Australia-Sri Lanka cooperation raises serious human rights concerns

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) has expressed deep concern at Australia’s decision to donate naval patrol boats to Sri Lanka, warning it was cooperating with a major source of refugees escaping serious human rights violations.

RCOA chief executive officer Paul Power said Australia’s donation, made during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Colombo, effectively assisted a country accused of grave human rights abuses in the interception of asylum seekers fleeing persecution and torture.

Mr Power said the arrangement undermined Australia’s credentials as a Refugee Convention signatory and provided a distorted view of the regional cooperation needed to better protect refugees in the Asia-Pacific region.

“Cooperating with a source country for refugees is entirely different to working with other countries of asylum to address onward movement of people seeking protection,” Mr Power said.

“Sri Lanka is a country with a long history of political violence on a scale unimaginable to Australians. Reports from the US Department of State, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have highlighted the silencing of critics of the government, torture and enforced disappearances.”

The Prime Ministers of Canada, Mauritius and India boycotted CHOGM in protest of Sri Lanka’s poor human rights record. British Prime Minister David Cameron visited the Tamil-populated north of the country to meet with families displaced by conflict and has given the Rajapaksa government until March to set up an independent inquiry into war crimes.

Mr Power said the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances ranked Sri Lanka second only to Iraq for the number of unexplained disappearances of civilians. Since its establishment in 1980 to assist the relatives of disappeared persons, the Group has investigated the disappearances of more than 12,000 Sri Lankans. At this stage, 5,676 cases remain unresolved and unexplained.

UNHCR’s December 2012 report on eligibility guidelines for asylum seekers from Sri Lanka nominated people at risk of persecution including: people with perceived links to the Tamil Tigers; opposition politicians and political activists; journalists; human rights activists; witnesses to human rights violations; victims of human rights violations who are seeking justice; women and children in some circumstances and gays and lesbians.

Sri Lanka’s national human rights commission recorded 86 complaints of torture in the first three months of this year alone.

“Australia’s decision to prioritise deterrence policies against asylum seekers arriving by boat, ahead of the human rights of people in Sri Lanka sets a dangerous precedent. As one of a small number of Refugee Convention signatories in the Asia-Pacific region, Australia needs to be leading by example and encouraging greater refugee protection in the region, not cooperating with refugee source countries to block people fleeing human rights abuses,” Mr Power said.

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Reports on Sri Lanka’s human rights record

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