



call to action
13th APRIL 2006

WEST PAPUAN REFUGEES human rights must be paramount

In response to pressure from Indonesia, the Australian Government has moved to decrease asylum seekers' rights.

In January of 2006, 43 asylum seekers from West Papua landed in Cape York, claiming persecution from Indonesian authorities. Of these, 42 have had their claims of human rights abuse substantiated according to Australia's international obligations, and have been granted visas. The incident created a storm of controversy as Indonesia condemned Australia's actions and withdrew its ambassador from Canberra.

Responding to this pressure, the Government has announced that future asylum seekers who land on Australian shores will now be denied access to current Australian onshore processes. This new policy reflects earlier legislation made in 2001, which excises parts of Australia territory from the onshore migration zone so that asylum seekers entering without visas can be prevented from making valid application for protection unless determined by the Minister.

These changes will make conditions worse for many future asylum seekers. As well as reducing appeal rights and creating uncertainty, moving to process asylum seekers in offshore centres reduces transparency and lessens the ability of NGOs and Churches to provide support to asylum seekers. Such changes place transient political concerns ahead of our obligations to protect vulnerable people from persecution.

The President of the Uniting Church in Australia, Rev. Dr Dean Drayton, has written to Prime Minister John Howard stating his opposition to such asylum seeker policy. He wrote:

While we agree... that Australia's role should be to encourage and support the emergence of democracy in Indonesia, the Uniting Church will never support a policy that seeks to override human rights under the banner of 'national interest'...It is unacceptable that the fate of innocents would be determined, not by their need, but by the dictates of foreign policy.

Write an email, letter or fax to members of Cabinet expressing your opposition.

Some points you might make:

- Human rights must be paramount in considering asylum seekers' cases. Human rights abuses should never be overlooked for the sake of trade and diplomatic ties.
- As a signatory to the Refugee Convention, Australia must not return asylum seekers to territories where they could face persecution or torture.
- By signalling that human rights can be secondary to other 'national interests', Australia will lead its neighbours to similarly disregard human rights when it suits them.
- In no case should an asylum seeker's personal details be exposed to their persecutors.
- 42 of the 43 West Papuan refugees have been proven to have genuine claims against the Indonesian Government. It is unacceptable that future refugees in the same position may have their claims denied.

Contact details for Members of Cabinet: go to

<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/parl/41/ministry/ministry.htm>

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHURCH'S POSITION ON ASYLUM SEEKERS, please visit UnitingJustice Australia's website at <http://nat.uca.org.au/unitingjustice> or call us on (02) 8267 4236