

# QUAKER PEACE AND LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

## ACTION ALERT: ASYLUM SEEKERS

### Introduction

Many Friends remain deeply concerned at the way in which official policies towards asylum seekers are being framed and carried out. The human cost is increasing for the detainees and those involved in implementing the policies. As Bob Douglas of Canberra Meeting (and one of the founders of Australia 21) has put it: "The outbreak of violence and death on Manus Island is the latest chapter in a sequence of events that has changed Australia from being a leader in humanitarian aid to displaced people, into an international pariah".

The situation on Nauru is similar, given the outbreak of rioting last year and the resulting damage to property, and the ongoing reports of psychological distress among asylum seekers there. This is compounded by the recent removal of significant law officers from their posts by the government, delaying much legal work. *The New Zealand Herald* reported on 6 March that a former Salvation Army caseworker told the SBS TV network that colleagues had fabricated individual management plans of asylum seekers. The Salvation Army denied this claim.

Major causes of unrest are the slowness of decisions on processing asylum claims, and the absence of assurances to detainees about future resettlement prospects. Also, local opinion in PNG and Nauru is divided on the impact of the presence of the detainees on local economies and culture.

Therese Rein, when speaking at the Australian National University recently, said (2 March 2014): "What I do reflect on is that there are a lot of people in the world who are displaced because of war, famine, oppression – and it is really important that, as part of the United Nations, we welcome people to this country who are fleeing all of that". Senator John Madigan (Independent, Victoria) presented a motion to the Senate on 4 March expressing strong support for on-shore processing of asylum seekers and for increasing the level of humanitarian intake under the migration program.

### Recent Parliamentary Moves

On 5 March 2014 the Senate approved the setting up of two enquiries, at the initiative of the Greens and the ALP. The first – by the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee – will focus on the events at Manus Island in February. The second – by the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee - will look at the incursion of Australian customs and naval vessels into Indonesian waters when turning back boats. It remains to be seen exactly how these enquiries will be conducted, but you can find out more

(including the names of the committee members) by checking the Senate committee section of the Parliament House website – [www.aph.gov.au](http://www.aph.gov.au)

In an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (7 March 2014) Sarah Whyte reported that a media spokesman for Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister said that asylum seekers and workers at the Manus Island detention centre should be flown to Australia to give evidence to the Senate enquiry. "I doubt if the PNG Government would allow the Australian Senate to conduct an enquiry on PNG soil and jurisdiction", said Daniel Korimbao. "The better option would be to have the detainees, and any other person, flown to Canberra where the enquiry is being held, to be interviewed there".

### **Future Options**

Australia 21, a newly-formed non-partisan group focusing on shaping the future, has already published valuable sets of essays on current issues like climate change. In December 2013 it issued a set on *Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Finding a Better Way* (edited by Bob Douglas and Jo Wodak). It contains a range of views from different contributors, with academic, military, refugee, community, human rights, legal and religious perspectives. Plans are now proceeding for a Discussion Paper on a way forward, followed by a Roundtable in Parliament House, Canberra, mid-year to engage people from many backgrounds in responding to the current challenge of asylum and refugee concerns. The website is [www.australia21.org.au](http://www.australia21.org.au)

A particular approach that has been advocated by John Menadue of the Centre for Policy Development is to use the experience with Vietnamese refugees in the 1980s as a basis for constructing an orderly arrangement for those seeking asylum. This would involve (a) a progressive increase in the refugee and humanitarian intake, (b) agreements with countries from which people are fleeing (eg Sri Lanka, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and more recently Syria and Egypt) to create more orderly departures, (c) arrangements with transition countries including Malaysia and Indonesia to allow assessment of refugee status under UNHCR guidance, (d) progressive abolition of mandatory detention, and (e) more supportive rules for those who are living in the community (eg work rights). He sees it as essential that any change along these lines be the result of dialogue among politicians, government officials, and NGOs.

### **Quaker Action**

On 28 February 2013 Yearly Meeting Clerk issued a media release urging that asylum seekers receive humane treatment. Here is an excerpt:

Quakers believe that Australia can do much better in its response to asylum seekers, the Presiding Clerk of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia, Julian Robertson, said today. 'We regard Australians as capable of more

Compassion and support for people who have been through trauma and danger. Our political leaders should be willing to reinforce this with policies that are just And fair.'

He continued: 'The fact that the UNHCR and many human rights groups have spoken out about Australia's approach as in conflict with our obligations under the Refugee Convention is a further cause for concern. As a member of the UN Security Council, Australia should be upholding international standards of conduct rather than adopting a narrow interpretation of its responsibilities.'

In August 2013 Quakers wrote to the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd calling for a global and regional response to the flow of people from instability in many parts of the world, greater funding for UNHCR, and an increase in the humanitarian intake within Australia's migration program. Although there was no formal minute at YM 2014, Friends there did have informal discussions to share their own ideas and experience in supporting vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers.

Many Friends will be aware of the plans for a major series of rallies on the refugee/asylum seekers concern on Palm Sunday (13 April), and you are encouraged to make your presence felt as Quakers in co-operation with other concerned citizens. You are also encouraged to keep aware of the activities of other churches through the website [www.australianchurchesrefugeetaskforce@com.au](mailto:www.australianchurchesrefugeetaskforce@com.au)

QPLC believes it is desirable at this stage for Friends in different parts of Australia to take up with politicians and bureaucrats the issues that are of immediate concern in their own areas, and to let us know any action taken. We can then formulate a national response more adequately and advise the Presiding Clerk accordingly.

In addition, QPLC is to approach Canberra Meeting for financial support for Australia 21's Roundtable event, as the organisation depends largely on donations for its work. If any other regional Meeting would be interested in offering support, we can provide further details.

Canberra  
March 2014