



Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee

WATCHING BRIEF 21-7: REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

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.

July 2021

This Brief deals with some of the creative responses to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers who have been stranded in detention by the excessive harshness of the Australian policies on border control.

Background

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) has offered the following summary of the current situation in Australia:

- Both major political parties have adopted a policy of blocking access to protection in Australia and penalising those coming by boat.
- The number of visas issued under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program remains at 13,750, after a brief period in 2018-19 when the target increased to 18,750.
- As of July 2021 it is estimated that there are 10,000 humanitarian visa holders stranded overseas.
- The 2021-22 Federal Budget reflected a cost blowout in onshore detention and compliance, but increased the allocation for settlement support and to address the backlog within the Migration and Refugee Division of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.
- Funding has been allocated to support refugee and other migrant women if they are survivors of domestic violence.
- There are currently 239 people remaining offshore (109 on Nauru and 130 in PNG).
- The Government is increasing spending on measures (including on regional cooperation) to intercept and stop potential asylum seekers from boarding planes or boats.
- Funding for UNHCR remains unchanged at \$25m a year.

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At the United Nations there was a focus on Australia during its hearing at the UN Human Rights Council on 20 January 2021 as part of the regular rotation of the Universal Periodic Review of all countries' policies. Forty-seven member states raised concerns about Australia's refugee and asylum seeker policies. In particular, Australia was urged to ensure that immigration detention is time-limited and subject to judicial review. Concern was also raised about detention facilities and lack of access to families.

On 9 July 2021 the UNHCR issued a media release supporting the endeavour to reduce loss of life at sea, but concerned at the continued interception of individuals seeking Australia's protection and the absence of adequate transparency. It also called for the government to resolve cases of those in detention in a timely manner. This followed a decision by the Government to rush through legislation in Parliament in May 2021 to give the Minister for Immigration power to overturn refugee status, in breach of international law. The new provisions contain no mechanism to prevent indefinite detention of refugees who cannot be returned. This at a time when the average period that a person is detained in immigration detention has increased from 100 days in 2013 to 600 days in 2020.

In a media release on 2 July 2021, the Commonwealth Ombudsman raised concerns about immigration detention, saying that people are routinely restrained for no reason, guards use excessive force, complaints are not investigated properly, and there are significant delays in progressing cases. See www.ombudsman.gov.au

According to Rod McGurk of Associated Press (19 October 2020) the USA had resettled 870 refugees from Australian detention since 2017, and was expected to have resettled a total of 1,100 refugees by early in 2021. Marc Ablong, a representative of the Home Affairs Department, told a Senate committee that the resettlement deal is "operating very effectively to date".

Many refugees have been left in limbo for up to 8 years. The cost is \$3.2 million per person per year (*The Guardian*, 21 July 2021). Those in community detention are no longer given any financial or other help so rely totally on charity.

Initiatives to Assist Refugees/Asylum Seekers

Operation Not Forgotten is a cooperative venture by Canadian and Australian organisations, volunteers and donors to build a pathway for refugees who have been stuck for 8 years in offshore processing in Nauru and PNG. It began in 2019 and so far, according to the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), it has raised \$3m (mostly in Australia) and sponsored 240 people. Support agencies in Canada called MOSAIC and Ads-Up Refugee Network are partners in the scheme. Up to 100 refugees can be taken each year, offered support with housing, employment and family reunion in Canada: it costs \$20,000 per person. RCOA coordinates tax-deductible donations. UNHCR assists where needed. It is expected that Canada will open its border to refugees in September, and there are 160 ready to go. Further details are available at www.refugeecouncil.org.au/canada/

The Refugee Council also offers another community sponsorship scheme to enable Australians to support refugees – see www.refugeesponsorship.org.au

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The National Council of Churches (NCCA) has advised that there is a Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia (CRSA) initiative based on the Canadian experience. A pilot version was tried in 2020 with 'mentor' groups of 5-6 people in rural, regional and city locations. There has been positive feedback about its success. As a result the CRSA is to be enhanced through community organisations who can support refugee newcomers. An information session is planned for 12 August 2021. You can register for this at www.refugeesponsorship.org.au/upcoming-public-information-sessions/

There have been numerous representations made to the Australian Government (by Quakers and others) to accept the offer of the New Zealand Government to take 150 refugees annually from Australia's offshore processing system. South Australian Quaker David Evans wrote to all federal MPs in March 2021 urging this, and received a response from Senator Simon Birmingham on behalf of the Government saying that resettlement of refugees from Australia in New Zealand would have "serious implications" and probably lead to their replacement by new arrivals in Australia. The ALP appears to be taking a more open-minded approach to the New Zealand offer.

David Evans has drawn attention to another scheme that New Zealand has been using to recruit skilled workers directly from refugee camps overseas (e.g. Syria, Lebanon). Along the same lines, there is a group called Talent Beyond Boundaries that matches skilled refugees with companies in need of their skills, and works with governments to open skilled migration pathways for refugees and their families. See www.talentbeyondboundaries.org.au

Sister Jane Keogh, a Brigidine nun based in Canberra, has been running Manus Lives Matter for over five years, with direct support for those in detention on Manus Island, PNG. Here is a recent post from her:

"Lots of requests for help this week. One refugee is getting no government money and still living in a car. Another in PNG needs to join a gym to get out of his room safely and with something to do for mental health. This month's (money) went towards Gym membership for two guys to keep them safe and sane. These days unsafe at home and travelling. Food is still a problem too. Your generosity makes a big difference to them and to me". For more information contact janeikeogh@gmail.com

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) in Melbourne works with other agencies to meet the complex needs of asylum seekers, using advocacy, community engagement and fundraising. Its aim is to stop the indefinite detention of refugees. It has over 400 clients in detention in Australia, Nauru and PNG and has helped get children moved from detention. See www.asrc.org.au

St Vincent de Paul offers financial support, and visits homes and detention centres to help with basic needs and in providing resettlement services. See www.vinnies.org.au

Red Cross Australia helps refugees with food and housing, employment and community connections. It welcomes financial donations to meet the large increase in demand during the pandemic. See www.redcross.org.au

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Quaker Responses

Many Australian Quakers have been active in support of refugees and asylum seekers, including through public rallies, vigils, letter-writing, sponsorship and visiting. Nationally Quakers Australia have made numerous approaches to government to seek changes in the policies that deny people their dignity and rights, maintain indefinite detention, and fail to live up to the obligations of a nation state that is party to the Refugee Convention and other international protocols.

There are opportunities such as those listed above for further action in support of a just and compassionate outcome for refugees and asylum seekers.

Canberra, July 2021

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