

**Caritas cautious of new asylum policy, wants more detail.**

Caritas Australia, the international aid and development agency of the Catholic Church, welcomes the tone of Prime Minister Gillard's new policy on asylum seekers but says more information is needed to ensure the dignity of refugees is protected whilst their applications are processed.

Jack de Groot CEO of Caritas Australia said, "We agree that there is no quick fix to this issue. We welcome the Prime Minister's approach and shift in language, and the overdue commitment to developing a sustainable, effective regional protection framework. However, more detail is required before we can judge the initiatives announced today."

Caritas Australia continues to support local partners in both Sri Lanka and Afghanistan and remains extremely concerned about the protection measures for vulnerable groups and individuals. We welcome the Prime Minister's decision to recommence processing Sri Lankan asylum seekers however we remain extremely concerned about the isolation of Afghani refugees who will continue to be held without recourse, seemingly in breach of human rights obligations.

"It is our firm belief that an asylum seeker's country of origin should play no part in their application and evaluation of their refugee status," said Mr de Groot.

"Offshore processing is not a preferable option for dealing with asylum seekers who seek protection in Australia. An effective regional processing centre to be established in East Timor must be differentiated from the deleterious impacts of the Pacific Solution.

"Processing of asylum seekers should be conducted in Australia. If a regional processing centre is established in East Timor or anywhere else, it must be supported by the country's own people, and asylum seekers should be allowed free access into the community - including access to education and health care.

"Whilst East Timor is a signatory to the UN refugee convention (unlike Nauru) there are still many questions that need to be answered in relation to this new proposal," Mr de Groot said.

"Who will administer the processing centre? How and by whom will claims be processed? How and when will successful refugee applicants be resettled? What will happen to unsuccessful applicants? Who will be employed to run the centres?"

"Many people in East Timor still do not have access to adequate food, clean water, health and education services. If asylum seekers are given these services, as they are entitled by law how, will the consequent tensions be managed in the wider community? All these matters need to be clearly articulated before we can support the proposal", said Mr de Groot.

"Caritas Australia has a significant presence in East Timor and will be talking with our many partners to canvas their views on the new announcement; we will be making very sure that Prime Minister Gillard and her Government are aware of their position."

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**The Catholic Agency for International Aid and Development**

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