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## PM should focus on region rather than borders in Asylum seeker debate

Prime Minister Julia Gillard should use today's expected announcement on asylum seeker policy to commit to a broader, regional approach in an effort to create long-term, sustainable solutions for asylum seekers and refugees, international aid agency Oxfam Australia said.

Oxfam Australia's Executive Director Andrew Hewett said Australia's narrow focus on border policy meant the Government risked missing the big picture.

"Australia needs to engage with our neighbouring countries using resources such as properly targeted aid and diplomacy, so that more people can safely stay in other countries in our region and begin to rebuild their lives," Mr Hewett said.

"At the moment there are very few options for asylum seekers and refugees in our region. Of our nearest neighbours, only Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste are signatories to the refugee convention.

"This means that asylum seekers in neighbouring countries often live in very insecure positions, where they can't have their refugee claims processed, earn a living, or send their children to school. People who are recognised as refugees also often live in conditions of real hardship, without the rights of other citizens.

"By providing more support to help other countries in our region offer safety to people seeking protection, Australia can help give people alternatives to feeling that they have to undertake a risky boat journey. This support could include helping those countries and the UNHCR process asylum claims quickly and fairly, and helping improve the living conditions of asylum seekers while their claims are being determined.

"Oxfam knows from our work in many countries around the world that there are many serious and complex reasons behind people's decisions to risk hazardous journeys in search of a safer, better life for themselves and their families."

Mr Hewett said it was important to have an informed and open debate about asylum seekers in Australia but said it was important to remember that the debate was about people's lives.

"Currently 80 per cent of the world's refugees are hosted by developing countries and less than one per cent of refugees are resettled by wealthy countries around the world. Australia can and should do more to both resettle more refugees itself and to encourage other wealthy countries to do more.

"Effective border management includes the fair and humane treatment of asylum seekers. While Australia has robust security systems in place for screening any unauthorised arrivals, we need to improve the fairness of our current approach," Mr Hewett said.

"Oxfam hopes that Prime Minister Gillard uses today's announcement to help create a fair, humane and sustainable approach to asylum seekers."

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Oxfam is a leading international aid agency working with communities around the world for solutions to poverty and social injustice.