



JULY 2011

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC MIGRANT & REFUGEE OFFICE

News

The official newsletter of the Australian Catholic Migrant & Refugee Office

Special Interest

- Conflict in Burma
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AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC
MIGRANT & REFUGEE OFFICE

GPO Box 2720
Canberra ACT 2601

Level 2 Favier House
51 Cooyong Street
Braddon ACT 2612

T: (02) 6201 9848

F: (02) 6247 7466

director@acmro.catholic.org.au

www.acmro.catholic.org.au



Pursuit of Justice, Freedom and Autonomy in Burma

The Suffering and Unwavering Determination of the Kachin

Currently there are fierce battles raging throughout the Kachin State between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Burmese government. Relations between the Burmese military and the Kachins have been deteriorating for years and have now reached a humanitarian crisis. Military confrontation has now erupted and innocent lives are being lost. An estimated over 20 000 have fled to refugees camps at the Sino-Burmese border. The crisis is getting more and more serious.

Kachin is one of the major ethnic groups in Burma along with other groups such as Karen, Chin, Mon and Shan. Kachins predominantly live in the Kachin state situated in far northern Burma. The category Kachin comprises of six ethnic sub-groups or principal lineages (Jinghpaw, Lawngwaw, Lashi, Zaiwa, Rawang, Lisu). These six groups are deemed to share similar traditions, customs, dialects and practices living mainly in northern Burma, as well as parts of China and India. An estimated one million Kachin live in Burma (*continued page 3*).

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC
MIGRANT & REFUGEE OFFICE



Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office in association with the Australian Catholic University invites you to attend the first annual



BISHOP JOSEPH GRECH MEMORIAL COLLOQUIUM ON ETHICS AND MIGRATION

ONE HUMAN FAMILY ACROSS BORDERS

**Welcome by
Father Maurizio Pettena**

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Bishop Christopher Prowse
Bishop of Sale

The Honorable Chris Bowen
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship

MY STORY

A refugee journey to Australia

FACILITATOR

Anton Enus,
SBS Television Presenter



Thursday 8 September 2011 ■ 7pm- 9pm

RSVP by Friday 2 September 2011 ■ adminassistant@acmro.catholic.org.au

Central Hall Melbourne Campus ■ Australian Catholic University, 24 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy

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Metro train to Parliament Station

Under British rule from 1824 until 1948, many Kachin converted from traditional spirit worship animism to Christianity. In modern Burma, the majority of Kachins are Christians, predominantly Baptists, followed by Roman Catholics and other Christian denominations.

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) was formed in 1961 shortly after Burma's first Prime Minister U Nu decreed Buddhism as the state religion of Burma, against the will of the Ethnic Minorities. The KIA also formed in response to the unfulfilled promises of autonomy of an independent Kachin State outlined in the Panglong Agreement 1947. In 1962 a military coup led by General Ne Win attempted to consolidate



Burmese control over the "Frontier Regions", which were home to various ethnic groups. From 1961 until 1994, the KIA fought a grueling and inconclusive war against the Burmese junta. Originally the KIA fought for independence, but now the official Kachin Independence Organization (KIO, the political arm of the KIA) policy goal is for autonomy within a federal union of Burma, along with self-determination of rule and administration of land and resources.

In 1994 a "Cease-Fire" agreement between the KIA and the Burmese Army was signed. On the 9th June 2011, open conflict erupted for the second time after the 17-year ceasefire. The clashes began when the Burmese government concluded an agreement with China for the construction of a dam that will power a hydroelectric plant in Kachin territory. The project will cause the forced displacement without adequate compensation and flooding of villages where the Kachin people live. Local people refused to move provoking violent repression from of the Burmese Army. The military-backed Burmese Government has exclusively become the "protector" of the Chinese Government's multi billion dollars investment interests in Kachin State. More clashes between the two sides broke out on the 2nd



and 3rd July 2011. Efforts to initiate a fresh "Cease-Fire" agreement have so far been unsuccessful. Since the initial fighting broke out in June 2011 more than 20,000 Kachin refugees have fled to the China border fearing torture, abuse, rape, murder and forced to be used as porters for the Burmese soldiers as well as human mine sweepers by Burmese troops.

