

8 September 2011

DIAC SECRETARY MUST SPEAK UP ON 'SOCIAL UNREST' CLAIMS

The Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Andrew Metcalfe, must respond immediately to media reports that he has linked asylum seeker boat arrivals with future social unrest in private discussions with the Federal Opposition.

If the media reports are accurate, the claims which Mr Metcalfe made are inflammatory and unjustifiable. If the media reports are wrong, Mr Metcalfe must explain what he did and did not say. A failure to correct or retract the statements will do even more damage to the cause of people seeking Australia's protection from persecution.

We utterly reject any suggestion that Australia faces the prospect of riots or unrest similar to that seen in parts of Europe as a result of asylum seekers entering Australia. Our nation has been receiving asylum seekers and refugees for decades - more than 770,000 since Federation. There is no evidence to link refugees received by Australia with social unrest. As Mr Metcalfe well knows from the work conducted by his own Department, Australia has one of the most successful approaches to the settlement of refugees and migrants in the world. With continued government and community commitment to settlement support for new arrivals, this will remain the case for many decades to come.

If the media reports remain uncorrected, many people will assume that Mr Metcalfe intended to make those remarks and stands by them. The impact of this for asylum seekers and refugees will be devastating, given Mr Metcalfe's critical role in Australian immigration policy. It will also further undermine Australia's commitment to maintaining access to asylum, as well as raise further questions about the nation's commitment to its obligations under the Refugee Convention.

While last week's High Court ruling has frustrated the plans Mr Metcalfe and his Department had to deport asylum seekers to Malaysia, it would be unacceptable for a senior public service official to attempt to raise false fears to advance a policy goal. If Mr Metcalfe's position has been misrepresented by the media, he must say so - loudly and clearly.

This statement has been endorsed by:

Refugee Council of Australia
Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
Australian Council for International Development
Coalition for Asylum Seekers Refugees and Detainees
Edmund Rice Centre
Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia
International Detention Coalition
Refugee Advice and Casework Service (Australia)
UnitingJustice Australia

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