

ACTION ALERT AA 20-4: ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

September 2020

This action alert identifies the key issues surrounding the status of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, the role of the Australian Government and organisations involved in these issues.

People and Places

Drawing on official sources, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) has compiled the following details about the current situation:

- There are around 26 million refugees worldwide and a further 3.5m asylum seekers. The main source countries are – Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia.
- During the decade from 2009 to the end of 2018, Australia recognised or resettled 180,790 refugees – 0.89% of the total number in that decade (20m). This placed Australia 29th per capita and 54th in relation to GDP.
- Since 2012, 4183 asylum seekers/refugees have been sent to offshore centres (Manus PNG and Nauru) under a policy that denies them permanent entry to Australia. 942 have been returned to their country of origin, and 730 have been resettled in a third country. There remain 227 in PNG and 209 in Nauru.
- In Australia there are 1373 people in detention, of whom 340 have been detained for over 730 days, 1987 are on bridging visas, and 845 in community detention.
- During 2018-19 there were 24,566 people seeking asylum (mainly from Malaysia and China) but only 1650 were given protection visas.
- Under Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program, more people are being accepted on the basis of community links (eg family reunion). There has been a significant reduction in the proportion of people accepted after referral by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – from 80% in 2012/13 to 23% in 2018-19. This indicates that the most vulnerable are not being given the priority they deserve.

The Pandemic

In March 2020 UNHCR launched an international appeal for funds to support its emergency response to the spread of COVID-19 virus. Australia contributed \$1.25m to this appeal. Australia suspended the granting of offshore humanitarian visas on 129 March, and stopped resettlement work. Asylum seekers on bridging visas and temporary protection refugee visas were omitted from income support programs such as JobKeeper and JobSeeker.

On 28 April 2020, an Open Letter was sent to the Prime Minister from 186 organisations including church, welfare, human rights, union, academic, multicultural, and legal agencies. The letter included the following:

We ask you to lead the Australian Government to ensure that all people in Australia are protected from the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 by:

- *Ensuring all people have access to medical treatment and Medicare for people seeking asylum.*
- ***Ensuring all people have a financial safety net so they are not forced into destitution.***
- *Extending JobSeeker to people on bridging visas currently ineligible for income support.*
- *Extending JobKeeper to temporary visa holders so that businesses employing them can continue to operate.*
- *Removing penalties for Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) holders accessing Special Benefit in light of the pandemic and remove restrictions on accessing Special Benefit for Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) or SHEV holders who are studying.*
- ***Preventing people from losing legal status and access to support.***

The full text can be seen at www.unitingcare.org.au

Quaker Responses

Recently Australian Quakers issued a public statement urging action in Support for People in Immigration Detention at this time of a pandemic. It called on the Government to release refugees/asylum seekers, currently in detention, into community care, and ensure they have the medical and other support needed, including access to JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments. Full details of the statement can be found at www.quakersaustralia.info

Quaker Service Australia (QSA) – an aid agency accredited by the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade – has developed a refugee program, in cooperation with the Refugee Council of Australia. This has enabled Quakers in different parts of Australia to assist refugees in language and literacy training, vocational skills, multicultural learning, mentoring, social inclusion and connection. Further details can be found at www.qsa.org.au

There are opportunities for action now to reinforce the concerns raised in the Quaker statement and by many other people concerned about the vulnerability of asylum seekers and refugees, and the options available for assisting them. You can join with other groups in your area to raise public awareness of the stress being added to those who have sought protection from Australia (**for example the attempt to remove mobile phones from those in detention**). You can also link up with one of the many agencies listed below if you want to do more.

Relevant federal politicians:

David.Coleman.MP@aph.gov.au Minister for Immigration

Senator.Keneally@aph.gov.au Shadow Minister for Immigration

Senator.Mckim@aph.gov.au Greens Spokesman on Immigration

Resources and Action

What follows is a list of agencies that are advocating for and supporting asylum seekers and refugees:

- Refugee Council of Australia – seeks a permanent end to off-shore processing, a larger Refugee and Humanitarian program, and a reformed detention system. See www.action.refugeecouncil.org.au
- Amnesty – seeks an end to offshore detention, supports refugee rights and sponsorship. See www.amnesty.org.au
- UNHCR Australia – raises awareness, provides emergency response and ongoing care for asylum seekers and refugees. See www.unrefugees.org.au
- Settlement Services International – offers asylum seeker assistance, multicultural foster care, community engagement, employment support. See www.ssi.org.au
- Asylum Seeker Resource Centre – Offers food and material aid, advocacy, healthcare, education and employment, and legal aid. See www.asrc.org.au
- Global Giving – uses crowdfunding to empower women, help needy children, support rural education, and prevent health crises. See www.globalgiving.org
- UN Women – has a focus on ending violence and poverty, promoting leadership, and emergency support. See www.unwomen.org.au
- Vinnies – advocacy, legal assistance, housing, support for children in schools, settlement assistance, visits to detention centres. See www.vinnies.org.au
- Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education – advocacy, legal assistance, empowerment and mentoring, research about those deported, community education/awareness. See www.erc.org.au
- Religions for Peace – family support for those in detention, raising awareness. See www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au
- Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce – offers encouragement and resources for churches' engagement in advocacy and support for refugees and asylum seekers. See www.ncca.org.au
- Uniting Justice Australia – the Uniting Church's agency with particular concern for refugees and asylum seekers. See www.unitingjustice.org.au
- Anglican Church of Australia. Oversees Anglican response. See www.anglican.org.au
- Australian Red Cross – offers general support for refugees settling into the community. See www.redcross.org.au