



Refugee Council of Australia

BULLETIN FOR MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS

13 February 2008

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

Paul Power, CEO, Refugee Council of Australia

NEWS FROM THE REFUGEE COUNCIL

RCOA welcomes closure of Nauru detention centre

Last week's closure of Australia's offshore detention centre on Nauru by the new Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans, has been welcomed by RCOA. This brings an end to the long wait of the 90 refugees held over the past year on Nauru and to a failed policy which brought needless suffering to vulnerable people. Our media release about this announcement can be viewed at <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/newsevents/media.html>

Asylum policy concerns taken up with new Government

RCOA and A Just Australia (AJA) have been working together to follow up a series of issues identified as immediate priorities for the new Minister to consider. The issues were nominated by representatives of a range of organisations working with asylum seekers as those having the most direct day-to-day impact on people seeking protection. The priorities put to the Minister in early December were:

1. Ending the Temporary Protection Visa and Temporary Humanitarian Visa system.
2. Ending offshore processing and resettling refugees held on Nauru (as has since occurred).
3. Transferring long-term detainees for whom there are no character or security concerns from Immigration Detention Centres into the highly successful Community Care Pilot.
4. Reviewing the Ministerial Intervention process in the light of recommendations from the Commonwealth Ombudsman, halting any imminent removals from Australia while this review takes place.
5. Giving priority to reuniting split families of former Temporary Protection Visa holders who have been trying unsuccessfully for some years to bring immediate family members to Australia.
6. Reversing the denial of work rights and access to Medicare for asylum seekers on Bridging Visas affected by the "45 day rule".
7. Changing the language used in policy and public discourse about refugee issues, replacing public condemnation of asylum seekers and refugees with more balanced and positive commentary on refugees and the humanitarian program.

Paul Power (RCOA CEO) and Kate Gauthier (AJA National Coordinator) have followed up correspondence to the Minister with some constructive discussions with Ministerial advisers. These and other issues will be raised directly with the Minister as part of the dialogue between the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and NGOs on refugee and humanitarian issues in Melbourne on February 28-29.

Priorities in refugee resettlement policy

Also on the agenda at the DIAC-NGO Dialogue will be a series of high priority settlement policy concerns. In early December, RCOA representatives met representatives of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia, migrant resource centres and settlement services, torture and trauma services and multicultural youth services to discuss common settlement policy concerns to take up with the new Minister. The resettlement policy priorities nominated were:

1. **Refugee and Humanitarian Intake** – Ensuring that the Refugee and Humanitarian Program remains focused on humanitarian need, not on notions of "integration potential". Increasing the refugee

resettlement intake and advocating for other countries to do the same, to respond to the many situations where refugees have no durable solution available.

2. **Reuniting families** – Ensuring that reuniting split families is given a high priority in the humanitarian program, regardless of regional quotas for the refugee program (possibly through a new humanitarian family reunion visa category). Reviewing the financial arrangements for travel to Australia under the Special Humanitarian Program, to reduce the financial burden on new arrivals.
3. **Language learning and education** – Improving the effectiveness of English language programs. Improving education strategies for school-aged refugee and humanitarian entrants.
4. **Employment** – Investigating ways of improving employment outcomes for refugee and humanitarian entrants, through fairer skills recognition processes, reviewing the applicability of “welfare to work” obligations, improving the effectiveness of the Job Network and giving greater support to successful job placement strategies.
5. **Housing** – Ensuring that the needs of refugee and humanitarian entrants are given a high priority in the development of strategies to improve housing affordability for Australians on low incomes.
6. **Citizenship test** – Developing strategies to ensure that refugees and humanitarian entrants are not disadvantaged by the testing regime or discouraged from seeking citizenship.
7. **Settlement services** – Reviewing the provision of settlement services for new refugee and humanitarian entrants, exploring the impacts of recent tendering and funding strategies on service delivery, the viability of settlement services and co-operation between services.
8. **Whole-of-government approach to settlement issues** – Exploring how different Federal Government departments and the Federal and State Governments can work together much more effectively to ensure the best possible outcomes for refugee and humanitarian entrants across all policy areas.
9. **Migration advice and legal assistance** – Expanding access to free migration advice and legal assistance for people seeking to propose humanitarian entrants, as well as for people seeking onshore assistance.
10. **Positive promotion of multiculturalism and humanitarian program** – Replacing the past negative political rhetoric about refugees, asylum seekers and multiculturalism with a confident and positive promotion of Australia’s diversity and its role in welcoming and supporting refugees. Funding independent research on migration issues, to improve national knowledge and planning.

