

1978

Statement

**On Refugees**

*Australian Episcopal Conference*

19 May 1978

We, the Catholic Bishops of Australia, meeting in plenary session in Sydney, [2897] commend the Australian Government for the new policy that it has adopted towards Indo-China refugees. We note that 11,000 refugees will have been accepted by the end of June and it is expected that another 9,000 will be granted entry into Australia in the next financial year. Not only are we conscious of the Government's efforts in accepting these refugees, but we also realise the tremendous efforts made by Commonwealth and State Government Departments, together with voluntary groups, in the work of their resettlement. In the areas of social security, welfare, health, housing, employment and education, these efforts have been most significant.

We recognise the difficulties that the Government faces in dealing with refugees [2898] arriving unannounced on our northern coastline. We commend the Government for the sensitive way it is handling this most complicated problem.

We remind Catholics and the Australian community of the obligation that we have [2899] to accept significant numbers of refugees. These people have lost everything, including their homeland. They have been virtually forced out of their own country, separated from friends, relatives and their possessions. It is a fact that most would desire to live in freedom in their homeland if that were possible. They now have to start life anew and they need a homeland in which they can do this.

There are currently over 100,000 refugees in Thailand and 15,000 in Malaysia with [2900] smaller numbers scattered around other countries in South-East Asia. There are also a large number of East Timor refugees in Portugal who earnestly desire to come to Australia but, as most have no relations here, they are not able to obtain approval for entry. We ask the Australian Government to give sympathetic consideration to the particular plight of these people. Australia as a signatory to the United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees has a national obligation to provide a home for a just proportion of the world's fifteen million refugees. Because of our proximity to Asia we have an additional responsibility to refugees in this part of the world. Not only do we have a national responsibility, but as Christians we have an obligation to help these people who are in such great need.

We urge the Catholics of Australia and the community in general to accept these [2901] responsibilities to the Indo-China and East Timor refugees, to support the actions of the Government in welcoming them to Australia and to show to the refugees themselves an attitude of goodwill that will help them to settle into our community.

The Commonwealth Hostels are presently providing most of the immediate accommodation for refugees. By the end of June these hostels will be filled to capacity and unless we can assist these refugees, numbering more than 3,000, to settle in the community, then the refugee program will be considerably delayed. The need for a fresh initiative in helping to settle the large number of refugees now in the hostels is therefore evident. [2902]

Communities in Wagga, Rockhampton, Tamworth, Wollongong, Canberra and elsewhere have already undertaken the responsibility of resettling a group of refugees. We have no doubt that every community, whether in the city, suburbs or country, could resettle at least one refugee family if they were willing to do so. This has been done in America where more than 50% of the 160,000 Indo-China refugees who have arrived have been resettled by individual parishes and dioceses. [2903]

We the Catholic Bishops urge all our people to consider seriously the possibility of their parish becoming involved in the resettlement of at least one refugee family. [2904]

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Source: Archives of the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO), Canberra, Australia.

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