



Refugee Council of Australia

BULLETIN FOR MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS

June 15, 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.

Paul Power, CEO, Refugee Council of Australia

NEWS FROM THE REFUGEE COUNCIL

Refugee Week celebrations mark contribution of young refugees

Refugee Week 2007 is just about to commence and promises to be excellent event, celebrating the theme of "The Voices of Young Refugees". We are delighted that events are happening all over Australia, with more than 120 events listed on the Refugee Week calendar on our website. Official launches are being held in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney and Townsville over the coming several days. This is the first time that Refugee Week has coincided with World Refugee Day, which has been celebrated on June 20 each year since 2001. The support for this combined celebration has been excellent. Refugee Week 2007 is going to be a valuable opportunity to promote awareness – and a sign of the great cooperation between the many and diverse organisations which work with and involve refugees in different ways. The Refugee Week events calendar can be viewed at <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/newsevents/refugeeweek.html>

For future reference, Refugee Week will be celebrated each year in the week (Sunday to Saturday) which includes June 20. This means it will not clash with public holidays in any state or territory. It will always be two weeks after WA's Foundation Day long weekend and one week after the Queen's Birthday long weekend in other states and territories. Refugee Week 2008 will be June 15 to 21.

Changes to proposer system for Special Humanitarian Program

In recent weeks, the Refugee Council has received a number of requests for information about the changes to the proposer support system for the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP). From our discussions with the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), it seems that the new system will come into effect some time in 2008. Individual proposers will have to meet some minimum residency and employment requirements (details of which are yet to be finalised) to be able to propose an SHP entrant without assistance. However, we are being assured that SHP applications will continue to be decided on the basis of humanitarian need. Where a proposer does not meet the residency and employment requirements, they will be asked to link up with a volunteer-based community organisation which will support them. The details of how this volunteer support system will work are still being determined. From our discussions with DIAC so far, we are fairly confident that the new system will result in improved support for many SHP proposers and entrants.

Concern about possible blanket ban on HIV-positive entrants

Recent comments from the Prime Minister have raised concerns about whether the Federal Government may ban HIV-positive entrants entering Australia. The Refugee Council is encouraging the Prime Minister to follow the advice of his Immigration and Health Ministers, who reportedly do not share his interest in such a ban. The effect of HIV-positive refugees and migrants is negligible on Australia's health system. Australia has one of the most strict and rigid systems in the world to admit refugees and migrants. Every person applying for a permanent visa has to be approved on the grounds of complying with health and character requirements which include:

- A full medical examination;
- A chest x-ray if the person is 11 years or older; and
- An HIV test if the person is 15 years or older.

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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

If the person does not satisfy these requirements then a visa is denied, except in a small number of cases where a health waiver is granted for humanitarian or family reasons. The Refugee Council believes that the discretion to grant a waiver must remain so that Immigration officials can manage situations where a blanket ban would result in immediate family members being separated or highly vulnerable people left without protection.

Changes to work exemption period for newly-arrived refugees

Last month, the Minister for Workforce Participation, Dr Sharman Stone, announced that the Federal Government is changing the work exemption period for newly arrived refugees and humanitarian migrants. Previously, refugees were granted welfare benefits but were not required to look for jobs for a minimum of 13 weeks. New arrangements will see those with the capacity to work referred to employment services six weeks after arriving in Australia. Dr Stone's statement can be accessed at: <http://mediacentre.dewr.gov.au/mediacentre/MinisterStone/Releases/HumanitarianentrantstolearnEnglishonthejob.htm>

Newly arrived refugees and humanitarian migrants will now be given a Job Capacity Assessment (JCA) interview between three and five weeks after their arrival. Previously, the JCA was given within the first two weeks of a person's arrival. As part of the new system, Centrelink interviews a refugee six weeks after arrival, following the JCA.

Within the new system it is presumed that the refugee will be exempt from working for 13 weeks (after arrival) if he or she is enrolled in 20 hours of AMEP classes. However, if the Job Capacity Assessor assesses the refugee as being work ready, Centrelink can overturn the exemption and the person would then be expected to look for work, with assistance from a Job Network provider or another service.

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations will shortly release a fact sheet on the changes, which will be posted on the Refugee Council's website.

COMING EVENTS

Refugee Week - June 17-23

The national events calendar is at <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/newsevents/refugeeweek.html>

Saturday, 16 June - Sydney

Film screening: Temple of Dreams at the Sydney Film Festival

The world premier of a new film by Tom Zubrycki, Temple of Dreams, is a story told from the inside revealing Muslim Australians in a way that dispels stereotypes of a vilified and victimised minority.