RCOA completes annual Intake Submission

The issues outlined above and many others have been incorporated into the Refugee Council’s submission to the Australian Government on the 2008-09 Refugee and Humanitarian Program. The 102-page submission, completed last week, drew on views gathered at around 40 public consultations in eight states and territories and input from representatives of more than 160 organisations. The submission will be available for public release in early March, following the DIAC-NGO Dialogue.

It appears that the Government’s usual invitation for public submissions on the 2008-09 refugee and humanitarian intake will not be happening this year, largely as a result of the timing of the change of government. However, RCOA encourages organisations and individuals to write to the Minister and the Secretary of DIAC as soon as possible to raise issues they believe should be considered.

Refugee Week 2008 theme: ‘A Place to Call Home’

Refugee Week 2008 will be held from June 15 to 21, with the theme being ‘A Place to Call Home’. This theme, which encourages Australians to think about our common obligation to people who have no secure home, connects with UNHCR’s global focus on refugee protection for World Refugee Day (June 20) and this year’s 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Photo/artwork competition for Refugee Week poster

RCOA will shortly be producing a national Refugee Week poster and is inviting people to submit photographs or artwork which illustrate the theme of ‘A Place to Call Home’. A cash prize of \$500 is being offered for the image chosen. Entries close next Monday, February 18. For details, see the Refugee Week web page: <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/newsevents/refugeeweek.html>

This web page also has details of small grants (\$250 and \$500) being offered for organisations holding Refugee Week events in NSW. Funding for these grants has been made available by the NSW Community Relations Commission.

COMING EVENTS

Monday 4 February to Friday 29 February – Sydney

Art Exhibition: Togetherness for Peace

Venue: NSW Parliament House (Fountain Court), Macquarie St, Sydney. Open Mon - Fri 9am - 4.30pm.
For further information contact: 0403 787 440

Friday 15 February - Sydney

Film Launch: We Are All Australian

By the students of Strathfield South High School and Windsor High School. A Living in Harmony project
Venue: Strathfield South High School, Cnr Hedges Ave and Liverpool Rd, Enfield
Details: 7.00pm and for further information visit www.harmony.gov.au

Friday 22 February to Thursday 13 March – Melbourne

Refugee Realities – Oxfam Australia Interactive Performance Event

Volunteers needed! Refugee Realities is a multi-media installation/performance simulation examining and sharing the realities of refugee experiences. This event incorporates moving image, improvised theatre, audio-visual and photographic art forms as well as real humanitarian supplies and equipment. Over the three weeks of the event, thousands of visitors will view the exhibitions and side-events, including lectures, film screenings and cultural events, or participate in the simulation.

Venue: Gasworks Arts Park, 21 Graham Street, Albert Park, Melbourne

Details: For further information, please visit: www.oxfam.org.au/refugeerealities

“Belongings” website exhibition

Closing date for exhibits: Friday 22 February

Did you migrate to Australia between 1945 and 1974? Do you have a keepsake that you brought over or found in Australia? *Belongings* is a website exhibition which tells the stories of post-Second World War migrants through their personal mementos, photographs and memories. The stories will be shared online at www.belongings.com.au. Coordinated by Auburn Council and the NSW Migration Heritage Centre. For further information contact: Andrea Fernandes on (02) 9217 0626 or email andrea@pnh.gov.au.

Saturday 23 February to Monday 25 February – Brisbane

Asia Pacific Interfaith Symposium on Women, Faith and a Culture of Peace

Venue: Multi-Faith Centre, Griffith University, Nathan Campus, Brisbane

For further information and full symposium program, see <http://www.griffith.edu.au/centre/mfc/>

Sunday 24 February – Adelaide

"Silk Road" Performance

Performers from the Afghan, Persian, Indian and Tatar communities in Adelaide join artists from Flamenco, Greek and Celtic backgrounds to celebrate the ancient global trade route, the Silk Road.

Venue: South Australian Folk Centre, cnr South Rd and George St, Thebarton

Details: cost \$12 and \$10 concession

Tuesday 4 March – Adelaide

Exhibition of African Masks

Venue: The Mawson Centre, 2-8 Main St, Mawson Lakes.

Details: 5.00pm to 7.00pm, RSVP by 21 February on (08) 8281 7644

Monday 10 March – Sydney

Conference: Western Sydney Kaleidoscope

Cross cultural stories and experiences of raising happy, healthy and resilient children and young adults.

