

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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MEDIA RELEASE

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AUSTRALIA CUTS BACK ITS COMMITMENT TO UNHCR

Today the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs announced the size and composition of the 2002–2003 Humanitarian Program.

On face value the announcement held no surprises – a program of 12,000 places, made up of:

- 4,000 places for refugees;
- 6,000 places for humanitarian entrants;
- 2,000 places for those granted refugee status in Australia.

This is the same size as every year since 1996 and roughly the same composition.

It is only when you look at the detail that you see the ‘sting in the tail’.

The 4,000 places dedicated to the refugee component of the program have traditionally been directed towards assisting refugees identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as being priority cases for resettlement. Australia has made much of our generosity in this regard and of the importance of this contribution to the work of UNHCR.

Next year’s program will see UNHCR having to ‘share’ its allocation with refugees identified in Indonesia and as part of the Pacific Solution. This will mean fewer places for UNHCR’s priority caseload.

“Surely this goes against everything the Minister has told us about his commitment to assisting the most vulnerable refugees overseas!” said Ms Margaret Piper, the Refugee Council of Australia’s Executive Director.

“It is the Minister’s decision how the places in the program are divided. He could have chosen to direct the intercepted refugees elsewhere – after all,

there are 8,000 other places available to him – but instead he elected to take places away from the UNHCR program,” she concluded.

It is also important to note that those who will come in from Indonesia and the Pacific Solution will not be granted permanent residence, as will all other off-shore entrants, but will be issued temporary visas. These temporary visas limit access to settlement services and other important entitlements. This will:

- Create on-going hardship for the refugees;
- Exacerbate divisions within the community;
- Compromise the viability of settlement services.

The Refugee Council of Australia does not see this as wise or humane program planning. It is self-interested and divisive, and the real losers will be the refugees the Minister would have us believe he wants to help.

[Click here to go to the Refugee Council's Position Paper on the 2002–2003 Federal Budget](#)