Venue: State Theatre, 49 Market Street, Sydney. Time: 11.50am

Details: www.sydneymfestival.org

Tuesday, 26 June - Sydney

Event: Jungle Tracks

A program and series of publications targeted at people working with refugee and other children and young people who have experienced trauma.

Venue: Fairfield Public School, 66-82 Smart Street, Fairfield. Time: 4pm

Details: RSVP (02) 9794 1900

Monday, 30 July & Tuesday, 31 July - Hobart

2007 FECCA Congress

The theme of the 2007 FECCA Congress is Empowerment and Inclusion: Australian Cultural and Social Diversity within a Global Context. The Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the Australian national peak body that promotes multiculturalism, community harmony and social justice. Keynote speakers include Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews, and Shadow Immigration Minister Tony Burke. FECCA is calling for conference papers. Deadline, 29 July.

Venue: Wrest Point Resort Hobart, 410 Sandy Bay Road, Sandy Bay, Hobart

Details: (02) 6282 5755 or <http://www.fecca.org.au/Congress/Home.cfm>

Monday, 3 September & Tuesday, 4 September - Sydney

Conference: Muslim Students in Australian Universities

The Conference will discuss national strategies which universities may use in making provision for Muslim students, discuss issues associated with gender, discrimination and respect for difference and

engage the Australian Muslim community in partnership and dialogue about educational aspirations and local involvement.

Venue: Crowne Plaza Hotel, 30 Philip Street, Parramatta

Details: 0422 085 222 or msau-sec@uws.edu.au or

<http://www.uws.edu.au/about/adminorg/corpserv/edc/events>

NEW RESEARCH, STATEMENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

Amnesty International Refugee Kit

Themed “Australia’s unfair shores”, the Refugee Kit contains fact sheets packed with information about everything from people smuggling and detention on Nauru and Christmas Island, to the mental health problems caused by our system of temporary protection. It also contains case studies of four refugees and their experiences. Available from Amnesty International Activist Resource Centres on 1300 300 920 or http://www.amnesty.org.au/Act_now/campaigns/refugees/refugee_campaign_kit

Settling in Australia: the social inclusion of refugees

This publication, edited by Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury, includes a number of chapters on the settlement experiences of refugees in Western Australia, ranging from academic research to service providers’ reflections and refugees’ own perspectives. Available from the Centre for Social and Community Research, Murdoch University, Perth (08) 9360 7349

Classroom management strategies to address the needs of Sudanese refugee learners

This study by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), examined the extent to which English language, literacy and numeracy teachers used classroom management strategies to meet the needs of adult Sudanese refugee learners. While teachers met the needs of these learners in so far as they coincided with those of other refugee groups, the highly oral language culture of these learners appeared not to have been accounted for in teaching strategies. Recommendations include greater flexibility in program content, outcomes and delivery.

Available from <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1778.html>

New book: Acting from the Heart

In *Acting from the Heart*, 50 people who have been moved to support asylum seekers and refugees, reflect on the diversity of this movement and describe how they became involved in refugee advocacy. Edited by Sarah Mares and Louise Newman and published by Finch Publishing, the book “represents a powerful contribution to the ongoing debate about the ethics of our nation and the politics of institutionalised inhumanity worldwide”.

Available from <http://www.seekbooks.com.au>

New publication: Human rights 2006 – The Year in Review

This publication is a collection of papers presented at the annual Castan Centre for Human Rights Law Conference in Melbourne. The conference updates legal practitioners, government, NGOs, community organisations and academia on key human rights issues and events.

Available from <http://ecommerce.law.monash.edu.au/categories.asp?cid=2&c=125318>

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)

Indonesian Asylum seekers on Christmas Island to be deported

Five Indonesians from West Timor will be deported after being detained on Christmas Island for the past 18 months. The group include a couple with two small children and another man. The single man is being held with two Vietnamese asylum seekers who, once the Indonesians leave, will be the sole occupants of the Department’s \$500 million detention centre when it opens its doors. Immigration Minister Andrews said the decision on the Indonesians’ applications followed a lengthy process of review and appeal. (*The Australian*, 5 June)

Refugees no burden on health system

A Medical Journal of Australia report has found that refugees have a similar, if not lower, rate of hospital admission as people born in Australia. The study, conducted in the six years to June 2004, included refugees from Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burma, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia and Sudan living in Victoria. The study left open the possibility that refugees may not be seeking necessary hospital treatment because they are unfamiliar with the admission system. (*The Australian*, 4 June)