Venue: Holroyd Centre, 17 Miller Street, Merrylands

Details: 9.30am to 5.00pm, Cost is \$20 per person, RSVP by 15 February

For further information and registration contact: Amrit Versha on 0423 793 344

Wednesday March 19 to Friday March 28 – Sydney

Harmony Day 2008 – Photography Competition and Exhibition

Supported by Sydney Multicultural Community Services and Randwick City Council, this exhibition aims to showcase originality and expression of culture among community members of Inner and Eastern Sydney.

Venue: *Exhibition Launch, 19 March, Bowen Library, Maroubra*

Details: For entry forms and further details, please contact Yasmine Loupis on (02) 9663 3922.

Friday 30 May – Sydney

Art for Refugees Exhibition and Sale

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

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

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

NEW RESEARCH, STATEMENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

Watching Brief: Reflections on Human Rights, Law and Justice

This latest book by renowned human rights lawyer, Julian Burnside QC, is a collection of essays and commentary on human rights in Australia, issues such as mandatory detention, anti-sedition legislation and anti-terrorism legislation. Published by Scribe Publications.

Towards better health for refugee children and young people in Australia and New Zealand

This 2007 report by the Royal Australasian College of Physicians provides a comprehensive analysis of issues relating to the health of refugee children and young people in the community and in immigration detention. The report also recommends enhancements to health services, further development of research and improvements in training and professional practice. A full copy of the report and related position paper “*The Health of Refugee Children*” can be downloaded from <http://www.racp.edu.au>

New Special Features section on UNHCR Refworld site

This new section of the website brings together key documents relating to UNHCR’s special initiatives such as the Global Consultations on International Protection, Convention Plus and the High Commissioner’s Forum. This new feature can be found at:

<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=initiatives>

New documentary films: African on Screen Initiative

The Applicant is a fictional story about the prejudice one African Australian job seeker faces and is intercut with real-life accounts of racism encountered by African men and women. In *Colour Blind*, a young Sudanese woman leads a blind man through an urban Australian landscape littered with signs of fear and intolerance, posing the question, ‘Are you free of racism if you don’t see it?’ Both films have been launched as the first in the Africa on Screen Initiative coordinated by Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE). For further information, please visit: <http://www.ice.org.au/newswire/africa-on-screen>

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)

Damaged souls caught in third wave of suffering

While offshore detention may be ending as the last refugees leave Nauru, many of those who suffered under the policy on Temporary Protection Visas are experiencing ongoing torment as they remain separated from their family members. Director of the Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture, Paris Aristotle, says that separation from families is often linked to the psychological deterioration of

many refugees and that, in the absence of family, it is almost impossible to recover from trauma. (*The Age*, 9 February)

No protection visa for 'people smuggler'

Immigration Minister Chris Evans has refused a protection visa for Mr Ali Al Jenabi despite acknowledging that Australia had obligations towards him under the UN Refugee Convention. Senator Evans said the visa had been refused on character grounds relating to the Government's views on the practice of people-smuggling, Mr Al Jenabi has been released on a Bridging Visa and will be able to live and work in Australia until Iraq is deemed to be safe. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February)

Nauru detention centre closes its doors

With the last remaining refugees leaving the Nauru detention centre today, the former Government's 'Pacific Solution' will effectively draw to a close. UNHCR Regional Representative Richard Towle said "this is the end of a long and fairly painful chapter in Australian asylum policy and practice." UNHCR will also carefully monitor the continued use of detention facilities on Christmas Island. (*ABC Online*, 8 February)

Australia accepts stranded Afghans

A family of nine Afghan refugees is to be resettled in Australia after being stranded on the Indonesian island of Lombok. They are part of a group of 21 who are awaiting the outcome of their protection visa applications. (*The Age*, 2 February)

Australia considers Nauru aid following asylum-seeker centre closure

Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, Duncan Kerr has indicated that the Federal Government will consider a new aid deal for Nauru. (*ABC Radio Australia*, 1 February)

Trouble in Paradise as refugees get racist hate mail

Two refugee families in the Adelaide suburb of Paradise have received racist, hand-written letters that threaten the safety of the single mothers and their children. The incident follows the recent relocation of another family after similar threats were received. (*Adelaide Now*, 29 January)

Refugees failing citizenship quiz

Figures released by the Government have showed that only 80% of refugee and humanitarian entrants are passing the citizenship test on the first or subsequent attempts. Immigration Minister Chris Evans said that the Government needed to ensure the test did not disadvantage those most in need of support and will conduct a review of the test in April. (*The Age*, 29 January)