A local priest described the raging conflict in

Kachin States in northern Burma as "ethnic cleansing" and "humanitarian emergency" (Fides Service). Priests and nuns in the diocese of Bhamo and Myitkyina and other local Christian church leaders including pastors and local non-governmental organisations are doing everything they can to help ethnic Kachin refugees, almost all are Christians, victims of a brutal repression carried out by the Burmese military.

Source: Photo's provided by the Author of the article with permission for publication.



These refugees are without aid from any international humanitarian organisations as the Burmese Army is blocking any aid from reaching them. Many are in danger of dying from disease and hunger. Meanwhile the military threaten anyone who attempts to help these displaced and suffering peoples. Reports from the refugee camps count three young children who have died from diarrhea in refugee camps on China-Burma border.

The Burmese Army's reputation for the deliberate disregard of human rights, in particular the violation of internationally accepted norms regarding treatment of civilians in war, has been reported at nausea over the years. However, they seem immune to criticism or exposure.

The newly designated government headed by President Thein Sein, who is also the Chairman of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) still controls the government, judiciary and armed forces. This new government is essentially no different from the one it succeeded; one notoriously famous for its dictatorial military absolutism. Retired generals still rule.



Burma's 64-year-old historic Panglong Agreement, signed on 12 February 1947, in theory recognises autonomy for the internal administration of "Frontier Areas", including the creation of the Kachin State, has been ignored by the Burmese military regime. It was an agreement that was reached through negotiation and mutual trust between the then head of the Army, General Aung San (Aung San Su Kyi's father) and leaders of the Kachin, Karen, Chin and Shan ethnic groups. If the terms of that agreement had been honored Burma would be a thriving, peaceful and prosperous federal union today. The people of Burma have paid a heavy price and have lost the freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom to associate, and all other freedoms set out in the International Charter of Human Rights.

Kachins living in Kachin state in northern Burma have experienced five decades of oppression and atrocities under the Burmese dictatorship and a succession of brutal military regimes. Most Kachin refugees have fled to neighbouring China along the Kachin-China border but none of them have been able to seek a humanitarian protection from the Chinese government. In most cases the Chinese authorities detain them. Women are subjected to human trafficking and forced prostitution.



Other Kachin refugees fled to Malaysia and others sought refuge in India. A few of us including myself are fortunate enough to have been granted protection visas here in Australia and are now contributing towards the greater common good for this great country. Many others have sought and been granted protection in other countries such as the USA, Canada, UK, Netherland, Japan and New Zealand.

The Kachin Association of Australia (KAA) is a non-profit organisation that represents the Kachin living in Australia. Officially formed in August 2006, the KAA participates in the humanitarian assistance program of onshore and offshore Kachin refugees displaced from Burma because of social injustice, religious persecution,

execution based on Kachin ethnicity, and political disagreement.

The Kachin community here in Australia would like the Australian Government, humanitarian aid agencies and fellow Australians to understand the current situation in Kachin State northern Burma. This situation has not been publicized freely because of powerful media censorship by the military regime. For those living outside of Kachin State, it is difficult to understand the harsh reality the people are facing. In undemocratic Burma, only the few military commanders with executive power control the whole country. They have seriously oppressed media freedom and social and human rights activities, especially in Kachin State. The Burmese military regime's ethnic cleansing mentality fuels every Burmese soldier to act with violence, especially towards the strong-willed Kachin ethnic group. This is why the Kachin were forced to leave their homeland.

A source from the Kachin State said, a relief agency the Relief Action Network for IDP (Internally Displaced Person) and Refugee (RANIR) made up of members from the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), Kachin Churches and non-governmental organizations was formed to help Kachin IDPs who are critical need of aid on Thursday, July 7. Currently, there are a total of 12 make-shift temporary camps near the Chinese



border, including six in Laiza, according to the Refugee Relief Committee of the KIO. These relief groups are quickly running out of aid and essential supplies. More clashes are underway and the escalation of the civil war continues creating the biggest humanitarian disaster in Northern Burma since World War II.



