

# **AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC MIGRANT AND REFUGEE OFFICE**

*\* BISHOPS' COMMITTEE for MIGRANTS and REFUGEES \**

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The Director  
Humanitarian Program Policy and Management Section  
Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs  
PO Box 25  
BELCONNEN ACT 2616

Dear Director,

## **Submission on Australia's Humanitarian Program for 2006-07**

In this submission, the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office will comment on the seven questions raised in the Minister's Discussion Paper.

Firstly, however, I repeat our support for the increase in the humanitarian program for 2004/2005 from 12,000 to 13,000 places. This was the first real increase in the program for about seven years and it was, we believe, an important step in the right direction. The increased numbers received broad support from the community and we hoped that they would be further increased in 2005/06. It was with some disappointment, therefore, that we learned that there would be no further increase.

I repeat the request that a further increase be considered in the Humanitarian Program for 2006-07. The Australian Catholic Bishops remain committed to their call for an annual intake of at least 20,000 people under the Humanitarian program.

Rev Monsignor John Murphy  
Director

***Question 1: How can the Refugee Program best target those in greatest need of resettlement?***

DIMIA processing posts, in addition to accepting referrals from UNHCR, could make greater use of other international agencies such as the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) in order to administer a program that is more flexible and better able to respond to the changing location of refugee generating areas/zones? In fact ICMC was used in one program in 2004 and we understand that their contribution was greatly appreciated by DIMIA. ICMC stands ready to assist again.

Overseas selection processes and on-arrival settlement services could well be enhanced and more effectively identify humanitarian entrants' needs if more weight were given to community organizations' concerns. These organizations possess particular experience both in Australia and overseas when dealing with displaced people and their needs. Volunteers have historically been the lifeline for migrant and humanitarian entrants. There would be great benefit for DIMIA to recognise the potential for formal partnership arrangements such as those which exist in the Humanitarian program of the USA.

Improvement is required to increase access to processing posts for refugees as well as an overall speeding up of applications once they are received. It is very difficult for applicants under the Humanitarian program when they have to wait for many months (up to one year) to hear anything about their application and to also be told that interim enquiries will not be answered.

Special support and training should be offered to those individuals and organisations that specialise in dealing with clients from The Woman at Risk visa subclass for female applicants. Non-government organizations, including church-based, have the capacity at international and national level to cooperate through shared information and arrangements in areas of common interest and concern to identify effectively and select women at risk for settlement in Australia. There should be a person with expertise in each Australian Embassy with responsibility for the processing of applications for women at risk. This person should be familiar with the local situation and have an understanding of social and cultural circumstances and factors that cause women to be at risk. In recognition of the problems and barriers faced by women in travel and the lodgement of applications, special consideration should be given to make the process culturally and socially relevant, well known and more accessible, accountable and responsive to women at risk.

**Repeat Applications.**

A further increase in the refugee/humanitarian program (as proposed by the Australian Catholic Bishops) to enable it to be responsive, flexible and adaptable to need and fluctuations would address and limit the need for repeat applications. There need to be sufficient places available to limit the likelihood of repeat applications. However, restrictions on repeat applications should only be considered if the primary application were without doubt comprehensive and complete. Many repeat claimants may have the opportunity to provide new information in support of

their claim. Barriers may have existed in the first instance which prevented complete disclosure of information.

***Question 2: How can the Special Humanitarian Program best target those in greatest need of resettlement?***

There should be sufficient, specially trained staff at more accessible locations close to refugee source areas. The difficulty in determining those in greatest need for resettlement is accepted. See the suggestion given above about using the services and expertise of competent international agencies. Some community organisations, both in Australia and overseas, possess particular experience when dealing with displaced people and their needs. Overseas selection processes and on-arrival settlement services could well be enhanced, and more effectively identify humanitarian entrants' needs, if more use were made of these organisations, as is done by the USA.

Volunteers have historically been the lifeline for migrant and humanitarian entrants. There would be great benefit for DIMIA to recognise the potential for partnership arrangements with community organisations who use volunteers in targeting those in greatest need of resettlement.

We had hoped that the interest-free loan scheme for travel costs of proposed nominees would ensure greater proposer support, including from Church and community organizations who receive many requests for proposals. But the conditions of the scheme prevent these organizations from applying for a loan on behalf of a client.

In addition, the level of support which all proposers can offer entrants will be enhanced if they are better prepared, resourced and supported. This should include a pre-arrival induction program where the proposer is made aware of his/her obligations (financial or otherwise) and of what she/he is likely to experience as a proposer. The proposer needs to receive regular information updates on settlement services so that entrants can be more effectively linked into the services of which they are in need. Community groups/organisations, with the support of government, could provide training/education programs to ensure that proposers are better prepared and able to undertake that which, for many, can be a difficult and stressful experience. Many proposers (often family members) agree to propose entrants despite having limited financial resources, little knowledge about the obligations of the proposal and little knowledge of other refugee settlement services. A long-term commitment to provide necessary resources (financial or otherwise) must be given to ensure proposer support for emerging new resettlement caseloads with small populations in Australia.

We had hoped that the interest-free loan scheme, mentioned above, would go a long way to involving the broader community in the Special Humanitarian Program proposer process. Proposers need to be cognisant of the commitment and responsibility involved with proposal/sponsorship. They should be aware that they require sufficient resources to meet their obligations and responsibilities.

