

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

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REACTIVATE SAFE HAVEN VISA FOR EAST TIMORESE: RCOA

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) has called on the Australian Government to offer temporary safe haven to the people most at risk from the humanitarian and political crisis in East Timor.

Chair of RCOA's Legal Policy Committee, Liz Biok, said Australia was ideally placed to offer specialist care and protection to East Timorese people most at risk, through a reactivation of the safe haven visa developed in 1999.

"In 1999, Australia offered protection to 3,920 ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and 1,932 East Timorese through Operation Safe Haven," Ms Biok said. "The Kosovars and East Timorese were given accommodation in seven safe havens around Australia and provided with care including medical assistance and trauma counseling, returning home in 2000.

"A reactivation of Operation Safe Haven would ensure that those most at risk from the crisis in East Timor were provided with the medical assistance, shelter and support needed.

"The information that RCOA is hearing from contacts in Dili is that many people are being left without sufficient medical care or food and that 50,000 people have already been displaced by the violence.

"While Australia would not be able to provide immediate safe haven to all displaced East Timorese, the Federal Government could respond to the crisis by offering safe haven for six months to 2,000 people most in need of medical care, trauma counselling and physical protection.

"This operation could be expanded, depending on whether the crisis continues to escalate or in response to medical needs which cannot be met in East Timor."

The Australian Government's safe haven visa category offers protection for a fixed period to those who have been displaced and are unable to return to their homes, with priority given to those to whom other humanitarian considerations apply.

Media enquiries: Liz Biok (02) 9219-5895 (bus hrs) or (02) 9569-3419 (after hrs).