



Refugee Council of Australia

BULLETIN FOR MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS

August 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

Citizenship, Integration criteria and English language tuition on national political agenda

As a Federal election draws closer, the level of political activity increases in all portfolio areas – the immigration portfolio and refugee policy being no exception. Some developments in recent weeks have included:

- **Citizenship test** – The completion of the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee report into the government's current citizenship test legislation. The Refugee Council was among the organisations which raised concerns about the legislation in a submission and in an appearance before the committee hearing in Sydney. The legislation is still before the Senate. Details of the committee process, submissions and the final report can be found through the following website link: http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon_ctte/citizenship_testing/index.htm
- **Integration criteria** – The announcement by Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews of plans to put greater emphasis on integration criteria in assessing applications for permanent visas and to ask permanent visa applicants to sign a values statement. The announcement was made in a speech on July 31 – see <http://www.minister.immi.gov.au/media/speeches/2007/ka05-31072007.htm>. The broad application of integration criteria would be a negative step for Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program. However, at this point, there is no indication of what this ministerial decision will mean in practice. Any new policy is not expected to be implemented for at least four months. The Refugee Council has written to Mr Andrews, asking for an opportunity for further discussion and emphasising the importance of not watering down Australia's commitment to resettling the most vulnerable.
- **Labor pledge on language tuition** – The Labor Party's pledge to expand language tuition for refugees who most need it. Shadow Minister for Immigration, Integration and Citizenship, Tony Burke, announced that an ALP Government would inject \$49.2 million over four years into English language tuition for refugees. The plan, which would allow trainers to apply for additional funding beyond the current 510 hours per student to ensure that refugees have functional English, will also establish traineeships under an additional 120 hour vocational scheme. Mr Burke's media release can be found at <http://www.tonyburke.com.au/file.php?file=/news/IKOOSGQWMY/index.html>

Hobart takes centre stage in multicultural policy

Hobart became the centre of national multicultural policy debate on July 30 and 31 when the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) held its 2007 Congress at Wrest Point Casino. More than 300 delegates attended and many issues were canvassed around the themes of empowerment and inclusion. Among the many speakers were eight Federal and two Tasmanian politicians, including three Ministers and three Shadow Ministers. Keynote speaker was Khoa Do, filmmaker and 2005 Young Australian of the Year, who spoke of his life experience beginning with his family's escape from Vietnam when he was two years old. The Refugee Council's CEO Paul Power, who spoke on a panel discussion about inclusion, highlighted three principal concerns of many newly-arrived refugees – reuniting family, finding suitable and affordable housing and breaking into the Australian employment market.

Suite 4A6, 410 Elizabeth Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010 Australia
Phone: (02) 9211-9333 • Fax: (02) 9211-9288
info@refugeecouncil.org.au • Web: www.refugeecouncil.org.au
Incorporated in ACT • ABN 87 956 673 083

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

Advocates work together to take issues to UNHCR gatherings

More than a dozen Australian non-government organisations (NGOs) are working together on plans to raise issues of concern at UNHCR's annual NGO consultations (September 26-28) and Executive Committee (October 1-5) in Geneva. These two events bring together hundreds of international policy makers on refugee issues from government, non-government and UN bodies, providing an unparalleled annual advocacy opportunity. The Refugee Council has participated in these events for more than 20 years and interest among other Australian NGOs has grown considerably in recent years. Last year, 22 Australian NGO representatives attended the 2006 events and celebrated a major advocacy achievement led by Dr Eileen Pittaway, Director of the University of NSW's Centre for Refugee Research. The main outcome of the 2006 meeting was a new UNHCR Conclusion on the protection of refugee women and girls at risk, backed up by more than US\$40 million in commitments to improve protection measures – a result of years of lobbying by Dr Pittaway and others. Details of what happened last year can be found in reports at http://www.crr.unsw.edu.au/unhcr_advocacy.html

For 2007, the Refugee Council has received funding from Oxfam Australia to cover the travel costs of a refugee community representative from Australia. We are currently seeking applications from people who have experienced life as a refugee and are interested in raising issues of international concern at the coming UNHCR NGO consultations. Applications close on Friday (August 17). The details and selection criteria are at http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/current/ExCom_travel_grant.pdf

For more information on UNHCR ExCom and NGO Consultations, see <http://www.unhcr.org/excom.html>

COMING EVENTS

From mid-July to mid-September "Excised" – Paddling for Refugees

David Corlett (author, *Following Them Home: The Fate of the Returned Asylum Seekers*) and Simon Keenan have embarked on a unique journey to raise awareness about asylum seekers and the policies which have seen sections of Australia excised from our migration zone. On the road and in their sea-kayak, David and Simon will make the 15,000 km journey in an effort to publicise the little understood policy of excision and its devastating human implications. Follow their journey on www.paddlingforrefugees.org

