

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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MEDIA RELEASE

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NO JUSTIFICATION TO STOP PROCESSING OF HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM

“There is simply no justification at all to cut the processing of offshore humanitarian visas” said Margaret Piper, Executive Director of the Refugee Council of Australia in response to today’s announcement by the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.

“The government has committed to a combined offshore and onshore humanitarian program of 12,000 places for this financial year. By the end of January just over 4,600 visas had been issued overseas. The highest number of visas expected to be issued to asylum seekers in Australia is 4,500. Add these together, you get 9,100 – this is 2,900 short of the target!” she continued.

The Council recalls the undertaking given by the Minister to rollover places not used in one year to the next. There are 640 places left over from last year. And this is not counting the unused visas.

This means that there are at least 3,500 visas that could and should be issued between now and the end of June.

The Government’s decision to cut processing could have many serious and undesirable consequences:

- people in dangerous situations who would otherwise have been granted a visa, will not be;
- the closure of “the queue” will make refugees seeking protection decide to come here directly and thus the number of asylum seekers will increase;
- it will create tension within and between ethnic communities;
- if Australia, with approximately 8,500 asylum seekers decides to stop providing resettlement places, how will the other 2 big resettlement countries (Canada and the USA) respond as they have over 400,000 asylum seekers between them? Won’t they think that they have even greater reason to cut their program? If this happens, UNHCR’s entire resettlement program would collapse.

“Yes, the arrivals of the boat loads of asylum seekers presents us with a challenge” Ms Piper continued, “but it is a challenge we should face responsibly and not alarm the public nor disadvantage some of the most vulnerable people in the world to make a political point. None of this would happen if the Government severed the numerical link between the onshore and offshore programs and recognised that, as a responsible member of the international community, there will be times when we need to dig a little deeper than others. We did it for the Kosovars, why not the Iraqis and Afghans?”.