

# REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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## Evaluation of Onshore Lodgement and Processing of SHP Applications

### Summary Report

May 2006

#### Background

During the second half of 2005, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) was contracted by DIMA to conduct a national evaluation of the lodgement and initial processing of Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) applications that takes place in Australia.

RCOA conducted an evaluation of DIMA's pilot project in June 2004 which established initial processing onshore of applications lodged through Nairobi, Cairo and Pretoria. This was also expanded to require that lodgement of these applications would occur through the NSW DIMA office. On the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2005 the program was extended to some Middle Eastern posts to include Amman, Ankara, Beirut and Tehran with applications now lodged in DIMA'S Melbourne office.

#### Aim of the Evaluation

The aim of the evaluation was to explore:

- the extent to which the Onshore Lodgement and Processing is a more efficient and effective way to undertake the initial processing of SHP applications and the extent to which it provides better outcomes for all stakeholders, and
- relevant issues relating to the SHP more generally.

#### Methodology

In order to undertake the evaluation RCOA staff held focus group interviews from November 2005 to February 2006 in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane and Toowoomba. Participants in the focus groups were SHP entrants, community leaders proposers (groups and individuals), settlement workers, migration agents and others that work with and support proposers. Over 150 people linked with both African and Middle Eastern entrants participated in the evaluation.

The Refugee Council also met with DIMA Onshore Humanitarian Processing Centre (OHPC) staff from Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra on two separate occasions during the course of the evaluation.

The resulting report to DIMA presents our findings in a thematic manner and also incorporates some quantitative data supporting the 20 recommendations about ways in which Onshore Lodgement and Processing of SHP applications can be enhanced.

The report also documents many of the key issues raised by affected communities and workers in relation to concerns expressed about the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program more generally.

## Findings

*Overall impressions* gained through the evaluation were that:

- overall processing times had been reduced;
- the process is now more transparent and there is less likelihood of corruption;
- proposers are now better informed about progress of applications;
- communication with DIMA has improved (although some issues remain).

In brief, some of the ongoing problems and concerns related to:

- proposers receiving inaccurate or incomplete information from a variety of sources;
- poor access to appropriate and non-fee charging migration advice;
- a lack of confidence in communicating with DIMA;
- other impacts of settlement such as anxiety, separation from family, lack of familiarity with Australian bureaucratic systems.

As mentioned previously, the research also explored issues of concern relating more generally to the *SHP* including:

- differing cultural definitions of 'family', the importance of familial obligations and responsibilities and the degree to which this is taken into consideration during DIMA decision making;
- funding arrangements for application advice and assistance;
- the level of understanding of the 'realities' of the SHP – limitations, constraints and changing priorities.

## Recommendations:

The recommendations made to DIMA as part of the evaluation are summarised below.

In relation to the nature and dissemination of **information** about new onshore lodgement procedures, the Refugee Council recommends that DIMA:

- provide affected communities with translated versions of written communication (acknowledging the difficulties in meeting the extensive and diverse language needs, particularly of the many different African communities);
- use appropriate and effective forms of ethnic media, particularly community radio to disseminate set information in relevant community languages;
- improve dialogue with proposers, migration agents and workers to ensure that all stakeholders have ongoing access to accurate and complete information about the new lodgement procedures.

To enhance **communication** between proposers, workers and DIMA at all stages of the lodgement and application assessment process, the Council recommends that DIMA:

- encourage proposers to make telephone inquiries to the OHPC staff during initial processing and also following the referral of an application to the overseas post;
- include information about the Telephone Interpreting Service (TIS) and the TIS contact phone number on all written documentation;
- inform proposers and workers about complaints mechanisms and methods employed by DIMA to minimise corruption.

To address concerns in relation to the **SHP** more generally, the Council recommends that DIMA:

- seek advice and input from affected communities about cultural definitions of 'family' and ensure this is reflected in departmental policy and procedure.

If you would like further information about this project, please contact:

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