Friday, 17 August & Sunday, 19 August – Sydney

Special Event: My Dress, My Image, My Choice

A 'women only' event, showcasing a fashion parade, superb cuisine and an opportunity to meet Australian Muslim women. This event has booked out for the past 5 years. Free event

Details: 17 August, 11.00am – 2.30pm, Randwick Town Hall, 30 Frances Street, Randwick

19 August, 5.00pm – 8.30pm, Castle Grand, Cnr Pennant & Castle Streets, Castle Hill

Bookings essential call: Sharon 0422 346 263

Monday, 20 August – Melbourne

Seminar: "Research in Trafficking of Persons"

With Professor Susan Kneebone, Deputy Director of the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law

Details: 6pm; Places are limited so RSVP is essential to marketing@law.monash.edu.au by 16 August

Venue: Monash University Law Chambers, 472 Bourke Street, Melbourne

Tuesday, 21 August – Brisbane

Film presentation and forum: "Celebration of UNESCO-declared International Year of Rumi"

The renowned 13th century Sufi poet and mystic, Rumi has inspired countless peoples across diverse cultures and faiths to build a peaceful world. This celebration commemorates the 800th anniversary of Rumi's birth.

Details: 7.15 to 9.30pm, RSVP by August 17 to mfc@griffith.edu.au or (07) 3735 7052

Venue: Multi-faith Centre, Griffith University, Nathan campus

Wednesday, 22 August – Sydney

Publications Launch – "Long Way to Equal"

Presented by the Women's Legal Service of NSW, Her Excellency Marie Bashir AC CVO, Governor of NSW will launch "Long Way to Equal" which documents the difficulties refugee and migrant women have in accessing legal services.

Details: 3.00 to 4.30pm, RSVP before 17 August to [Sharon Kingshott@clc.net.au](mailto:Sharon_Kingshott@clc.net.au) or 02 9749 7700
Venue: Theatre, Parliament House, Macquarie Street, Sydney

Friday, 24 August - Sydney

UNHCR ExCom: What is it?

Amnesty International Australia and the Centre for Refugee Research present a half-day seminar examining Australia's engagement with UNHCR's annual Executive Committee (ExCom) meeting. Guest speakers include: Ellen Hansen (UNHCR Senior Protection Officer), Peter Hughes (Department of Immigration and Citizenship) and Eileen Pittaway (Centre for Refugee Research UNSW)

Venue: University of NSW Central Lecture Block 2 (<http://www.facilities.unsw.edu.au/maps/kensington.pdf>).
The location is E-19. Details: Graham Thom, Refugee Coordinator, Amnesty International – (02) 9217 7643 or gthom@amnesty.org.au

Saturday, 25 August – Hobart

Celebration – “Melting Pot 07”

International Students' Committee presents an evening of international flavours, food stalls and performances. For tickets please contact the TUU Activities Centre on (03) 6226 2495.

Details: 6.00 to 11.00pm

Venue: TUU Activities Centre, Sandy Bay

Sunday, 26 August – National Refugee and Migrant Sunday

Coordinated by the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) and the Christian World Service (CWS), Refugee and Migrant Sunday this year will focus on the theme “Responsibility to Protect”. For further details, and information kit and events please visit www.ncca.org.au/cws/refugees/rms

Wednesday, 29 August – Sydney

Seminar: Asylum – Upholding Human Rights

To celebrate Refugee and Migrant Sunday, the NSW Ecumenical Council is hosting this evening seminar with speakers Sir Anthony Mason (former Chief Justice, High Court of Australia) and George Gittoes (artist, film maker, journalist).

Venue: 7pm to 9pm, Uniting Church, 395 Oxford Street, Paddington

Details: RSVP to Kathy Moroney at kmoroney@ncca.org.au or (02) 9299 2215 by August 23

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>

Thursday, 18 October – Sydney

Refugee Art Exhibition, Humanitarian Awards Ceremony and Short Film Festival

Sponsored by the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivor's (STARTTS), this event will comprise the Dario Palermo National Refugee Art Exhibition, the STARTTS Humanitarian Awards presentation and The Triumphant Refugees' Short Film Festival. The event will commence with a lantern lit march from Sydney's Domain to the event location.

Details: Convened at Domain at 6.00pm for march to Pitt St Uniting Church Hall, Pitt St, Sydney

Contact gary.taylor@startts.org for further details and art exhibition entry and awards nomination forms

Wednesday, 24 & Thursday, 25 October – Melbourne

Conference: 2007 ACFID Humanitarian Forum – “Resiliency in Africa”

Keynote Speaker - Professor Francis M. Deng, Special Advisor to the U.N. Secretary-General on Genocide and Mass Atrocities

Details: for further information, please visit www.acfid.asn.au Registrations close Friday, 5 October.

