



Refugee Council of Australia

Media Release – for immediate release

April 9, 2010

Halt in refugee processing creates detention concerns.

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) recognizes the need for the Australian Government to take into account changes in country conditions and changing security situations in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan and possible reviews by UNHCR of its advice on returns to those countries, and their impact on refugee assessments. However, the Government must guard against the negative impacts which any suspension of asylum processing can have on vulnerable groups of asylum seekers.

“We appreciate that asylum seekers are not going to be returned unless security assessments show a significant improvement in country situations. However, any prolonged delay in processing is far from an ideal situation, particularly for those in detention, as they are kept in limbo.” John Gibson, President of RCOA said.

While security in these countries might be improving for the future, asylum seekers fled the security situations of the past and many have faced terrifying experiences.

“We are concerned that any suspension will inevitably increase the time that people will spend in immigration detention. There must be careful monitoring of people who have suffered torture and trauma, and the Government must come up with alternative arrangements for these people. If that means bringing them to the mainland for treatment, then that must be done.” John Gibson, President of RCOA said.

This changing situation highlights the problems with offshore processing, which creates difficulties in addressing a wide range of protection issues in individual cases. Offshore processing makes practical and humane temporary solutions for these people that much more difficult.

RCOA urges the Government to strictly adhere to the time limits it announced for the suspension and promptly resume processing afterwards .

“We expect that there will not be any rolling suspensions even if the security situations may be unclear at the end of the announced suspension periods. To do that would effectively recreate indefinite detention, where asylum seekers have no idea how long they will be detained, something this government has previously stated they are opposed to. It must not happen”

The Refugee Council also calls for some maturity and balance to be injected into the asylum seeker public debate.

“It is important to keep things in perspective and draw back from the politicization of the debate and the obsessive focus on the statistics of each boat arrival. A more relevant statistic is that while Australia saw an increase of 1400 asylum applications last year, Canada had 33,250 applications. A poor country like Yemen received 60,000-70,000 boat arrivals and we have received 4600 over the last 18 months.” John Gibson said.

In 2009, Australia received 6170 asylum applications (offshore and onshore), just 1.6% of the 377,160 applications received across 44 industrialised nations. Of the 44 nations, Australia was ranked 16th overall and was 21st on a per capita basis. The applications received in Australia must be viewed in light of the numbers of the 286,680 applications received in Europe and the 82,270 applications received in North America. The industrialised countries with the largest number of asylum applications in 2009 were the United States (49,020), France (41,980), Canada (33,250), United Kingdom (29,840), Germany (27,650) and Sweden (24,190).

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The Refugee Council of Australia represents
non-government organisations and
individuals working with and for refugees
in Australia and around the world