

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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MEDIA RELEASE

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REFUGEE COUNCIL ASKS FOR EMPATHY WITH ALL VICTIMS OF PERSECUTION

“The Refugee Council of Australia expresses its absolute horror at the terrorist attacks on the United States last week” said the Refugee Council President, David Bitel. “It is also disturbing that at a time when most Australians can begin to appreciate the loss of safety and fear experienced by refugees, some members of the community have chosen to vilify Muslims and Australians of Arab descent.”

The Refugee Council supports calls made by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for all Australians to act in an understanding and tolerant fashion. “We have an opportunity as Australians to show solidarity not only with the victims of this tragedy in the United States, but also with those victims of persecution in our own community” Mr Bitel continued.

“Linking terrorism with the people fleeing persecution doubly victimizes those who have survived torture and refugee trauma and are seeking to repair their lives in Australia. It treats the innocent as criminals and reflects a disturbing ignorance about the nature of international terrorism, and the process of refugee determination in Australia.”

Those making this link need to consider the following;

- if a terrorist is to target Australia they would be far more likely to enter on a tourist, student or other temporary visa by airplane rather than risk traveling on a leaky boat, voluntarily subjecting themselves to the extensive security checks undertaken on all unauthorised arrivals. Nor would they be likely to wish to wait indefinitely in a detention centre;
- those asylum seekers who are found to be refugees have, by definition, been found to have a well founded fear of persecution. The Afghans who have arrived in Australia by boat recently are overwhelmingly Shiite Hazaras, an ethnic group that have been victims of a form of genocide perpetrated by the Sunni, Pashtun-dominated Taliban;

- the Refugee Convention contains an Exclusion Clause (article 1(F)) that allows a state to deny protection to people who have committed serious crimes or crimes against humanity before coming to Australia.

“A joint statement by the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities encouraging solidarity at this time demonstrates what a strong capacity Australians have to join together in times of crisis. Australia has the potential to turn this adversity into an opportunity to increase community cohesion, increase our understanding of the reasons asylum seekers choose to flee, and extend our empathy to all the victims of organized violence, United States citizens and Australian survivors alike.”