



Right to live at home, right to seek asylum, right to work

The Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce believes that Refugee Week is a time to remember that the suffering of asylum seekers and refugees is a global problem. Australia has an important role to play in helping to find durable solutions.

“Australia’s overseas aid funding should be targeted to improve living conditions in countries gutted by poverty or war,” Executive Officer, Misha Coleman, said today. Ms Coleman was formerly the CEO of Anglican Overseas Aid and has spent the past 20 years working in countries from which people flee.

“Targeted funding is a better approach than detaining people in prison-like environments. We should be focusing more effort on peace and security in those countries from which people are fleeing, and working with our neighbours to protect refugees in our region. Cruel policies which punish those who try to reach Australia do not stop planes nor boats. They DO stop people living productive lives,” Ms Coleman said.

Last year, the Government last year effectively decided to divert \$375 million away from the overseas aid program to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, for purposes which have yet to be clarified. Ms Coleman said the redirection of overseas aid funding from programs in countries such as Indonesia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, the Pacific, or Cambodia and the Philippines would only further increase the misery in those countries.

Taskforce Chair Reverend Elenie Poulos, National Director of UnitingJustice, said, “We are calling on the Government and Opposition to shift their focus to the creation of positive humanitarian solutions for asylum seekers and refugees, those often referred to in the Bible as ‘the least and the lost’.

“We are very concerned about asylum seekers denied the right to work while living in the community waiting for their refugee claims to be determined. We don’t want to create an underclass of people who cannot support themselves and their families. We are calling on church members and others to contact their Federal Senators and ask them to support the Motion in favour of the right to work which is going before the Senate on 20 June,” said Rev. Poulos.

Mr Peter Arndt, Taskforce Member and Executive Officer of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, said that his agency is an example of one which provides direct care and support to refugees and asylum seekers in our community. “We are currently providing a large amount of material support to people who are living in the community on bridging visas, but who are not allowed to work to support themselves. I hope the Senate will see this current policy doesn’t make sense”.

Executive Officer of the Taskforce, Ms Misha Coleman, will speak at the Refugee Day Rally in Melbourne on Sunday 16th, and will challenge the audience in a simulation exercise. The rally will commence at 12 midday in the Museum Forecourt, corner Gertrude and Nicholson Street, Melbourne.

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The Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce was established to promote a shared Christian vision of compassion and hospitality for asylum seekers and refugees. The churches and their agencies work together to advocate for just and humane policies. Supported by the National Council of Churches in Australia, the Core Group of the Taskforce currently consists of leaders from seven Christian denominations and three Ecumenical bodies in Australia. The Taskforce supports a broader network of 150 individuals from across the 19 members of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

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