

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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MEDIA RELEASE

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RCOA SUPPORTS EAST TIMORESE BILL

The Refugee Council of Australia welcomes the announcement today by the ALP to move an amendment to the Migration Legislation Amendment (No. 1) Bill in the Senate tomorrow. If adopted, the amendment will enable the Government to grant permanent residence to the approximately 1650 East Timorese asylum seekers currently living in Australia.

“Fleeing persecution, massacres and widespread human rights violations including sexual violence under Indonesian rule, many hundreds of East Timorese sought protection in Australia in the early 1990s. For the past 8 to 10 years the majority of East Timorese asylum seekers have been living in a state of legal limbo awaiting a first decision on their refugee applications,” said Margaret Piper, Executive Director of the Refugee Council.

In March 2002, the Government announced it would commence the processing of East Timorese asylum applications and that decisions would be made in relation to the current situation in East Timor.

“While the majority of East Timorese may no longer fit the 1951 UN Convention definition of a refugee, there are strong and compelling reasons why they should be granted permanent residence through a special humanitarian visa. ”

“The East Timorese asylum seekers are a valued and integral part of the Australian community. For many, the subjective fear of return is exacerbating past trauma, particularly those who have suffered torture and sexual violence.”

“The Council is pleased to see the proposal for a special humanitarian visa before the Parliament and we would encourage all political parties to support this important amendment,” concluded Margaret Piper.