

REPORT FROM THE AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC MIGRANT AND REFUGEE OFFICE

(November 2003 to March 2004)

The report presented to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in November 2003 was for the period January - October 2003. This report is for the next five months (November 2003 - March 2004)

STAFFING OF THE AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC MIGRANT AND REFUGEE OFFICE (ACMRO)

Fr John Murphy is full-time Director, ably assisted by two part-time staff (25 hours per week each): Verona Armstrong (Labour Agreement Administrator) and Anne de Smet (Information and Administration Officer)

MEETINGS/TELECONFERENCES

In February, Fr Murphy went to Adelaide and joined with other peak agencies in a meeting with the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Senator Amanda Vanstone, about the composition of the 2004/2005 Humanitarian programme. ACMRO also made a formal submission to the Minister on the proposed programme (copy attached). One of the requests made by ACMRO in the submission and during the meeting with the Minister was for an increase in the size of the Humanitarian Program for 2004/2005. We were delighted when the Minister subsequently announced a small increase (from 12,000 to 13,000 places).

In the period of this report, Fr Murphy has participated in the following meetings/consultations/teleconferences:

- an ACBC network meeting of the Directors of Conference agencies
- two meetings of the Canberra Consultative Advisory Group for ACMRO
- two teleconferences with the Priests and Religious who provide pastoral care at the Immigration Detention Centres
- a special two-day meeting of the Catholic Immigration Office Directors in Adelaide (February 19-20), also attended by Bishop Joseph Grech. This meeting dealt with the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees
- a teleconference of the Steering Committee for a National Conference for Migrant Chaplains to be held at the end of 2005. The Steering Committee will next meet at Chevalier Resource Centre, Kensington, on Tuesday 4th May
- a Consultation between the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in February. These DIMIA/NGO Consultations are held twice each year (in February and August).
- a Consultation between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and NGOs on Human Rights issues in March. The Honorable Alexander Downer attended this consultation. These consultations are held twice each year (in March and September)
- two meetings of the National Council of Churches in Australia (Refugee and Displaced Persons Committee).

MEMBERSHIP OF ORGANISATIONS

ACMRO is a member of:

- A Just Australia (Organisational Supporter)
- Australian Refugee Rights Alliance (ARRA)
- Refugee Council of Australia
- National Council of Churches (Refugee and Displaced Persons Committee)
- ACT Multicultural Committee

REPRESENTATION TO THE MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND OTHER PARLIAMENTARIANS

A number of requests were made to Minister Vanstone to use her Ministerial Power to grant more favourable decisions in refugee/asylum seeker/migrant cases. A second request was made on behalf of Sabaeen Mandeian detainees.

CASE WORK

Fr Murphy is a registered (non-fee charging) migration agent and responds to requests for help in coming to, or remaining in Australia (most frequently under the Humanitarian Program, but also under the Migration Program). These requests come (and are answered) by email, mail and telephone from people overseas and in Australia. People already in Australia sometimes visit the office. Requests from overseas come most frequently from African countries.

REPORTS TO THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR MIGRANTS AND ITINERANT PEOPLE

In January/February, ACMRO responded to the request of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Itinerant People by sending the ACMRO report (January - October 2003) and reports from the capital city offices for 2002. Fr Murphy also provided some suggested points and material to Bishop Grech for the Ad Limina visit to the Pontifical Council.

TALKS/VISITS

The following occurred during the period of this report (November 2003 - March 2004):

- • An address to the Sydney Migrant chaplains
- • An address for an Information Day on Refugees/Asylum Seekers (Canberra)
- • A visit to Baxter Detention Centre (over two days)
- • Participation in a Conference for groups who resettle refugees in Canberra

REFUGEE AND MIGRANT SUNDAY 2004

As in past years, material will be sent to Bishops and Catholic Education Commissions for distribution to parishes and schools. The material will include a poster, and messages from the Holy Father, from Bishop Grech, and from ACMRO.

MEDIA RELEASES

In the period of this report, subjects of media releases from the Bishops' Committee for Migrants and Refugees included:

- Excision of more islands not the answer (November 2003)
- Reports of self-harm on Nauru sad but not surprising (December 2003)
- New policy on Iranian asylum seekers encouraging (February 2004)
- Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office welcomes increase in humanitarian numbers (March 2004)

MANLY CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE GROUP

In 2002, the Manly Catholic Social Justice Group proposed the establishment by the Catholic Bishops of a Commission of Inquiry into Australia's Immigration and Refugee Programs. At the request of the Bishops' Committee for Migrants and Refugees (BCMR), Fr Murphy met with members of this group in August 2003 to clarify aspects of their proposal. The BCMR decided in November that the Bishops did not have the resources to proceed with the proposed Commission of Inquiry, and the Manly group was informed accordingly.

INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS

With Bishop Joseph Oudeman and Mr Jose Zepeda from the Centre for Multicultural Pastoral Care, Brisbane, Fr Murphy attended the

Fifth World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees - prepared by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People - (November 17-22), and the Council and Governing Committee meetings of the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) - November 22-24. All of these meetings were in Rome.

ACMRO has observer status at the Executive Committee (EX-Com) meetings of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and at the Council meetings of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) - all in Geneva. However, concerns of finance and time normally preclude attendance.

LABOUR AGREEMENT

ACMRO administers a Labour Agreement with the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The Agreement provides for the temporary and permanent entry to, and stay in Australia of a specified number of religious workers (and their dependents where applicable) for service in the Catholic Church in Australia. **Our very dedicated and capable Administrator of the Agreement is Verona Armstrong.**

The Labour Agreement (LA) was renegotiated for the third time between the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and began operation on 1 December 2003 . It will operate for three years until 30 November 2006 . The Agreement is specifically designed to simplify the process to enable Pastoral Workers (priests, religious and lay pastoral workers) to come to work in the service of the Catholic Church in Australia .

As predicted, the new Agreement is more onerous than earlier Agreements and is less flexible in its application, especially in the area of Lay Pastoral Workers. With the mandatory requirement now to provide evidence of a contract for a base minimum salary of \$32,000 between the sponsor and Lay Pastoral Workers, Lay Movements (eg the Focolare Movement and the Neocatechumenal Way) have been forced to reconsider their position in relation to matters of sponsorship. Likewise avenues that were previously open under earlier agreements for Lay Pastoral Workers to work in some Dioceses to gain experience of pastoral work have been curtailed and the Dioceses have had to reconsider their position with regard to sponsorship in these instances and consider other visa options. Some of the Eastern Churches have been similarly affected.

It is mandatory under the new Agreement for priests to provide evidence of Ordination and for Religious to provide evidence of Profession. Age and English exemptions are more difficult to negotiate for Permanent entry.

Stricter controls on security and the closing down of some overseas Embassies without the provision of additional staff to cater for increased workloads has produced an unpredictable environment in which the Labour Agreement now operates, and has caused the process to slow down considerably. The workload at the ACT Regional Office of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) has increased because of the decision by DIMIA to process all Temporary entry visa applications in Canberra where formerly only nominations were decided there. It is proposed by DIMIA to introduce the processing of all Permanent entry visa applications under the Labour Agreement in Australia by the end of this year, thus slowing down the process further. It should be noted however that, without the Labour Agreement, visa processing would be much more prolonged. Similarly the workload in the ACMRO Office has increased because of the additional processing involved with the introduction of Visa application decisions in the Canberra DIMIA Office for Temporary nominees both on and off-shore.

So far in 2004, 71 nominations have been received which is slightly more than the number for the same period last year. Of the 71 nominations,

33 are for priests whereas for the same period last year only about one third was for priests.

STUDENT VISA REFORMS

Under new Student Visa regulations, DIMIA attaches financial conditions which are very difficult to observe on the granting of student visas for people from assessment levels 3 & 4 countries (countries like India and the Philippines). Ways to overcome the problem for religious students (including Seminarians) appear to be:

- the use of the Occupational Trainee visa. Fr Murphy is still awaiting clarification from DIMIA.
- The use of a new agreement for religious personnel which is still to be "signed off" by the Minister, a process which was not helped by the change of Minister in October 2003.

NEWSLETTER - "JOURNEYS' END"

The first edition of "Journeys' End" for 2004 was distributed in February. **Anne de Smet, our Administration/Information Officer, attended to the preparation and distribution of the newsletter very capably and enthusiastically.**

We hope to have smaller and more frequent editions of the newsletter in the future and to include more stories about refugees, migrants and asylum seekers.

Email Addresses

Fr John Murphy: director@acmro.catholic.org.au

Verona Armstrong: adminofficer@acmro.catholic.org.au

Anne de Smet: clericalofficer@acmro.catholic.org.au

Web Site Address: www.acmro.catholic.org.au