Labor urged to end offshore asylum seeker processing

The Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia has called upon the Federal Government to abolish offshore processing on Christmas Island saying that while the Nauru camp might be closed, continuing to use the Christmas Island facilities is "robbing Peter to pay Paul". Labor for Refugees is also seeking to lobby the Minister for Immigration, Senator Chris Evans on the issue of returning Christmas Island to Australia's migration zone. This would ensure that all asylum seekers would be assessed under the same system and would have access to the Australian legal system. (*The Age*, 22 January)

Howard mandarins capturing Labor ministers

Refugee advocate and author Tony Kevin urges the Rudd Labor Government to instigate a full-powers judicial inquiry into the former government's people smuggling disruption program as recommended by the Senate in 2002-03. (*Eureka Street*, 21 January)

Anglicare lists its priorities for Federal Budget

Among priority areas listed by Anglicare Tasmania Acting Chief Executive, Daryl Lamb for consideration in the upcoming Federal Budget are housing, improved services for refugees and people with disabilities. The Federal Government has called for public submissions and community input into the 2008-09 Federal Budget. (*ABC News*, 21 January)

A new life begins after year in Nauru, a 'very bad place'

As one of the first 21 Sri Lankan refugees to be resettled in Australia from Nauru, 24-year old 'Aswin' described Nauru as a 'very bad place' and was grateful to be in Australia where he hopes to build a future for himself. (*The Age*, 19 January)

Former minister slammed for visa failure

Federal Court judge Kevin Lindgren has said that the failure of former minister Kevin Andrews to issue a decision within the required 90 days in the case of a convicted Iraqi people-smuggler was an "egregious failure by the minister to obey the Parliament". On 30 January, a 'mandamus' will be issued compelling the new Minister Senator Chris Evans to make a final decision on the case within 90 days. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 January)

People smuggler block to continue, says Minister

Despite voicing strong opposition to the former Howard Government's people smuggling disruption arrangements, the new Rudd Labor Government has vowed to retain the policies which have been controversially linked to the sabotage of boats and life-threatening maritime events such as the sinking of the SIEV X in which 353 people drowned. Senator Evans said the Government would not support the scuttling of boats, but is committed to attacking people smuggling at its source. The Government is also yet to make a decision about whether to revoke laws which excised 4000 islands of the Queensland coast from Australia's migration zone. (*The Age*, 17 January)

Refugees stranded on Lombok

Advocates for the group of Afghan asylum seekers stranded on the Indonesian Island of Lombok since 2001 are surprised that Immigration Minister Senator Chris Evans was not aware of their case. A claim for humanitarian protection has been lodged with the Minister's office and there have been a number of representations regarding the group in the past. Senator Evans' statement that he was not briefed on the case comes as he prepares to visit Indonesia for discussions on people smuggling. (*ABC Radio National, Breakfast*, 17 January)

Call for re-engagement with African refugee resettlement

Dr Andre Renzaho of the African Leadership, Learning and Advocacy Group urges the new Labor Government to reconsider commitments to African communities in conflict and support a re-engagement with refugee settlement from Africa. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 January)

Villawood may be scrapped and replaced

Following recent Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) reports which have described Sydney's Villawood detention centre a "disgrace", Immigration Minister Senator Chris Evans has advised the Department of Immigration to consider recommendations to close the centre and replace it with another 800 bed facility on another site. Refugee advocates have also called on the government to abolish mandatory detention laws following the death of an Iranian detainee in hospital recently, raising concerns about the standard of health care services in detention. (*The Age*, 14 January)

The Age calls for a fair go for asylum seekers

In an editorial, *The Age* newspaper notes that, while recent reports by the on the standard of Australia's detention centres has shown some overall improvements, mandatory detention policies and legislation remain at the heart of the problem. The new Rudd Labor Government must address all inequities concerning refugees and asylum seekers including those which affect community-based asylum seekers. (*The Age*, 12 January)

Record payout for refugee who sewed lips

Iranian refugee, Parviz Yousefi has been awarded more than \$800,000 in compensation from the Federal Government for the physical and psychological damage caused by more than three years in detention, despite recommendations he should be released on medical grounds. Mr Yousefi is no longer able to work and will require medical treatment for the rest of his life. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 January)

Woomera breakout charges dropped

Charges against two former Woomera detainees who escaped with almost 40 others in 2002 have been dropped. *(ABC News, 11 January)*

Kenya needs Australia's help in desperate times, says African Think Tank

Chairman of the African Think Tank, Dr Berhan Ahmed, calls on the new Australian Government to overturn the decision by the former Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews to halt the refugee intake from Africa. Growing conflict in Kenya and a rising humanitarian crisis have brought deep concerns to Australia's African community. *(The Age, 11 January)*

