



Refugee Council of Australia

MEDIA RELEASE

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REFUGEE COUNCIL RESPONSE TO 2007- 08 FEDERAL BUDGET

Increased Funding for Settlement Services

The Refugee Council of Australia welcomes yesterday's Federal Budget announcement that an allocation of \$209.2 million over four years gives additional support to recently arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants.

Disappointingly, however, yesterday's Federal Budget allocation was not matched with an increase in the number of humanitarian entrants which remains at 13,000 places for 2007-08.

Refugee Council's Chief Executive Officer Paul Power said this figure constituted a very small component of the entire migration program.

The additional \$127.8 million earmarked for humanitarian students under the English as a Second Language – New Arrivals Program – for both primary and secondary students was particularly welcome.

"This is an excellent measure that doubles the per capita rate of government funding for students," Mr Power said.

The Refugee Council also commends an extra \$5.3 million to subsidise the cost of rent and utilities during the first month of a humanitarian entrant's arrival under the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS).

In addition, the Refugee Council welcomes improved access to Centrelink on arrival crisis payments to the tune of \$6.4 million.

An additional \$35.2 million to establish a Complex Case Support Network (CCSN) is welcomed to deliver specialised and intensive case management to humanitarian entrants.

"These resources are definitely needed and we look forward to further details about how the scheme will be designed and implemented," Mr Power said.

Increased support amounting to \$16.6 million for proposers under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) is also welcomed in principle.

"This is provided there are no limitations in practice for potential proposers who don't comply with the minimum requirements and there is equitable access to the Proposer Support Program," Mr Power said.

The increased budget allocation also targets additional funding for public transport facilities for new arrivals, additional funding to encourage new interpreters in emerging community languages, extra funding for torture and trauma services and funding to support sustainable settlement of refugees in rural and regional areas.

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Strengthening Australia's Borders

The Refugee Council of Australia welcomes the Federal Government's efforts to combat people smuggling and the criminal networks that engage with this activity.

"However, we are concerned that these measures could also punish asylum seekers," Mr Power said.

An allocation of \$3.3 million to combat people trafficking specifically in Thailand is a welcomed initiative.

The Refugee Council is also concerned that the improved arrangements in transit countries might not be acknowledging Australia's international obligations.

"The \$7.7 million allocated to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to care for people intercepted or in transit in Indonesia, could appear at first glance to be a positive step. Our concern, however, is that this initiative may be part of an overall strategy which results in restricted or delayed access to permanent protection for those who need it.

Improved arrangements in transit countries once again continually refer to asylum seekers as prospective illegal immigrants, when this is not the case under international law. Additionally many of the transit countries are not signatories to the Refugee Convention. The Refugee Council urges the Australian Government to press upon Indonesia to ratify the convention as part of a common regional approach to alleviate the suffering of vulnerable people.

The Refugee Council suggests that \$12.1 million over four years for additional Airline Liaison Officers cannot be used to prevent the access of asylum seekers to a fair Refugee Status Determination.

Citizenship

The Refugee Council is disappointed about the allocation of \$123.6 million for introducing a citizenship test. Such a large allocation of funds would be able to achieve far more if directed to initiatives to improve the integration of new arrivals.

"Full participation in the society and commitment to Australia can not be measured or even fostered through formal testing," Mr Power said.

"The introduction of a formal citizenship test will act as a significant barrier to many refugees attaining citizenship thus fully participating in the Australian community," he added.

Instead of promoting Australian values the proposed citizenship test fosters exclusion and runs contrary to Australian these values, Mr Power said.

The Refugee Council urges the Australian Government to consider alternative ways for refugees to obtain citizenship.