Venue: William Angliss Conference Centre, Melbourne.

NEW RESEARCH, STATEMENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

Resource: UNHCR launches new Refworld Website

UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres has officially launched the new Refworld website at www.refworld.org. The new website brings together country reports, national legislation and case law, and all public domain UNHCR protection policies and guidelines – an excellent and free resource for people researching refugee issues and policies.

Diversity in Health 2008 Conference: Call for Papers

Entitled '*Strengths and Sustainable Solutions*', the conference will consider, review and develop strengths and sustainable solutions in the overall approach to health and well-being of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Deadline for abstracts: August 13

Conference details: March 10 – 12, 2008; Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Contact: Conference Secretariat 02 9840 3800 or dhi@swahs.health.nsw.gov.au

Website: www.dhi.gov.au/conference.

Call for Papers and Presenters – *Sharing our Stories, Sharing our Strengths* Refugee Conference

People of a refugee-like background are invited to submit papers and deliver presentations highlighting their experiences at the "*Sharing our Stories, Sharing our Strengths*" Refugee Conference in December this year. To be held at the University of Western Sydney, Bankstown, papers are invited on a range of topics including 'Building Communities', 'Making a living and family life in Australia' and 'Working Australian Systems'. Papers and presentations in languages other than English are invited. Interpreters will be available. Deadline for abstracts: August 31. Conference to be held December 6, 7 & 8

Contact: Jasmina Bajraktarevic on 02 9794 1900 or jasmina.bajraktarevic@sswahs.nsw.gov.au

Call for Submissions: *Growing up Asian in Australia*

The editors of this anthology are looking for personal experience narratives of growing up Asian-Australian that are unique, honest and reflective. Original submissions are sought that provide insight into the lives of Asian-Australians that defy, question or shed light on the usual stereotypes. Submissions must be received by December 1, 2007. The collection will be edited by Alice Pung, author of *Unpolished Gem*. All enquiries to: Denise O'Dea at deniseo@blackincbooks.com

Call for Short Films, Features and Documentaries: *Human Rights Arts and Film Festival*

Organisers of Australia's first Human Rights Arts and Film Festival are seeking submissions from film and documentary makers. For further information and submission guidelines visit: www.hraff.org.au
Submissions close on August 31.

Call for Submissions: *National Conference on Racism in a Global Context*

Murdoch University, Western Australia November 9 to 11, 2007. For full conference details please visit: <http://ncrgc.murdoch.edu.au/>. Final date for submissions is September 3.

CD Release: *Normal Days by Scattered People*

Launched on World Refugee Day, June 20 this second album follows the acclaimed '*Scattered People*' release in 2000. *Normal Days* expresses the overwhelming desire of asylum seekers for normality where skills are valued, safety is assured and access to ordinary life is welcomed. Dedicated to those performers on the original '*Scattered People*' who have since been forcibly returned to their homeland, profits from *Normal Days* release will go to the Refugee Claimants Support Centre in Brisbane. Visit www.sweetfreedom.org/ for more details.

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)

Thailand to repatriate 7,000 Hmong Refugees

Despite calls from US lawmakers, the Thai Government will continue with plans to forcibly repatriate thousands of Hmong refugees back to communist ruled Laos. The Thai military government has come under international criticism recently for beginning a controversial process of deportation of Hmong refugees living in camps along the Thai-Laos border. In an appeal to the Thai King, members of the US Congress have said that the refugees face starvation and death by the Lao military regime if returned and that the refugees should remain in Thailand until they can be resettled in third countries. (*AFP & Radio Australia, 7 August*)

Burmese refugees not protected in Malaysia

150 UNHCR-recognised refugees have been detained by Malaysian authorities following the latest in a series of raids. Despite permission for UNHCR to operate in the country, the Malaysian Government is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention and does not officially recognise the status of some 36,000 Burmese refugees, 12,000 from the Rohingya ethnic minority. (*AP, 6 August*)

Family tricked by deregistered migration agent

The High Court has ruled that a 2003 case concerning a Lebanese family be reconsidered by the Refugee Review Tribunal following allegations that the family had been misrepresented by a deregistered and fraudulent migration agent. (*AAP Newswire, 2 August*)

Victorian Government criticises integration capacity assessments

The Victorian Government has condemned plans announced by Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews to introduce 'integration capacity' assessments for migrants and refugees. Minister assisting the Premier on immigration issues, Daniel Andrews, said the Victorian Government did not want to create additional hurdles for people wishing to settle here. Australian Council for Civil Liberties Secretary, Cameron Murphy also labelled the plan unworkable, ridiculous and a return to the days of the White Australia policy. (*The Age, 2 August*)

