

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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MEDIA RELEASE

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CHILD FRIENDLY GOVERNMENT?

RCOA Response to HREOC Report: "A Last Resort?"

"In the same week that we have seen the Federal Government profess a commitment to children and families, they try to hide a damning report into their treatment of children in immigration detention centres by tabling it in the midst of the Budget hype," said David Bitel, president of the Refugee Council of Australia. "If the government were serious about being family friendly, how can they justify their robust defence of a policy that has caused so much suffering?" he continued.

Mr Bitel made these comments in response to the release of the Human Rights Commission's report "A Last Resort?". A weighty tome of over 900 pages, the report offers a thorough and compelling analysis of an area where successive governments have failed in their duty of care to some of the most vulnerable human beings.

Most of the children who have found themselves in immigration detention centres have already experienced extreme trauma in their homeland and during flight. They commit no crime in coming to this country, save the fact that they are unable to produce necessary travel documents. They came in search of safety and protection but instead have been subjected to months, and in some cases years, of neglect and deprivation, the scars of which many will carry for years to come as they try to rebuild their shattered lives in the Australian community.

"The Refugee Council has raised concerns about the detention centres since the policy was introduced in 1992" said Mr Bitel, "but when you see the evidence set out in its totality, it makes for chilling reading. In almost every area considered, the Human Rights Commission finds that Australia has breached the obligations it voluntarily assumed under the Convention on the

Rights of the Child and that, as a result, children and their families have suffered substantial, potentially permanent, harm.

“This should not be a time for apportioning blame or making excuses,” he continued. “Both of the major political parties have had a hand in shaping the current detention policy and they both have a responsibility to put things to right.

“Nor is it acceptable to deny the need for action by pointing to declining numbers or to change of management company. It cannot be denied that the fundamental conditions that underpinned the worst abuses are still in place and there is nothing to stop them from being repeated.

“The Australian Government is not above the law. Its own human rights arbiter has determined that the policies are fundamentally flawed and the Government must now make every effort to change the laws and implement the recommendations in the report,” Mr Bitel concluded.

For further information or to obtain a copy of the Council’s submission, contact Margaret Piper on 02 9660 5300 or 0405 144 099.