The broader community is entitled to know and understand fully the events and circumstances which lead to people seeking refuge. We believe that persons/communities who have a good understanding of those issues will acknowledge, respect and treat refugees with dignity and will welcome the opportunity to support applicants during processing and arrival in Australia.

Non- government community and church organisations, with the support of government funding, could provide the necessary training and skills required for volunteers within communities to assist applicants in their settlement. Applicants and communities would require long term government support in education, health, housing and employment opportunities to enhance the settlement of applicants.

Australians should be reminded that previous generosity to refugees has been of benefit to Australian society and will continue to be so. The Australian community should be encouraged to have confidence and pride in Australia's refugees. Refugees by definition, are people with courage, ingenuity and perseverance and are endowed with talents and creativity which were necessary to have survived and found sanctuary. Australians respect such values and attributes, but rarely do we attribute them to refugees. It should be acknowledged that many well-known and distinguished Australians are from refugee situations. The government is responsible for providing the Australian community with accurate information.

Information and education programs should address the international issues that cause the forced displacement of people. Globalisation, an economic rational approach to governance and change in social and economic structures, and how that affects the individual, has never been explained sufficiently to the Australian population.

***Question 3: What information should be included in pre-embarkation information and cultural orientation classes to ensure that humanitarian entrants have realistic expectations of life in Australia?***

We congratulate DIMIA on contracting IOM to deliver the AUSCO program, and will be interested to learn of the progress/success of the program.

***Question 4: Have recent enhancements to the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) improved the abilities of proposers to provide assistance to Special Humanitarian Program entrants?***

The initiatives given in the Discussion Paper have/will improve the abilities of sponsors to provide assistance:

- The introduction of funding to cover the cost of pre-embarked medical assessments and accommodation assistance has already been a great help.

- However, the limitations of the travel-loan scheme remains an obstacle. Also needed is governmental provision of temporary housing for proposal cases as well as assistance in linking entrants to essential mainstream services.
- An observation about the tendering process: some agencies who were previously IHSS providers did not receive new contracts in the last round of grants (with no reasons given). One such agency, which had decided not to apply at the beginning of the IHSS, but which was encouraged by DIMIA to do so, eventually did apply successfully. When the time came to reapply in 2005, it went through a long and complex tendering process, only to be unsuccessful.

**Question 5:** *What settlement services are available for humanitarian entrants once they exit the IHSS?*

We are happy to learn of the SGP follow-up to the IHSS. It is good to know that Humanitarian entrants or family stream migrants with low English proficiency who arrived in the last five years will continue to receive assistance. Our only plea would be to encourage/enable mainstream Australian volunteers (eg former CRSS volunteers) to be involved in the SGP. Many of these volunteers have felt unwanted and unneeded since the IHSS began; and yet their involvement assists greatly to foster unity in our multicultural society.

**Question 6:**

*What groundwork is required to prepare for and support establishment of humanitarian settlement in new regional locations?*

The proposals in the Discussion Paper are very good. In addition, the following should be noted:

- The current response by many Australians to asylum seekers demonstrates a concern and a desire to adopt a positive approach to welcome those seeking asylum into communities and towns. As an example, Rural Australians for Refugees has groups in many parts of Australia. Regional community members have developed solutions and ideas. These concepts could be considered and developed in consultation with government.
- Migration to regional areas is dependent on employment opportunities, educational and support facilities, ethnic and cultural understanding and acceptance.
- Migration and settlement of people from different cultures, religious backgrounds etc., has to be promoted as a positive for Australia.
- There is a need to ensure that specialised services such as torture/trauma counselling are available in regional communities. Some Church agencies have advised that humanitarian entrants who have attempted to settle in regional areas have relocated to city areas due to isolation and the desire to be in closer contact with other members of their community, and also for educational and employment related opportunities.
- Regional communities require workers to support existing volunteer groups and to work with mainstream services and to enhance access to services.
- DIMIA should research the factors that either enable or prevent successful settlement for humanitarian entrants in regional areas.

## **Question 7.**

*What measures are in place to improve health outcomes on-shore for newly-arrived refugee and SHP entrants, especially those from Africa?*

As we are not health providers, we cannot make meaningful comment on this question. However, we wonder how often travel has had to be postponed if an illness requiring treatment is discovered in the final 72 hours before scheduled departure. If this occurs in a high number of cases, we suggest that health assessments could be conducted in the last month before departure to allow time for treatment and final checks. Delay of travel is costly both financially and psychologically.

### **Other points:**

*Some issues concerning on-shore refugees and asylum seekers:*

- Asylum Seekers in the community have the right to work (cf the current Right to Work campaign). Such a right to work brings dignity in providing for themselves and their family rather than living on charity. It also gives access to health care. The Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (both in Melbourne) have given excellent reports about minimum standards for asylum seekers living in the community while awaiting a decision.
- The next wave of refugees: is the recent arrival of 43 West Papuans the beginning of this "new wave". Despite the excision of islands, they made it to the mainland. Australia has an obligation to hear their claims and, if found appropriate, to provide them with protection.
- The title "Return Pending Bridging Visa" highlights the very temporary nature of this visa and has a serious psychological effect on those to whom it is granted.