Report on anti-gay persecution to Refugee Review Tribunal

The Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby is preparing a report to the Refugee Review Tribunal on refugees fleeing anti-gay persecution. The group hopes the report will be used to improve training of RRT members in issues of anti-gay persecution and improve the handling of such cases before the RRT. (*Sydney Star Observer, 2 August*)

Australia pledges medical help to aid Darfur peace efforts

The Australian Government has pledged medical assistance to Darfur, but could not commit troops because of existing deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Solomons. Australian doctors and nurses may form part of UN staff in Darfur assisting peace-keepers. The UN voted to send up to 26,000 troops and police to Darfur in an effort to stop growing attacks on civilians. (*The Age, 1 August*)

A recent UN report highlights the growing crisis in Darfur with a further 25,000 people fleeing their homes bringing the number of internally displaced persons to 2.2 million. With over 200,000 Darfuri refugees in Chad and 140,000 Chadians displaced by the conflict, the total number of people affected by the protracted conflict has reached 4.2 million. Over the past 4 years of conflict, international experts estimate that over 200,000 people have died – a figure rejected by the Sudanese Government which claims the conflict has been exaggerated by western media. (*ABC News Online, 25 July*)

Tampa blocked despite legal advice

Despite initial advice from senior legal personnel that Tampa Captain Arne Rinnan had a right of "innocent passage" under international law, the Prime Minister's Department sought advice that would provide an alternative view. Information presented in a new biography of the Prime Minister suggests that initial advice was ignored in favour of an alternative view which would support the Government's political agenda leading up to the 2001 election. The Australian Council for Civil Liberties has called for the Prime Minister to make public the initial advice he was given. Following the rescue of more than

400 asylum seekers in August 2001, the Tampa was forced to wait off the coast of Christmas Island after the Government refused it entry to Australian waters. (*The Age*, 23 July)

ASEAN workshop on Immigration

The Australian and Indonesian Governments co-chaired a three-day ASEAN workshop on immigration investigations in Cairns on July 23 to 26. The workshop exchanged experiences on immigration investigation practices used to combat illegal border movements and immigration fraud. (*Minister for Immigration website*, July 23)

Navy morale overboard

Drawing on reports, notes and memos from senior naval personnel, the Government's stance on asylum seekers has taken a significant toll on the morale of sailors who are required to enforce Government policies of interception and turning boats back to international waters. Since the Tampa incident in August 2001 issues of declining naval morale, "psychological weariness" and frustrations over lack of recognition have become increasingly apparent. Long periods of time spent at sea on extended coastal patrols to intercept and deter asylum seekers have led in some cases to family breakdown and have undermined naval capacity to respond effectively to crises in the region. (*The Age*, 22 July)

Court criticises Refugee Review Tribunal for relying on Wikipedia

The Federal Magistrates Court has overturned a decision of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) on the grounds that the RRT used irrelevant and unreliable information to refuse a protection visa for an Iranian asylum seeker. A convert to Christianity, the Iranian asylum seeker feared he would face arrest and the danger of being killed because of his religious beliefs. Using information from a Wikipedia website, the RRT claimed he did not possess sufficient knowledge about religious rituals and refused the application for protection. The case will now be referred back to the RRT for re-consideration. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 20 July)

Inaugural UN Association report card criticises Australia

Australia has an appalling human rights record and has neglected its responsibilities towards refugees and asylum seekers, says the United Nations Association of Australia. In assessing the Government's actions in 10 different policy areas, the UNAA Report Card 2007 gives Australia a D for its treatment of asylum seekers and a C on its human rights record. (*The Australian*, 19 July) The report card can be viewed at www.unaa.org.au

Canberra silent on Nauru aid

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer signed a new Memorandum of Understanding with Nauru on 16 July, but has refused to disclose details of the aid package linked to Australia's offshore detention facilities. Over the past five years, Australia has provided over \$100 million to Nauru in what a former AusAid official has described as "an unmitigated bribe". The Nauru detention centre now holds 90 Sri Lankan and Burmese asylum seekers. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 July)

Australia to give \$20m aid to Darfur

In light of the ongoing crisis in Sudan's Darfur region, the Federal government has announced an additional aid package including \$16 million to the World Food Program, \$2 million for logistical support and \$2 million for health through the Australian Red Cross. A United Nations request for military personnel to assist peace-keeping efforts has not yet received a final response from the Australian government. (*The Age*, 15 July)

Correction: 83rd Sri Lankan asylum seeker remains in Australia

In last month's bulletin, we summarised a June 16 article from the West Australian newspaper which reported that a Sri Lankan asylum seeker had been deported to Nauru following medical treatment in Perth. The source report was incorrect and, in fact, the asylum seeker has remained in Australia for further medical treatment. He was part of a group of 83 Sri Lankans picked up by the Australian Navy near Christmas Island in February. Other members of the group are currently being held on Nauru.