



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office



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.