Author : Anonymous living in Australia.

[Migration], brings us into contact with men and women, our brothers and sisters, who for economic, cultural, political or religious reasons have left or have been compelled to leave their homes. Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi (EMCC), 96.

Multicultural Mass



On the occasion of the Pastoral Visit of
His Excellency, Archbishop Antonio Maria Veglio
President of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People

St Mary's Cathedral - 10th May 2011
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Refugee Program on the Thai-Burma Border



The situation of refugees, forced migrants and internally displaced people is one of the greatest humanitarian challenges facing humankind. This is especially true of what the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) calls 'protracted refugee situations' where refugees have lived for many years in a state of limbo with no resolution to their problem in sight. This is the case with the nine Burmese camps along the Thai-Burmese border – the result of the world's longest running civil war and the continued repression of ethnic minorities by the junta in Burma.

In the camps, primary and secondary education are all provided by UNHCR and NGOs but there is no opportunity for young, bright refugees to have access to recognized qualifications in higher education. In April 2005, a joint report by UNHCR and CCSDPT stated that refugee skills should be improved and more higher education opportunities offered. Since then, various attempts have been made to set up schemes, notably from Open Universities Australia and the Dundalk Institute of Technology, Ireland, but ACU has produced more graduates with a tertiary qualification that is internationally recognised.



In the study centre with students

ACU, through the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, has been offering tertiary education to Burmese refugee students living in the camps since 2004. This program is one of a number of community engagement programs that flow from ACU's mission statement to "be guided by a fundamental concern for justice and equity, and for the dignity of all human beings". It also echoes Pope John Paul II's letter on Catholic Universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1990), that "a Catholic university...will be capable of searching for ways to make a university education accessible to all those who are able to benefit from it, especially the poor or members of community groups who customarily have been deprived of it."

Since internet connection in the camps is not allowed by the Thai authorities, ACU had to set up a study centre with computers and internet access as well as accommodation for camp-based refugees. For the students in the centre, all expenses, including food, is paid for by ACU or donors. The project has evolved out of a community-development approach where stakeholders such as refugee leaders, CBOs and NGOs and former students were interviewed and gradually a picture emerged of which units would provide a good overall academic education and serve the refugee or migrant community, much of whose intellectual capital has been lost to resettlement.

ACU partnered with, initially, four US Jesuit universities and, in the current program, with three US universities and one Canadian, to provide a suite of units that are mostly taught online with ACU teaching two in face-to-face mode in order to humanise the teaching.

The program was awarded 'Best Collaborative International Project' at the prestigious Business Higher Education Round Table Awards (B-HERT) in 2008 and the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Outstanding Community Engagement in 2010.



In 2009, research was carried out to ascertain how past graduates had used their qualifications – whether their studies had benefited the refugee community (if they stayed in the camps) or the community in diaspora (if they had been resettled to a third country). In other words, how have their studies contributed to the common good? The result showed that all the students who remained on the Thai-Burma border worked for refugees by organising an array of social services. Among the jobs were: managing an orphanage in a refugee camp, training young people in leadership and management, working for an organisation that documented human rights abuses within Burma, teaching in camp schools and working for UNHCR.



Candidates undertaking the entrance test in Umpiem

The three who were resettled in either Australia or the USA used their ACU qualification to enter university in their host countries and gained scholarships. The conclusion was that these students, who had graduated under the most difficult circumstances, had, in the words of the ACU graduate attributes, recognised “their responsibility to the common good”. They graduated in August 2010.

In 2010, two hundred candidates who had completed secondary education and post-ten were interviewed and around one hundred sat the entrance test. Forty of mixed Burmese ethnicities with a good gender balance were chosen once English levels, motivation and academic ability had been examined. The students are also of mixed faiths. The students began their studies in October 2010.

