

## REFUGEES MATTER 17-7: ACTION ALERT

*As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.*

Australian Quakers have been deeply concerned at the way the off-shore immigration detention policy initiated by the Labor Party and continued by the Coalition has led to inhumane outcomes for the asylum seekers and refugees placed in the Nauru and Manus Island facilities. Numerous appeals have been made by individual Quakers and Yearly and Regional Meetings to political leaders to change direction, and bring the remaining people to Australia for resettlement and processing. A crisis point has now been reached on Manus Island following the decision to close the centre there and remove all support services.

### Basic details

Most of those housed on Manus Island have been determined to be refugees by the UNHCR criteria. There has developed a significant animosity between local people on both Manus and Nauru towards the refugees/asylum seekers, fed by incidents of violence and the cultural differences.

Some 50 refugees have been resettled in the USA, with a potential of up to 1250 from Manus and Nauru, but the process is very slow and subject to increasingly stringent immigration requirements set under the new US President.

The 600 men on Manus are to be transferred to new facilities near Lorengau town, but one of three centres has not yet been completed and is close to local residents who fear for their safety. Most of the 600 fear for their own safety and have decided to stay in the existing centre despite being denied access to food, water and power.

### Official Positions

The Australian Government maintains that the centre on Manus must close and says the new facilities will be more than adequate. The Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, said on 5 November that Australia would not take up an offer from New Zealand to receive 150 refugees for resettlement. He said he would give priority to the arrangement by the USA to take up to 1250.

The Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said on 3 November that the government would not budge from its position that those found not to be refugees should return to their countries of origin, or if found to be refugees settle in PNG.

Leader of the Opposition Bill Shorten on 3 November urged the Coalition Government to seriously consider sending some of those left on Manus Island to New Zealand. He reiterated the Labor Party policy in favour of denying entry to Australia but said other resettlement options should be sought with other nations.

Senator Richard Di Natale of the Australian Greens has responded to the situation by calling for the Government to bring the refugees to Australia and demonstrate some of the compassion shown by New Zealand.

The Papua New Guinea Government spokesman Petrus Thomas said on 30 October that PNG had no obligation to deal with asylum seekers found not to be refugees. He spoke of the responsibility of the Australian Government to pursue third-country options. He also expressed concern at the allegations from international observers of human rights violations on Manus, and called on Australia to maintain health and mental health services to the refugees. Earlier in the year the PNG Supreme Court ruled that the detention of asylum seekers was illegal.

### **UNHCR's Statement on 2 November 2017 (summary)**

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, today reiterates its call to Australia to stop a humanitarian emergency unfolding on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea.

More than 600 people currently remain at the 'Regional Processing Centre' located on Manus Island. Despite the cutting of water and electricity on 31 October, most have told UNHCR of their intention to remain due to fears for their security if they are forced to move outside.

If all 600 individuals were to leave immediately, many would not find adequate or sufficient accommodation elsewhere. The East Lorengau Regional Transit Centre was only intended for temporary accommodation and has limited capacity. There is no security fence at 'West Lorengau Haus' or 'Hillside Haus' in the Ward 1 area of Lorengau. UNHCR observed on 30 October that construction of 'West Lorengau Haus' is incomplete.

UNHCR has met with government authorities, including the Police and the Immigration and Citizenship Service Authority, who have noted that tensions within the local community are on the rise, partly due to the lack of consultation prior to the movement of refugees and asylum-seekers outside of the 'Regional Processing Centre.'

Welfare arrangements, including critical torture and trauma counselling services, are insufficient at present for refugees and asylum-seekers on Manus Island. Only four Immigration and Citizenship Service Authority caseworkers are providing assistance to a population of over 700 refugees and asylum-seekers.

UNHCR urges the Australian Government to work with the Papua New Guinean authorities to immediately de-escalate an increasingly tense and unstable situation. Australia remains responsible for the well-being of all those moved to Papua New Guinea until adequate, long-term solutions outside the country are found. UNHCR urges Australia to take responsibility and provide protection and safety to these vulnerable human beings.

**Statement by Refugee Council of Australia, 1 November**

Phil Glendinning, RCOA President, said that the lack of consultation between officials and local communities has been inadequate and has led to growing fear among the locals and the detainees. He called for immediate action to provide safety to those trapped in limbo, and for them to be brought to Australia, given the unviable alternative options in third countries.

**Action**

It is clear that Australia has gone well outside its obligations under the Refugee Convention by the way its approach to asylum seekers and refugees has become increasingly inhumane towards those caught up in it. The stated aim of stopping people smuggling has been used as an excuse for ignoring real human need.

The priority for action is to let your Federal representatives (MPs and Senators) know of your deep concern for immediate steps to restore basic services to the detainees on Manus Island while a longer-term arrangement is made. You could also press for the remaining detainees to be brought to Australia until a resettlement arrangement is made. The Yearly Meeting Presiding Clerk, Jo Jordan, has written to the Prime Minister along these lines.

As to longer term options, you could explore with them such things as accepting the New Zealand offer for resettling some of the refugees, urge a speed-up in the processing by the USA, and seek a new regional arrangement involving countries of our region.

**Canberra, November 2017**