

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

INCORPORATED IN A.C.T. - ABN 87 956 673 083

37-47 ST JOHNS RD, GLEBE, NSW, 2037
PO BOX 946, GLEBE, NSW, 2037
TELEPHONE: (02) 9660 5300 • FAX: (02) 9660 5211
info@refugeecouncil.org.au • www.refugeecouncil.org.au

MEDIA RELEASE

7th January 2002

IT'S TOO EARLY TO SEND AFGHAN BACK

While welcoming the recent developments in Afghanistan, the Refugee Council of Australia expresses concerns about remarks made by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Immigration which suggest that Afghanistan is safe now that the Taliban have been routed.

“Such remarks are grossly under-estimating the complexity of the situation,” said RCOA President, David Bitel; “further, they fail to recognise that for the last 20 years Afghanistan has been embroiled in a succession of bitter struggles between the various ethnic and religious groups within the country. What we are seeing is just the next chapter, not the end game.”

It is the opinion of the Council, based on over two decades of experience dealing with conflict situations around the world, that when there has been an upheaval of the scale we have seen in Afghanistan, a significant number of people will be in need of ongoing protection. This was the case in Indochina where resettlement programs went on for almost 20 years after the war ended. Six years after the signing of the Dayton Peace Accord, the largest single group Australia is accepting for resettlement come from Bosnia. “To expect that the situation with respect to Afghanistan will be any different is both simplistic and dangerous”, Mr Bitel continued.

It is true that the Refugee Convention includes a so-called ‘cessation clause’ which recognises that where circumstances in a country change, people from that country might no longer need protection.

But the Convention is clear that such changes must be of a fundamental and durable nature. “It is far too soon to make such a blanket assessment about Afghanistan,” said Mr Bitel. “Although the initial reports are positive, ethnic divisions within Afghanistan’s tribal culture are still deep, and freedom of expression and belief is not widely respected. The reinstitutionalisation of politics in a country that has suffered as much as Afghanistan is a process which will take years, not weeks or months. ”

Further, the Council argues that we should not lose sight of the fact that the majority of Afghan asylum claimants coming to Australia in recent years have been from the ethnic and religious minority group, the Hazaras. Without doubt the Hazaras suffered terribly under the Taliban. It must not be forgotten, however, that their persecution began long before the reign of the Taliban and there are as yet no guarantees that it will end with their demise.

The Refugee Council calls on the Australian Government to:

- continue processing refugee status claims lodged by Afghans;
- grant protection to those whose protection can not be guaranteed if returned;
- recognise the importance of increasing the size of the resettlement program from the region in order to combat people smuggling.