There are now two locations – the ACU study centre near Mae Sot with residential and working students from both the refugee and migrant communities and Ranong with migrant students and where the Marist Fathers who are involved with migrant education have supplied the infrastructure. In both locations, there is a local coordinator for logistical and security issues and tutors for English language, motivation and liaison between the online lecturers and the students (an Australian in Mae Sot and two New Zealanders in Ranong).



Students in our second centre run by the Marist Fathers in Ranong (southern Thailand)



Mae La camp

The overall coordinator is based on MacKillop Campus, North Sydney but visits the field regularly.

The current units of the eight-unit Diploma are: *English Language Communication Skills*, *Business Information Technology*, *An Introduction to International Human Rights Law and Practice* and *Managing Organisations* (all taught by ACU) and *Leadership Theory* (Gonzaga University, Spokane, USA), *General Psychology* (Regis University, Denver, USA), *The End of the Earth as We Know It: Global Environmental Change* (York University, Toronto, Canada) and *People, Places and*

Global Issues (Fairfield University, Connecticut, USA). All tuition is provided free of charge and all materials are supplied.

The program has inspired others to investigate starting similar programs for refugees in other parts of the world.

For the students, the program has meant not just jobs or a pathway to degree courses but transformation, with many, through the critical thinking that academic work demands, being led to a belief in peaceful, political negotiation to end the violence in their homeland. It has also been transformational for the lecturers. One lecturer, now retired with 30 years' university teaching under his belt, declared that his involvement had been the most satisfying teaching experience of his life.

The program has come to the attention of UNHCR and some NGOs who may gradually change their policies from regarding tertiary education for refugees as a luxury to where it becomes the norm, producing community leaders, social workers, teachers and others who will serve the refugee and migrant communities and, ultimately, their country of Myanmar/Burma when it becomes truly democratic and they can return in safety.

**For more information, please contact the coordinator:
Duncan MacLaren**

duncan.maclaren@acu.edu.au

**MacKillop Campus,
40 Edward Street,
North Sydney NSW 2060
Tel. +612 9739 2010
Fax +612 9739 2312**

Sources: CCSDPT (Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand)/UNHCR Comprehensive Plan 2007/8 available on www.ccsdpt.org.

Duncan MacLaren, *Tertiary Education in Pursuit of the Common Good: the Thai-Burma Border Experience*, in *Learning, Teaching and Social Justice in Higher Education*, edited by Noah Riseman, Sue Rechter and Ellen Warne, University of Melbourne (2010).



Graduation of refugee students from Burma



Refugee Week 2011

"One refugee without hope is too many"

Developing countries cannot continue to bear this burden alone. We need peace initiatives to long standing conflicts," said Antonio Guterres UN High Commissioner for Refugees in his message for refugee week.

The West Wagga San Isidore Refugee Committee hosted a Prayer Service for Peace to conclude a week of special events in Wagga Wagga and the region to mark Refugee Week 2011.

This committee is a small volunteer group that has been continually operating since the late 1970s assisting refugees with settlement in Wagga Wagga. Recent years have seen the emergence of the Government's Humanitarian Settlement Programme which caters for the increased numbers of entrants to our region. Services are coordinated by St Vincent De Paul and the Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga.



Musical offerings included a vibrant performance by a representative African group who sang a Song of Praise to God in their own language.

The sun shone on Our Lady of the Blessed Eucharist Church at San Isidore on the 26th June. A spirit of welcome and joy marked the diverse gathering as people arrived and filled the pews.

CANDLE LIGHTING CEREMONY.

Candles were lit to remember people around the world displaced from their homes by conflict, and to honour and give thanks for all who have come to our region as refugees and made new beginnings in our community.

BISHOP GERARD HANNA:



Bishop Gerard Hanna led the Liturgy and as Guest Speaker presented some thoughtful reflections, especially exploring this year's Refugee Week theme *Freedom From Fear*. Bishop Gerard made reference to the flight of his ancestors from persecution to the safety of Australia. He spoke of the need for Government policies and for all people to respond to refugees in ways that respect the dignity of the human person.



PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION.

Prayers were led by representatives of a wide range of groups including Christian Churches, service providers and the African community.

Cherry Lindsay of the Baha'i community accompanied by two Burmese friends shared a powerful prayer about unity and the Kingdom of God which was displayed on a banner.

Dr Ata Ur Rehman of the Muslim Association of Riverina Wagga Wagga Australia addressed the gathering. He used the image of the beauty and uniqueness of the vast array of individual flowers which when brought together creates a beautiful bouquet. It was a metaphor well understood by the gathering given the diversity of the congregation praying together for peace and justice.

WELCOME TO NEW ARRIVALS TO WAGGA WAGGA.

At the conclusion of the Liturgy, and to much applause, the congregation felt privileged to welcome recent new arrivals who had come to Wagga during the past twelve months. These new friends were originally forced to flee the violence of their home countries of Afghanistan, Burma, Burundi, Sudan and Sierra Leone.



SUPPER IN THE HALL.

There was a tangible feeling of happiness and people filled the hall to capacity as cups of tea, coffee, drinks and a delicious spread of food were shared amongst the gathering.

Report and Photo's by Joan Saboisky and Peggy Adamson



Justice Pending

On the 19th May 2009, the civil war in Sri Lanka came to a horrific end. The Government of Sri Lanka declared victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The disturbing use of armed forces to achieve this victory resulted in the deaths of an estimated 40,000 Sri Lankan civilians. Two years has since passed and still the world is waiting for war crimes and crimes against humanity to be investigated. On the 31st March 2011, a UN Panel of Experts released their report to the UN Secretary-General regarding the nature and scope of alleged violations of international and human rights law. This report on accountability in Sri Lanka specifically focused on the last few months of the war.

Australia is now home to both Sinhalese and Tamil communities; of which, many members of both communities share the Catholic faith. The Church, sacrament of unity, overcomes ideological or racial barriers and divisions and proclaims to all people and all cultures the need to strive for the truth in the perspective of correctly facing differences by dialogue and mutual acceptance (EMCC, 34). It is not by choice, but this is the challenge that faces members of both communities who have suffered from decades of violence and conflict.

The roots of [migration] can be traced back to exaggerated nationalism and, in many countries, even to hatred and systematic or violent exclusion of ethnic or religious minorities from society. This can be seen in civil, political, ethnic and even religious conflicts raging in all continents (EMCC, 1). Sadly the conflict in Sri Lanka, while unique in many aspects, is not an isolated case of the tragedy which befalls the civilian population on the outbreak of war. Migration, however, also helps people get to know one another and provides opportunity for dialogue and communion or indeed integration at various levels (EMCC, 2).

The following is a summary of the Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka.

While 1983 marked the beginning of war between the Government and LTTE, violence by both sides began much earlier. The 1950's were witness to discriminatory state policies and anti-Tamil violence. As Gandhian-style non-violent protests evolved into Tamil politico-militant groups; violent repression of Tamils by Sinhala nationalist increased in intensity. The escalating violence and severity of attacks was the catalyst for the rise of the LTTE and the following 27 years of civil war.

As the Tamil community became increasingly militarized, the LTTE adopted evermore violent tactics pioneering the use of suicide bombing against military, political and civilian targets. Tamils suspected of working with the government were labelled traitors and often killed, creating great fear and suspicion within the Tamil community.

From the 1990's until May 2009, the LTTE controlled large parts of northern and eastern Sri Lanka, operating its own police, jails, courts, immigration department, banks and social services. The growing Tamil diaspora around the world provided crucial support to the LTTE, financially and through advocacy.

