



Refugee Council
of Australia

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Refugee Council calls for rational public debate in wake of asylum seeker boat tragedy

The Refugee Council of Australia has called for calm in the wake of yesterday's horrific boat incident, off Ashmore Reef, and has strongly urged all commentators to refrain from politicising the tragedy or distorting the facts.

"The current priority is to attend to the medical emergency at hand, and we commend government for their swift evacuation of all critically injured survivors and their efforts to locate missing individuals", said Refugee Council President John Gibson.

"It is essential, however, that in re-entering a public debate on asylum seeker issues, we learn, as a nation, from past mistakes and focus scrupulously upon the facts. What must be avoided at all costs is any return to the divisive and destructive debate surrounding Tampa, 'children overboard' and the Pacific Solution", he added.

The Refugee Council of Australia refutes claims of a link between the introduction of more humane immigration policies and the increased numbers of boat arrivals. "There is no credible argument that has been put forward to corroborate a link. What we do know, is that the increased number of arrivals witnessed over recent months is consistent with international trends and with deteriorating situations in a number of countries, resulting in greater numbers of people being displaced and attempting to flee persecution."

Figures recently released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicate that there has been a 12% global increase over the last year in the number of asylum seekers lodging protection claims in industrialised countries. The UNHCR report also confirms that the numbers of asylum seekers arriving to Australia are very small by international measures, with Australia falling outside the top 10 receiving countries.

Mr Gibson also urged commentators and the Australian public to remember that the act of entering another country to seek protection from persecution – with or without a pre-issued visa – is sanctioned under both Australian and international law. "There is nothing "illegal" about the process of seeking protection from persecution. And as a mature democratic nation which has signed the Refugee Convention, we need to treat asylum seekers and handle their claims in a manner which is consistent with the "fair go" ethos of which we are rightly proud."

The Refugee Council notes that the vast majority of asylum seekers taken to Christmas Island, whose claims have been assessed, have been found to be refugees.

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The Refugee Council of Australia represents
non-government organisations and
individuals working with and for refugees
in Australia and around the world