Howard seeks to ban entry to people with HIV

Prime Minister John Howard has ignored the advice of his health and immigration ministers and said HIV-positive people should be banned from entering Australia. "I'm going to review the current position, and I want procedures put in place that see as far as possible that (HIV-positive people being allowed into Australia) doesn't happen," Mr Howard said. It is understood that both departments have told the Prime Minister that immigration has not had a significant impact on HIV infection in Australia. In 2005, just two per cent of 928 new infections were contracted overseas with half of that number being Australians or New Zealanders. (*The Age*, 2 June)

Nauru aid blow-out, DFAT asked to explain

Australia's overseas aid allocation to Nauru has blown out massively from a \$17.7 million allocation to an estimated \$29.4 million. During a Senate estimates hearing, officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) were asked to explain what Australia was giving Nauru under this arrangement. A DFAT official replied that among others, a finance team, a commissioner of police and up to three police advisers had been deployed. The overseas aid is in exchange for Nauru holding about 90 refugees from Sri Lanka and Burma in two detention centres financed by Australia. Nauru has received over \$100 million in aid over the past five years. (*The Age*, 2 June)

Detention centre on Nauru to be refurbished

The office of the Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews confirmed that State House detention centre on Nauru is under renovation, indicating that a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed between the two countries will be renewed. The MOU is due to expire on June 30. There are currently 90 asylum seekers being detained at the State House detention centre. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 May)

NSW Government profited from Nauru

A NSW Government company, Aus Health International, which lists the NSW State Government Treasurer and Health Minister as major shareholders, received \$200,000 from the Immigration Department for health services and construction work in Nauru during 2005 and 2006. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 May)

Phantom aid never leaves our shores

A third of the \$3 billion being spent on foreign development assistance this year is phantom aid which either never leaves Australian shores or has been directed away from poverty alleviation programs overseas, Aidwatch, has reported. The Aidwatch report, "Fighting Poverty or Fantasy Figures: The Reality of Australian Aid", states for example that \$2.08 million in 2001 spent on the so-called 'children overboard' affair was labelled as refugee funding under OECD criteria, however the asylum seekers involved were refused refugee status. AusAID responded that all official expenditure on aid reported by the Government complied with OECD guidelines. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 May)

Australian aid to Nauru labelled an 'unmitigated bribe'

A former AusAID director who headed Nauru's AusAID program throughout 2003, has labelled aid payments to Nauru as "unmitigated bribes" that ensure the Government's "Pacific Solution" continues. Nauru has received \$100 million from Australia since a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed in 2001. The Australian government spends an average \$2 million a month to run the Nauru detention centre. AusAID denied that the aid was a bribe. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 May)

Burmese asylum seekers appeal to High Court

Seven Burmese asylum seekers detained in Nauru are taking the Australian Government to the High Court, saying its refusal to consider their applications for refugee visas is unlawful. Lawyers will argue that processing the asylum seekers on Nauru, with no prospect of them being resettled in Australia, is

not lawful under the Migration Act. Melbourne lawyer David Manne acting for the men said they had been traumatised by abuse at the hands of Burmese and Malaysian authorities. (*The Age*, 26 May)

Asylum seekers exploit legal system, says High Court official

An increasing number of asylum seekers are exploiting Australia's justice system to try to stay in the country by arguing their case several times before different courts, the chief executive of the High Court said. "They have been through it once on ground one, they have failed and they have had another crack at it on a different ground and again it goes through," High Court chief executive Chris Doogan said. (*West Australian*, 24 May)

US denies refugee exchange deal caused spike in Haitian numbers

The number of Haitian asylum seekers intercepted by the US Coast Guard jumped from five in March to 704 in April, prompting claims they were being lured by the promise of a life in Australia. This followed the announcement early last month that Australia would consider resettling up to 200 Cuban and Haitian refugees being held at Guantanamo Bay every year, in exchange for the US taking asylum seekers held on Nauru. (*The Age*, 22 May)

Immigration Department cash blow-out

The Immigration Department is expecting a \$55 million budget loss this current financial year. Department secretary Andrew Metcalfe attributed the budget blow-out to an expansion of the department's activities and increased staff numbers, including officers handling the introduction of the Australian citizenship test. (*Canberra Times*, 22 May)

Victorian State Government funds agent to assist refugee new arrivals

The City of Maribyrnong in Melbourne has funded an "African communities' partnerships facilitator" who will build leadership skills among the different African communities to improve networks, services and relationships in the locality. (*Williamstown Advertiser*, 16 May)

Climate change displacement to top one billion by 2050

Global warming will displace at least one billion people by 2050 as water shortages and crop failures force people to leave their homes, sparking local wars over access to resources, a Christian Aid report says. "We estimate that, unless strong preventative action is taken, between now and 2050, climate change will push the number of displaced globally to at least one billion," the report says. (*The Age*, 15 May)