On the 16th January 2008 the Government declared a full military operation. By mid February 2008, the impact of the war on civilians had reached alarming proportions. On the 8th September 2008 the Sri Lankan Government announced that it could no longer ensure the safety of humanitarian workers in the Vanni area; requesting the United Nations and other international non-governmental organisations such as the Red Cross to leave by the end of the month. A week later on the 15th September, a large crowd of civilians gathered around the UN base, begging them not to leave; knowing their absence meant no international observers would report on what was to follow. That month, the Government began its final military offensive advancing into the Vanni from multiple directions and against the LTTE stronghold of Kilinochchi.

The Vanni area in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka was the visionary independent Tamil state held under Tiger control up until 2009. It was here in the jungle that the Tigers were based. It was also home to hundreds of thousands of people who later became trapped in the war.

Several factors account for why civilians became trapped in the war zone despite the government dropping leaflets urging civilians to leave the area. The leaflets provided no specific information on how to leave and in many instances, required civilians to actually head into incoming artillery fire, active combat and minefields.

"Dear Vanni Citizen: We are conducting a final war in order to liberate the people who have been suffering by the LTTE's ruthless terrorist acts in Vanni. In this war, the LTTE is being defeated in many places. We the Government of Sri Lanka are doing our best to avoid the human casualties in the war... Therefore, we are requesting you – the beloved Tamils – to come immediately to the government liberated areas to protect yourself before this disaster"

Leaflet dropped from helicopter 28th August 2008 by SLA

Some of the displaced civilians had to move repeatedly. With each move, they increasingly had to abandon belongings or even relatives. The living conditions deteriorated rapidly and basic necessities such as food became increasingly scarce. The crisis demanded the need for emergency humanitarian assistance; tragically, the UN had left.

On the 20th January 200, the government unilaterally declared a No Fire Zone (NFZ) and encouraged civilian populations to concentrate in these areas; announcing their “security forces are fully committed to provide maximum safety for civilians trapped or forcibly kept by the LTTE in the un-cleared areas of Mullaittivu”. The Government declared three NFZ; all three experienced heavy shelling from the Sri Lanka Army (SLA). The first NFZ boundary was 800 meters north of the advancing frontline. On the 19th January, SLA shells hit Villipunam hospital (clearly marked and located in the first NFZ) killing many patients.

On the 24th January, hundreds of shells rained down in the NFZ. Hundreds lay dead or severely injured along the roadsides along with shattered remains and dead animals. In stark contrast, outside the NFZ in Manjal Palam, host to a large number of LTTE and far fewer civilians, escaped with few signs of shelling.

On the 12th February the Government declared a second NFZ along a 12 meter wide strip of coast spanning from Putumattalan to Vellamullivaikkal. The LTTE moved into this coastal strip to prepare their last defence despite the futility of their military situation having only limited artillery and broken supply chains. As the LTTE became more desperate, they forced civilians including children to build military installations and fortifications. Ruthlessly, the LTTE prevented civilians from leaving the area, ensuring their presence as a human buffer, a policy which callously involved the shooting of civilians. It is estimated that between 300,000 and 330,000 civilians were trapped in this small area.

The second NFZ had three makeshift hospitals. Even though their coordinates were known to the Government and were clearly marked with emblems all were hit by mortars and artillery. The government also prevented humanitarian aid reaching civilians and purposefully underestimated the number of civilians trapped in the conflict.

On the 26th April the LTTE declared a unilateral ceasefire; however this was not accepted by the Government. On the 8th May the Government declared a third and final NFZ of three square kilometres. The United Nations estimated that 100,000 civilians were trapped in this tiny area. The shelling within the third NFZ was so intense the Red Cross could no longer rescue any civilians. As shelling and bullets rained down from all sides of the NFZ saw a steep rise in the number of civilian deaths. Many died and were buried under their bunkers amidst black smoke and the stench of dead bodies. Between January to May in 2009, tens of thousands were killed at the hands of the SLA or at point-blank by the LTTE.

On the 19th May the President Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka declared victory over the LTTE.

Sri Lanka is signatory to several international treaties which require it to investigate alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law and to prosecute those responsible. The recent UN report analysed information from a variety of sources in order to assess which allegations are credible. If there is a reasonable basis to believe the events happened; then this standard of evidence gives rise to a legal responsibility for Sri Lanka to respond. In the case of Sri Lanka, the response requires investigation of these credible allegations.

