



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office



Legal assistance is vital to the proper operation of our asylum process **3 September 2013** **Media Release**

The Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office express great sadness as the coalition announced on Sunday they will withdraw legal assistance to people seeking asylum in Australia who arrive by boat.

“Asylum seekers do not commit any offence by coming here. Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights every person has the right to seek asylum in any territory they can reach” said Bishop Gerald Hanna, Australian Catholic Bishops Delegate for Migrants and Refugees.

“It is a dismal reflection of the state of the politics around this issue that commentators frequently refer to asylum seekers arriving by boat as “illegals”. This is just not true. As for “queue-jumping”, leave aside that there is no queue where boat people come from, the etiquette of the checkout at the supermarket is not how it works when you are running for your life” said Bishop Hanna.

“We must stop treating asylum seekers as if they are the enemy. We do not fail when people turn up unexpectedly and ask us for help, we fail when we refuse to offer help” he said.

“The Coalition should not forget that the Liberal government of Robert Menzies was instrumental in drafting the 1951 refugee Convention and was one of the first governments to sign the convention” said Fr Maurizio Pettenà, National Director, Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office.

“This was done in the belief that people fleeing from persecution should be allowed to ask for asylum and in doing so be granted the opportunity to be recognised as a refugee under the convention” said Fr Pettenà.

“The provision of basic legal assistance enables the asylum process to operate in practical terms. If asylum seekers are denied legal assistance, their ability to understand and comply with the complex legal process in preparing an application is almost zero” he said.

“An important provision of the refugee convention protects recognised refugees from being returned to a place where their life may be in danger. Without sufficient legal assistance to ensure proper process, how can Australia be sure it's not placing people's lives at risk?” said Fr Pettenà.

“Legal assistance has been provided to asylum seekers by successive Australian governments for over 20 years. The decision to withdraw the support is impractical, unreasonable and appears purely motivated by political gain” he said.

For media enquiries, please contact Beth Doherty 0407 081 256 or Joe Moloney (02) 6201 9848