Rise in unlicensed drivers blamed on migrants and refugees

A sharp increase in the number of people driving without a licence has been attributed to refugees and migrants who were not aware of the need for a licence. Refugee workers have said that for many new entrants the concepts of needing to acquire a license and driving regulations were foreign and police agreed that targeted driver education campaigns for new arrivals were needed. *(Courier Mail, 10 January)*

Detention centres 'remain hell holes'

A recent HREOC report detailing annual inspections of immigration detention centres has shown that while overall improvements have been made there remain serious concerns about the 'prison-like' Stage One at Villawood Detention Centre and that detainees are still being held for too long. Refugee advocates have reported that detainees are routinely handcuffed while being transported to appointments outside the detention centre. *(The Age, 9 January)*

Iraqi refugee's body found after two days

An Iraqi refugee and community leader from Cobram in Victoria drowned in the Murray River while taking his son swimming. 40 year-old father of three, Abdul Albushaikhali, who arrived in Australia over 10 years ago escaping the brutal regime of former dictator Saddam Hussein, had assisted many refugees to settle successfully in the region. *(The Australian, 9 January)*

Block 19 at Bonegilla Migrant Centre wins recognition

Between 1947 and 1971, over 300,000 migrants went through the Bonegilla Migrant Centre near Wodonga. As it celebrates its 60th anniversary, the Centre has been listed alongside the Sydney Opera House and the Great Barrier Reef on the National Heritage list. *(Herald Sun, 9 January)*

Citizen test review backed

Immigration Minister Senator Chris Evans has said that he will conduct a review of the citizenship test introduced by the previous Howard government during last year. High rates of failure at 1 in 10 have prompted the review, which has been backed by ethnic community groups. *(The Age, 3 January)*

Howard negative about Vietnamese refugees, says Fraser

Following the release of the 1977 cabinet papers, former PM Malcolm Fraser has claimed that John Howard, then a junior minister approached him following a Cabinet meeting saying "We don't want too many of these people. We're doing this just for show, aren't we?" The claim, made in reference to Vietnamese refugees, has been denied by Mr Howard. *(The Australian, 1 January)*

ASIO wins right to appeal files ruling

The Federal Court has ruled the ASIO may appeal an earlier decision that it had to produce documents relating to three men denied visas on character and national security grounds. Two of the men who received adverse security assessments were Iraqi refugees Mohammed Sagar and Mohammad Faisal and spent more than five years on Nauru. *(The Age, 22 December)*

Detainees rejected but can't go home

Community leaders and a leading anthropologist have claimed that the 16 Indonesian people rescued from their sinking vessel during the Federal election campaign would have been aiming to seeking asylum in Australia, despite recent statements by the group. Claims that their boat had been blown off course may just be to avoid problems with the Indonesian government. The group has also claimed it

will not be able to return to their home island of Roti because of outstanding debts to fishing bosses. *(The Australian, 18 December)*

Asylum not required, say boat people

16 Indonesian people deported from Christmas Island after being rescued from a sinking vessel in November have stated that they did not make a formal claim for asylum and did not intend to come to Australia. This also comes after another four people were intercepted near the Ashmore Islands and transferred to Christmas Island for processing. Immigration Minister Chris Evans has reiterated that the Rudd Labor government will continue to process unauthorised arrivals on Christmas Island and that Australia must maintain a “firm but fair” immigration system. *(The Age, 18 December)*

Australian government exit worries Nauru MP

Nauruan MP and former Health Minister Kieran Keke has expressed concern that closing down immigration detention facilities on the economically struggling island nation will have significant and detrimental impacts on employment and the lives of local people dependent on the centres for income. *(Sydney Morning Herald, 13 December)*

Labor may help visa-seekers living on handouts

The new Immigration Minister Senator Chris Evans may move quickly to consider an internal review of bridging visas which deny asylum seekers access to work rights and Medicare. It is believed that the review by the Department of Immigration was completed in June 2007, but the previous government did not commence action on the review’s recommendations. *(The Age, 13 December)*

Departures of Burmese refugees from Thailand top 20,000

UNHCR figures show that since 2005, over 20,000 refugees from Burma have been resettled in third countries after spending decades in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border which are home to over 124,000 registered refugees. The United States had taken almost 12,000 with Australia and Canada resettling around 2000 each. Other resettlement countries have included New Zealand, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. *(Scoop.co.nz, 12 December)*