



Refugee Council
of Australia

MEDIA BRIEFING – February 26, 2007

REFUGEE COUNCIL'S KEY CONCERNS ABOUT THE SRI LANKAN ASYLUM SEEKERS ON CHRISTMAS ISLAND

The Refugee Council of Australia is the national umbrella body for non-government organisations involved in working with and for refugees. It represents more than 150 members across Australia.

Our organisation is deeply concerned that the Australian Government is considering plans to return 83 Sri Lankan and 2 Indonesian asylum seekers to Indonesia, for the following reasons:

- The plan to return asylum seekers to Indonesia could place Australia in breach of the Refugees Convention.
- Indonesia is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention and, therefore, is not bound by the Convention.
- Australia cannot guarantee that the asylum seekers will not be returned to face persecution once it hands over responsibility for their fate to Indonesia.
- The Sri Lankan Government clearly has been involved in discussions about this issue in some way, as the Sri Lankan Ambassador to Jakarta was the first official to confirm that the plan is under consideration. This is directly against the spirit of the Refugee Convention.
- The human rights situation in Sri Lanka has deteriorated rapidly in the past year. Two UN Special Rapporteurs visited Sri Lanka in the last 6 months to report on escalating human rights violations. In December, UNHCR issued new advice to governments handling asylum claims from Sri Lankan citizens, highlighting the grave needs of many for protection from persecution. In October, a team from Melbourne's Hotham Mission visited Sri Lanka to monitor the human rights situation, producing a report detailing the extent of human rights concerns. In this context these 83 asylum seekers should be given an opportunity by Australian authorities to explain their fears in relation to the escalating violence in Sri Lanka.