

# REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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## MEDIA RELEASE

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### REFUGEE COUNCIL DECRIES – “THIS IS NOT THE AUSTRALIAN WAY”

“The Government’s strategies to deny 14 people the opportunity to make a case for Australia’s protection are un-Australian,” said David Bitel, President of the Refugee Council of Australia. The sending back of the Kurds without looking at their claims, when other Kurds have as recently as September been recognised as refugees by Australia, offends both our international commitments and the notion that people are entitled to a fair go. Government figures show that 90% of boat arrivals over the last four years are refugees who are entitled to Australia’s protection. If these people are refugees they could go on to contribute to the country greatly like other refugees do.”

“In the eyes of the world, it does not matter whether a person crying out for protection has reached an artificially created domestic migration zone or has reached Australia’s actual borders. We must deal with them because we are obliged to do so under the 1951 Refugee Convention. This Convention does not allow us to return these people to a foreign state which is not a party to the Convention and where there is a real threat that they will be returned back to a situation of danger.”

David Bitel went on, “ what the world is seeing is a wealthy first world country which is turning its back on a small group of asylum seekers. How can Australia ask countries like Tanzania, which hosts 690,000 refugees, and Zambia, which hosts 247,000 refugees, to keep on doing their bit, when we are not prepared to hear just 14 cases?”

“The saddest thing of all,” Mr Bitel added, “is that we are not even prepared to listen. That is not the way of a nation, whose own representative, Dr H V Evatt, chaired the 1948 UN General Assembly which adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and which may next year assume presidency of the UN Human Rights Committee. Turning people back who it now seems clear sought refugee status not only tarnishes our heritage of international responsibility and compassion but goes against our compassionate ethos of which we have all been so proud.”

Mr Bitel concluded, “whilst we recognise the government’s right to control the borders there is one important legal exception to this rule which the government conveniently ignores; namely the right of refugees fleeing persecution to cross borders irrespective of immigration legalities. It is time the government stopped misleading the Australian people about this law”.

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