

2010 NSW REFUGEE WEEK LAUNCH

The Hon John Hatzistergos MLC, NSW Minister for Citizenship, NSW Attorney-General, NSW Minister for Regulatory Reform and Vice-President of the Executive Council in NSW

Keynote speech for NSW Refugee Week launch, Pitt Street Uniting Church, 19 June 2010

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we stand – the Gadigal people.

To them, most of us here today are in a sense, all refugees.

I would also like to acknowledge the Refugee Council of Australia and the Friends of NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) for their work in once again organising Refugee Week.

I would like also to pass on Premier Keneally's warm greetings to Australia's refugee community, to the people who work tirelessly in support of refugees and to everyone here today.

One of the major challenges that we face today, on a global scale, is how to protect people who have been forced, by armed conflict, human right abuse or other forms of persecution . . .

. . . to flee their homelands.

Refugees do not willingly leave their homes and families.

They do not come to Australia seeking financial advancement.

They do not leave with a final destination in mind.

They leave because of the fear of what will happen to them if they don't.

They leave because of the persecution and abuse that they have faced on a daily basis.

As a country, Australia shares responsibility with the rest of the international community, for protecting these refugees by offering them a place where they can be safe.

When we accept refugees into our community, we are offering them the chance to live a secure and stable life . . .

. . . free from fear.

Providing *Freedom From Fear* is at the centre of what we in Australia and NSW believe is our moral and lawful responsibility for refugees.

That is why *Freedom From Fear* is the message of Refugee Week this year.

It was the message last year and it will be next year too.

As we approach the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Refugee Convention, we as a country will continue to celebrate each successive refugee week with the same theme . . .

. . . *Freedom From Fear*.

Why?

Because, sadly, fear is a very powerful emotion.

It drives people to do things they would have never considered before.

It drives them to undertake the most perilous journey imaginable –

– that of a person fleeing across an international border and into the unknown.

These journeys are often met with hunger, disease, more violence and even death.

But there is light at the end of the tunnel.

In 2007-2008, Australia accepted more 13,000 humanitarian arrivals, the following year almost 13,500.

In 2009-10, the Australian Government increased this number by 250, with 6,000 places allocated to refugees.

These people are being given another chance – *Free From Fear* – to build a new life, to live in safety . . .

. . . as warmly welcome and dignified members of the Australian community.

I don't need to tell you here today that refugees are not a threat.

They come as ordinary, humble people.

They are teachers, doctors, labourers and carers.

They are mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers.

They are people.

They are people who grace us with their presence

. . . who enhance our diversity

. . . who teach us their customs

. . . and enrich our shared community.

Australia has a proud tradition of accepting migrants and refugees . . .

. . . and we're the better for it.

Refugees and refugee communities are valued members of Australian society.

A good example of a community with a strong refugee background is the Vietnamese.

Today the Vietnamese community is one of the largest and most visible migrant communities in Sydney.

Vietnamese is now the fifth most commonly spoken language, other than English, in this city.

This was not always the case.

Prior to 1975, there were fewer than 700 Vietnam-born people living in Australia.

By 1981 almost 50,000 Vietnamese had settled in Australia, after sustained periods of refugee resettlement and Australia's family reunion scheme.

Because of their hard work and vibrant culture, Vietnamese Australians are now an integral part of our community centred on Cabramatta as well as Marrickville, Fairfield, Bankstown and Liverpool.

Cabramatta itself has become renowned as a little Vietnam, attracting tourists and restaurant-goers to its bustling centre.

While the Vietnamese are an example of how refugees can make new and prosperous lives in Australia

. . . it is important to remember that difficulties refugees face with they first arrive.

Having fled for their lives, often leaving family and loved ones behind, refugees face a new set of challenges.

How do I communicate in a foreign language?

How do I find somewhere to live?

Will I be able to support my family?

And perhaps one of the most difficult questions to answer...

How do I recover from the trauma I experienced?

These are not easy questions to answer but rest assured . . .

. . . we will help in any way we can.

The NSW Government appreciates the work of the Refugee Council of Australia and other community organisations involved in providing service to the refugee community.

For the past five years, the NSW Government, through the Community Relations Commission, has been proud to provide funding for Refugee Week's events.

Through the Commission we also committed to assisting recently arrived refugees . . .

. . . such as those who have come to NSW from African countries such as Burundi, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somali and Sudan.

We are also aware of the challenges they face.

In 2005, the Community Relations Commission undertook an investigation into the many issues encountered by new arrivals from Africa.

The report addressed the need to review existing services in order to clear impediment faced by these new communities

The following year, the Commission made 41 recommendations to improve settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants from Africa.

We, as a Government, will continue to work with these refugee communities to ensure that the services they need are available.

It is through Government policy, funding and support, through the sustained and dedicated work of community organisations, that we can achieve this.

As we look towards the future, the resettlement focus will continue to be on refugees from the three key regions of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, with equal proportions of arrivals from each.

As a community, we must work together to ensure that these people are made to feel welcome and given the assistance they need.

And that is the point of Refugee Week.

This year it features exhibitions by refugee artist and performers, and symposiums and exhibitions where information on services and products will be provided to our newest arrivals.

There are festivals which showcase the different cultures and food of our refugee communities and encourage the wider Australian society to join in and learn more about these communities.

It is by coming together and sharing knowledge that we can break down cultural barriers.

I encourage everyone to attend at least some of these events, to get involved with communities other than your own, and to share and learn from each others' experiences.

On behalf of the Premier and the NSW Government I commend the Refugee Council of Australia and its members for their continued efforts in assisting, supporting and resettling refugees in our country.