



Refugee Council of Australia

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Improving regional refugee protection key to asylum policy

The Australian Government must accept its obligations to asylum seekers and set the standards for refugee protection in the Asia-Pacific region, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) said today.

In its submission to the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers, RCOA said there were no instant solutions to deter asylum seekers arriving by boat and that Australia should focus on improving inadequate levels of protection that force people to make desperate journeys to safety.

RCOA CEO Paul Power said both the Government's "Malaysian Solution" and the Opposition's "Pacific Solution" policies of Nauru and Temporary Protection Visas failed to address the lack of protection for refugees and asylum seekers in South-East Asia.

"The Expert Panel has a rare and unique opportunity to reframe the discussion of refugee and asylum seeker issues and recommend policy settings that provide short-term answers to save lives at sea and to build longer-term initiatives to build better protections in our region."

Key recommendations from RCOA include:

- No removal of asylum seekers from Australian territory;
- Removing the numerical link between the onshore and offshore streams of Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Programs;
- Increasing the offshore Refugee and Humanitarian Program to at least 20,000 places per year as soon as possible;
- Increasing funding support through AusAID to NGOs supporting vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers in Asia, the Middle East and Africa;
- Maintaining significant resettlement programs from Africa and the Middle East while working with other resettlement states to use resettlement as a strategic tool to improve protection for refugees in Asia;
- Consideration of alternative options for people to seek asylum in Australia including use of Australian embassies or legal permission to enter Australia temporarily for the purposes of seeking asylum;
- Engaging Indonesia and UNHCR in possible joint processing of applications for refugee status;
- Increased focus on the Bali Process to build refugee protection in South East Asia.

Mr Power said the Australian Government must acknowledge the constructive role it can play in the region by implementing best-practice policies.

“The international and regional cooperation Australia that is needed to address the problems of refugees in our region will not be secured if Australia shifts the bulk of its responsibilities to poorer countries that are not signatories to the Refugee Convention.

“There is every reason to believe that with vulnerable minorities facing increasing levels of violence and persecution in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the numbers of people seeking protection in Australia will grow to the point where any deterrent measures to prevent asylum seekers from approaching Australia by boat will cease to have any real effect.

“What is needed is a clear acknowledgement of the depth of the refugee protection crisis in the Asia-Pacific region and a concerted regional effort to address these protection needs.

“Progress can only be achieved through cooperation and cooperation can only happen if Australia is seen to be working in the interests of the region and those refugees and asylum seekers who need to be protected.”

RCOA’s submission to the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers can be viewed at http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/sub/120720_RCOA.pdf

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