



Refugee Council  
of Australia

November 17, 2009

## **AUSTRALIA CANNOT WATCH IDLY WHILE ASYLUM SEEKERS FACE RETURN TO SRI LANKA**

The Australian Government cannot remain a passive bystander while asylum seekers on the Merak boat face the risk of return to Sri Lanka, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) says.

RCOA president John Gibson said the organisation was alarmed by media reports that the Indonesian Government was considering returning asylum seekers whose claims were yet to be examined.

“Given our Prime Minister’s much publicised intervention to prevent the boat now in Merak from reaching Australian waters, Australia has a moral responsibility to do everything it can to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers on that boat are not returned to a situation where they may face persecution,” Mr Gibson said.

“Australia must now urge the Indonesian Government to allow UNHCR officials full access to the asylum seekers on the Merak boat and consider what actions Australia can take to rebuild trust and goodwill with the government and people of Indonesia.

“Australia is increasingly being regarded as a wealthy nation which has no qualms about shifting its responsibilities for refugee protection to neighbouring countries with fewer resources. Not only is this perception damaging Australia’s reputation in the region, it threatens to undermine longer term efforts to build regional cooperation on refugee protection.”

### **Call for gesture of goodwill to Indonesia**

RCOA members at today’s Annual General Meeting in Melbourne supported a resolution calling for the Australian Government to make an immediate allocation of 500 additional refugee resettlement places, as a practical gesture of Australia’s preparedness to work constructively with Indonesia to find solutions for refugees in the region.

Mr Gibson said the additional allocation would increase Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program for 2009-10 to 14,250 places, a figure slightly higher than the 14,144 refugee and humanitarian visas granted by the Howard Government in 2005-06.

“While this would be a small step at a time when Australia’s annual migration program is around 170,000 places, it would be an indication of Australia’s commitment to sharing of responsibility and to working with UNHCR and our neighbours to find genuine long-term solutions to pressing humanitarian concerns.

“This gesture would, we believe, create a positive basis to begin a constructive dialogue between Australia, Indonesia, UNHCR, other countries in the region and civil society about increasing the range of protection and resettlement options as part of a new regional strategy to protect people facing persecution.

“Any strategy must involve humane reception standards, credible processing of claims (including returns only with safeguards to ensure that human rights will not be violated) and access to timely durable solutions for recognised refugees, including resettlement in Australia and other countries.”

Mr Gibson reiterated RCOA’s recent calls for a mature and honest debate and political bipartisanship on this issue.