If you have an event that you would like to publicise, please email the details to info@refugeecouncil.org.au.

NEW RESEARCH, STATEMENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

New children’s book focuses on detention of asylum seekers

New Frontier Publishing has recently published a new children’s book, focusing on asylum seekers’ right to freedom. “**A True Person**”, written by Gabiann Marin and illustrated by Jacqui Grantford, is a moving story highlighting the bond between mother and daughter in times of adversity. Having escaped their war torn country in search for freedom, the mother and daughter instead find themselves in a detention centre, where Zallah, the daughter, struggles to comprehend the situation.

More information: http://www.newfrontier.com.au/books_new/true_person.htm

New book on Issues of Australian sovereignty

The Australian Public Intellectual Network has published a new book “**Our Patch: Enacting Australian Sovereignty Post-2001**”. Edited by Suvendrini Perera, the book reviews the way in which issues of sovereignty and self-determination have changed since 2001 – the centenary of federation, the year of the *Tampa* and of Australia’s entry into the global war on terror. Contributors include Tim Anderson, Maxine Chi, Henry Reynolds and Irene Watson. The book is available from www.api-network.com

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)

83 young Sri Lankans seek asylum

Media coverage of refugee issues in the past fortnight has been dominated by the fate of 83 young Sri Lankan men who were intercepted by the HMAS Success in seas off Christmas Island. On February 23, the Sri Lankan Ambassador to Indonesia said that Australia was considering returning the asylum seekers to Indonesia. Since then, media coverage has focused on whether the asylum claims would be processed in Indonesia or Nauru, or whether the asylum seekers would be sent immediately to Sri Lanka once they were returned to Indonesia. The Australian Government is yet to finalise its plans.

Ballarat to become refugee resettlement city

Ballarat will become Victoria’s second regional city to receive newly arrived refugees through a formal partnership with the Federal Government. The successful pilot developed in Shepparton will be expanded, with Ballarat to receive up to 10 families. (*Ballarat Courier, 1 March*)

Detainees' protest halts Falun Gong practitioner's removal

A protest by detainees at Villawood Immigration Detention Centre halted the removal to China of a Falun Gong practitioner. The removal of An Xiang Tao, 35, was aborted when more than 100 detainees formed a human shield to protect him, Ian Rintoul of NSW Refugee Action Coalition said. The Immigration Department said about 40 detainees, mostly Chinese, took part in a peaceful protest. Mr Rintoul has called on the Immigration Minister to review Mr An's case urgently. *(The Age, 1 March)*

Shire council criticises Government's lack of support for refugee resettlement

In southern Victoria, Bass Coast Shire councillors and community leaders have accused the Federal Government of doing nothing to assist the successful settlement of 80 Sudanese refugees drawn to Wonthaggi by jobs in the local meatworks. The criticism came as the Council considered an Immigration Department request to form a Local Settlement Planning Committee. The Council, which declared its community a Refugee Welcome Zone two years ago, agreed to the Department's request and resolved to lobby for more funds for settlement services. *(South Gippsland Sentinel Times, 27 February)*

Migrant policy shift on English

The Federal Government is planning to apply the mutual obligation philosophy to new migrants, who will be expected to learn English after they arrive in Australia. Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration Teresa Gambaro said that Australia always helped those in need but expected "those receiving assistance to contribute in return". It is unclear how the mutual obligation principle will be applied. *(The Australian, 23 February)*

Hundreds of volunteers in Tamworth ready to help refugees

A Tamworth organisation has been swamped with offers to help newly arrived refugees. Eddie Whitlam of UnitingCare's Migrant Resources Group said his organisation had more than 1600 potential volunteers and helpers on its books, many volunteering after the controversy over whether Tamworth should accept refugees. *(Northern Daily Leader, 20 February)*

\$2 million spent on Idle Port Hedland Centre

The Australian government has spent nearly \$2 million keeping the 800-bed Port Hedland Immigration Detention Centre empty since July 2004. The centre would require "several hundred thousand dollars worth of work" before it could house detainees again, Immigration Department deputy secretary Bob Correll told Senate estimates hearings. Port Hedland Shire Council has been lobbying for the centre to be made available to meet a dire local shortage of housing for mine workers, so far without success. *(The Australian, 19 February)*

Public Advocate opposes return to detention

South Australia's Public Advocate, John Harley, has raised concerns about two mentally ill detainees who have been sent back to detention against their will. Mr Harley is the official guardian of the two men and has opposed their transfer to Immigration Department residential housing projects because of their fragile mental state. A Department spokesperson said the transfer took place after consultation with medical practitioners. *(ABC, 17 February)*

Asylum seekers face lengthy stay on Nauru

Eight Burmese asylum seekers face years of detention on Nauru after rejecting an offer of returning voluntarily to Malaysia. The group has been told they will not be resettled in Australia even if they were found to be refugees. "We have suffered a great deal in Malaysia and do not want to go back to suffer again", a group member said. More than 480 of the 1200 or more asylum seekers processed on Nauru have been resettled in Australia. *(The Age, 17 February)*

Teenager jailed over death of Sudanese refugee

A Sydney teenager who fatally bashed a Sudanese refugee could be free from prison in less than three years. The then 16-year-old attacked Kuol Agang in a "senseless act of violence" in the Western Sydney suburb of Auburn in January 2006. Mr Agang, a father of four who had been in Australia only five months, was punched to the ground, cracking his head on the footpath. *(Wagga Daily Advertiser, 17 February)*