



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office



Statement on Christmas Island Protests regarding Immigration Detention

17<sup>th</sup> March 2011

The recent protests at Christmas Island are an understandable reflection of the conditions of detention and the frustration involved with been locked up for the duration of the application process.

The Commonwealth Ombudsman, the Australian Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International all report on overcrowded conditions, lack of health and legal services, insufficiently qualified government and contractor staff, high turnover of staff, insufficient interpreter services, isolation, depression, hopelessness, despair, anxiety, self harm, suicide and attempted suicide in Australian detention centres.

The use of tear gas and bean bag rounds, fired by shotguns is not an appropriate method for managing this situation.

Proper management should include effective legal representation, sufficient mental health and medical care, expedient processing of claims coupled with legal rights, in an environment free from isolation.

Humane management would empower detainees to control and determine their own lives.

Last month, Minister Bowen was inspirational in his speech on the 'Genius of Multiculturalism'; we again turn to him to take the lead on the humanitarian response and progress past policies of deterrence which misjudge the international context of forced migration.

**The Catholic Church will never accept mandatory detention**, prolonged, offshore and remote detention of asylum seekers and refugees.

John Paul II reminds us,

“Concern for refugees must lead us to reaffirm and highlight universally recognised human rights, and to ask that the effective recognition of these rights be guaranteed to refugees”<sup>1</sup>

Detention is for criminals. Refugees and asylum seekers are not criminals.

Asylum seekers are people created in the likeness of God, deserving of dignity, and who due to circumstances beyond their control are now in search of a sustainable life.

Border security is the responsibility of the Government but political demands should never prevail over the value of the human person.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, 1990 Message for Lent, 3: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 12 February 1990, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Compendium of The Social Doctrine of The Church, 505.



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John Paul II explains,

“The challenge is to combine the welcome due to every human being, especially when in need, with a reckoning of what is necessary for both the local inhabitants and new arrivals to live a dignified and peaceful life.”<sup>3</sup>

Mandatory detention of asylum seekers is not necessary for the protection of Australians. We do not need to lock up such small numbers of people who arrived without a valid visa to send a message to others.

In 2009-10, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) granted 4,322,710 permanent and temporary visas to Australia.<sup>4</sup> Despite this extraordinary volume, all Australians continued to live a peaceful life, and many flourish because of the warm welcome that we extend to people from other nations.

Australia is a nation which upholds human and civil rights. These great values do not need to stop at our borders. Arbitrary detention is not part of our values and would not be acceptable for any Australian. It should not be accepted for anyone else either.

There are many alternatives to detention which avoid the persecution of asylum seekers and expensive price tag. To their credit, Minister Bowen and DIAC Staff have been exploring other options. ACMRO encourages this effort and calls on the Minister to also consider working bridging visas to detainees who pass health and security checks. This will enable asylum seekers to contribute to society and be self-reliant.

This year, Pope Benedict XVI message for world migrant and refugee day focuses on one human family. All human beings are brothers and sisters under God our Father in heaven. All Australians are witnesses to the suffering of detainees and are called to protect human dignity.

The boats will stop when peace returns to regions currently experiencing conflict and human rights atrocities. Until then, Australians need to support policies that actively promote the dignity and welfare of asylum seekers.

ACMRO calls on people of good will to show their compassion towards asylum seekers so painfully affected by tragic situations, to voice their support to parliament to end mandatory detention in favour of more humane alternatives.

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<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, World Day of Peace 2001, 13.

<sup>4</sup> DIAC Annual Report 2009-10, p. 2.