

# REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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## MEDIA RELEASE

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### SAVAGE CUT TO HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM

This week's announcement by the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Philip Ruddock, about the size and composition of the 2000-2000 Humanitarian program disguises savage cuts to Australia's refugee resettlement program.

Since 1996 the offshore humanitarian program which brings refugees and others of concern to this country has issued in the order of 10,000 visas each year. These go to people who are victims of human rights abuses who have been determined to be in need of resettlement. Many have links already to the Australian community.

Mr Ruddock has announced that the 2000-2001 program will have only 8,000 places for humanitarian entrants – a cut of 2,000 or 20%.

This cut has been disguised by the fact that the total size of the program remains unchanged. There will still be 12,000 places in the combined offshore and onshore program. The government is simply allocating more places to the onshore component. This is because it is probable that the number of asylum seekers granted refugee status in the coming year will be high as most of the boat arrivals from the Middle East are being determined to be refugees.

The Refugee Council has long opposed the numerical linking of the onshore and offshore programs. The linkage confuses voluntary contribution with international obligation and also creates tension within and between ethnic communities. The Council argues that on the rare occasions the numbers of onshore visas exceeds 2,000, additional places should come from a contingency reserve, not the offshore program.

The Council also notes the decision to phase out the Special Assistance Category (SAC). This too is highly regrettable and will mean that the extremely vulnerable individuals who were assisted by this program and do not fit the criteria for other programs will no longer be able to be helped. The Special Assistance Category has been able to target people who are internally

displaced or who are in very vulnerable situations in their own countries such as the Ahmadis from Pakistan.

“The sad reality behind the Minister’s announcement is that 2,000 people who might otherwise have been assured of a safe future for themselves and their future will now be denied it on purely economic grounds” said Council President, David Bitel.