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New asylum-seeker policy ensures race to the bottom for election

Edmund Rice Centre director, Phil Glendenning, expressed serious concerns today at both the content and language used by Prime-Minister Julia Gillard in her address this morning on the Government's policy response to asylum-seekers.

“The Edmund Rice Centre welcomes the Prime-Minister's re-framing of the debate, especially her debunking of myths about the numbers coming to Australia and the reasons why they come,” Mr Glendenning said. “We welcome too, Ms Gillard's effective demolition of the Opposition's hollow threats to 'turn back boats' and her affirmation that, as Australians, we will never let vulnerable people drown. These are points that needed to be made.”

“However these positive expressions of Australian values, are at odds with the policy measures announced, that once more target vulnerable Sri Lankan and Afghan asylum-seekers. The human rights situation in both of these countries remains deeply concerning. Merely wanting conditions to be safe in either place before an Australian election, does not make it safe,” he said.

“Last year, Afghanistan saw more civilian deaths than in any year since the conflict there began. It was the most violent year of the war. As human rights organisations around the world have reported it is not a safe place to send refugees. In these circumstances it is unfitting for Ms Gillard to express an eagerness at an increased numbers of Afghan asylum seekers having their protection claims rejected,” Mr Glendenning said.

Commenting on the report on humanitarian conditions in Sri Lanka that was released yesterday by the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, Mr Glendenning acknowledged that conditions have improved significantly in many parts of the country. “However, there are still serious and ongoing concerns for five key groups of Sri Lankans who remain at risk if returned. Among these five are people with any form of connection to the LTTE, media personnel, unionists, human rights workers and other specific subsets of civil society. People from these groups must not be returned,” he affirmed.

“Ms Gillard fundamentally needs to lead the nation, not to follow Tony Abbott in a race to the bottom on asylum seeker policy. Sadly yesterday's policy announcement lifts neither the tone of the debate nor hope for a better policy – one that might be more consistent with our international obligations,” he continued.

“We believe that a regional response to the flow of asylum seekers is essential, however the East Timor solution is not it. There cannot be a regional response unless the region is involved.

“The proposal for a 'regional processing centre' in East Timor must not result in another Nauru. Very bad

decisions were made in regard to the Afghans on Nauru, and as a direct consequence of those decisions, lives were lost. In plotting future directions we must never forget that, and we must never repeat it The fact that East Timor is a signatory to the Refugee Convention should help prevent the appalling number of *refoulements* that occurred from Nauru – returns of asylum-seekers back to the harm they were fleeing,” he said.

“Moreover, why is it that we are once again asking a poor nation, to do what is our responsibility, without commitment from the rest of the region?” Mr Glendenning asked. “Wanting a regional response before an Australian election does not establish one.”

“The Edmund Rice Centre's research into deportations has demonstrated there are two separate, but intrinsically linked processes. First is the process to determine an individual's right to protection under the refugee convention. However, if an asylum seeker fails to demonstrate this, they must be able to be removed safely especially if returned to the country they fled. We have found that confusing these two questions has led to deaths of those removed or of their family members,” he said.

“The Edmund Rice Centre welcomes the lifting of the suspension on processing of protection claims of Sri Lankans, but we repeat our call to remove the suspension for Afghans. We want the law to be applied fairly and justly. Our deep concern is that the political motivations of the formulation of this supposed humanitarian policy are more about the Federal election, and not about meeting the needs of vulnerable people fleeing war and persecution.” Mr Glendenning emphasised.

“This is the great pity for our nation. Australians are a generous people, but we are easily scared by fear-mongering rhetoric and misled by poor policy explanations. The issue of asylum seekers and refugees needs to be first and foremost a humanitarian issue not a partisan political one - and it should never become a political football at election time. Malcolm Fraser's Government demonstrated that a regional solution is possible, when the region is involved as a whole, and when bi-partisan support is offered and demonstrated. In Fraser's time this bi-partisanship spirit was best exemplified by Ian McPhee and Mick Young travelling the country together explaining that Australia had nothing to fear from refugees. Under the leadership of Ms Gillard and Mr Abbott that bi-partisanship seems a long way off, making a truly regional response all the more unachievable.” he said.

“Ms Gillard is right when she describes the numbers coming to this nation as a very small minority of both international asylum claims and of Australia's overall annual migrant intake. But she is wrong when she asserts that the way to deal with such a small issue is to seek to punish the vulnerable who she now asks to pay for the crimes of others,” Mr Glendenning stated.

“The sad reality is that the impact of Ms Gillard's speech will be to drive the Coalition's response even further to the right. This is not the leadership the country needs. In ethical terms, Ms. Gillard has ensured this debate becomes a race to the bottom,” Mr Glendenning concluded.

Over the past nine years the Edmund Rice Centre has conducted research in 22 countries into what happens to Australia's rejected asylum seekers. Two major reports have been published Deported to Danger and Deported to Danger II - leading to the making of a television documentary, A Well Founded Fear, which screened nationally in 2008 and internationally in 2009

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