The UN panel expert report can be found at http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Sri_Lanka/POE_Report_Full.pdf or for a recent documentary see <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/sri-lankas-killing-fields/4od#3212461>

Author : Joe Moloney, ACMRO

Personal Account of Post War Sri Lankan

“As for the post war period thousands of people are still internally displaced. My relatives for instance have had to relocate and start fresh which has been quite difficult for them because they were farmers whose livelihoods depended on cattle and crops. Relocating into towns was a daunting transition that had to be made. Schools were further away and it was not easy starting a new life with nothing but the clothes on you and any money that remained. My relatives did return to their homes but there was nothing left to go back to. The houses were torn down, cattle missing, land mines everywhere so it wasn't a safe place for children or anyone for that matter. They couldn't possibly return to live there any time soon. This is only one situation where a family had been fortunate enough to be allowed to leave camps controlled by the government and find new accommodation without any government assistance.”

Author - Tamil living in Australia

Sri Lanka Population

21 Million

Ethnic Groups

Sinhalese 74%,
Moors 7%,
Indian Tamil 5%,
Sri Lankan Tamil 4%,
unspecified 10%

Religions

Buddhist 69%,
Muslim 8%,
Hindu 7%,
Christian 6%,
unspecified 10%
(CIA World Fact Book)

Welfare of human beings must outweigh policy decisions says Catholic Migration Office

Media Release

26 July, 2011

The welfare of all migrants is paramount and outweighs any policy which punishes 800 asylum seekers who in desperation turn to people smugglers for help, said Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO) Director Fr Maurizio Pettenà.

Following the announcement of the Australian Government's deal with Malaysia, ACMRO today called on all political parties to strive for a more humanised approach to dealing with clandestine migration.

"We are very concerned that vulnerable people including children, families and others in distress will be further paralysed by this deal at a time when they most need Australia's help" said Fr Pettenà.

"The Malaysian solution reflects a domestic political notion that Australia is under threat from boat arrivals. In fact, these small numbers of boat arrivals are insignificant in comparison to our total migration program which according to the department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), included almost 170,000 permanent and over 3.4 million visitor visas in 2009-10", said Fr Pettenà.

"Host to over 92000 refugees, Malaysia has a much greater challenge than Australia in order to fully utilise the benefits that refugees can bring to destination countries. Australia could provide a much better life for these 800 people than they can expect in Malaysia" he said.

A recent DIAC report (*A Significant Contribution*) concludes that refugees are an investment in Australia's long term prosperity due to their drive to succeed and young demographic profile; much needed if Australia is to maintain current standards of living in the face of an ageing population.

"Australia is excellent at delivering resettlement services and has the capacity to play a much larger role in the Asia Pacific region. However a genuine sharing of the responsibility for refugees should not involve trading lives in order to address people smuggling" said Fr Pettenà.

"Blessed John Baptist Scalabrini in 1890 said that migration in almost all cases is not a pleasure but a necessity that cannot be avoided. History shows that clandestine migration such as unauthorised boat arrivals are not stopped by domestic policies or by changing political parties. Voters with this expectation will be disappointed. Clandestine migration to Australia occurs because of what is happening in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Sri Lanka", said Fr Pettenà.

"Those in need are still there, waiting in growing desperation. Any damage done to the people smuggler business model may result in even more drastic measures and exploitation, as asylum seekers find alternative means to get to Australia" he said.

ACMRO welcomes the news that recent boat arrivals arriving between the announcement and Monday's official signing of the deal will have their refugee assessments carried out in Australia – as all asylum seekers arriving here should be.

"The government must pursue the welfare of migrants for their sake and for the sake of all Australia" said Fr Pettenà.

For media enquiries or to arrange an interview with Fr Maurizio Pettenà, please contact Beth Doherty on 0407 081 256 or Joe Moloney on 02 6201 9895.

