

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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MEDIA RELEASE

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JOINT STATEMENT BY THE NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL AND THE REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

In an act of unprecedented co-operation the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Refugee Council of Australia wish to release a joint statement in connection with the dramatic situation pertaining to the refugees onboard the Norwegian tank ship, the "Tampa".

We sincerely regret the lack of political will on behalf of the Australian authorities to resolve the precarious humanitarian situation that has arisen. The shocking news of Australian soldiers boarding the ship but refusing to render humanitarian support until the ship has left Australian waters is very distressing. We want to emphasize that Australia has the main responsibility for finding a solution for this group.

The situation in Afghanistan, the refugees' home country, is one of war, persecution and serious human rights violations. The large majority of Afghan nationals who have sought protection in Australia have been granted asylum based on persecution in their home country.

UNHCR must also take their share of responsibility to find a solution to the situation. If their plea to the governments involved to cooperate in finding a swift solution does not yield results, UNHCR must take the responsibility for the asylum procedure, and ensure that the people who are in need of protection receive it.

If Australia continues to ignore their humanitarian responsibility and violate basic human rights, and UNHCR's initiative does not bear fruit, the Norwegian Refugee Council will appeal to the Norwegian authorities to take swift action for an international solution. This must encompass the critical humanitarian situation onboard, as well as the asylum seeker's rights to have their applications for refugee status processed in accordance with international refugee legislation. The situation dictates that this only can happen by ensuring that the asylum seekers are allowed ashore.

It is critical to ensure that the country that receives the asylum seekers do not return them to their home country without processing their applications for refugee status.

We have during the last few years witnessed several examples of populist forces consciously appealing to the fear of other cultures for the purpose of their own political gain. This has been observed in Europe and Australia alike, and often during election campaigns. Rather than fulfilling their international responsibility, countries initiate processes in order to avoid responsibility for refugees. Both the Norwegian Refugee Council and Refugee Council of Australia are greatly opposed to this tendency.

For more information, please contact the Council or Steinar Sørli, General Secretary, Norwegian Refugee Council: mobile: (0011 47) 901 04 664

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A similar press release has been sent out in Norway.