



AUSTRALIAN CHURCHES
REFUGEE TASKFORCE



NCCA/ ACRT Palm Sunday Briefing 2021

Background:

The Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (ACRT) came together in early 2013 and is an initiative of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA). The Taskforce is committed to engage and advocate with asylum seekers and refugees in the national debate about Australia's treatment and attitudes towards them and the consistently changing government policies affecting them. This commitment is based on the strong Christian values of compassion, generosity and hospitality in response to people experiencing injustice and systematic deprivation of their human rights.

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” Matthew 25:40

Palm Sunday 28th March 2021:

Rallies will take place in cities and major regional centres across Australia on Palm Sunday to raise awareness of the continuing injustice and cruelty experienced by refugees and people who are seeking asylum. Slogans will be calling for 'Justice and a Fair Go for Refugees'. Church bells will ring for refugees.

There is still a group that want to retain the historical call for peace and justice of the Palm Sunday rallies. In Sydney, there is a specific call for 'peace not militarism', for the Australian Government to sign the Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapons and also a call to 'say no to racism'.

Summary of Key Justice Areas for Refugees:

- Permanent visas and family reunion for all refugees.
- Fair and timely assessment of all claims for refugee status.
- Basic income support for people in the community while their refugee status is assessed (if they are unable to find work to support themselves)
- Release of all Refugees from detention (#Timeforahome campaign)
- End offshore processing of refugees by bringing them here or allowing New Zealand to resettle them (#GameOver campaign)
- Community participation in welcoming and supporting refugees

Current Initiatives to address the Key Justice Areas:

Basic income support for people in the community while their refugee status is assessed (if they are unable to find work to support themselves)

This is a learning from the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020 – when all people on temporary visas residing in Australia were forced into poverty and destitution through the loss of jobs and denial of access to basic cash support and to Medicare.

The Red Cross published a report on Emergency Relief during COVID-19 (March – July 2020), in October 2020: <https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/0a4ca4bb-c5b9-4b6b-89e9-ff90df3a01fc/Australian-Red-Cross-COVID-19-TempVisa-Report-web.pdf.aspx>

Since 2019 up to 12,000 people seeking asylum in Australia have lost access to regular payments to help with basic living costs, casework support and access to torture and trauma counselling for those who are awaiting a decision about their immigration status (called Status Resolution Support Services). Related campaign was #DignityNotDestitution.

#Timeforahome Campaign

This is an online campaign being managed by the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. The right to a safe home is a basic human right. Everyone has the right to live, to be free, and to feel safe (article 3 of the Universal Declaration) and everyone has the right to live a decent life, which includes food, clothing, a home and medical care (article 25 of the Universal Declaration)¹. Over 140 organisations have added their voice to this campaign, which makes the following key points:

- Since 19 July 2013, the Australian government has enacted harmful policies against people seeking asylum, including indefinite detention for those arriving by boat.
- Around 260 people are still detained against their will in PNG and Nauru today.
- Over 1000 have been transferred to Australia for critical medical treatment and now live life in 'visa limbo'. Over 100 of these are still held in locked immigration detention centres and 'alternative places of detention' such as the Park Hotel Melbourne and Kangaroo Point hotel prisons.
- Parliamentary and departmental inquiries, UN investigations, reports by the Australian Human Rights Commission, and numerous whistle-blowers (including government doctors) have repeatedly told the story of systematic abuse, violence and medical neglect of people held in detention facilities. Tragically, 13 have died in these centres.
- It is time for the Government to release these people from detention and to resettle them into our community, so they can be safe and have a place to call home.

#Gameover

Gameover is an online campaign and petition, initiated by Amnesty International to achieve release and resettlement for the 264 people who remain in offshore detention (137 in PNG, 127 in Nauru). Former Socceroo and human rights advocate, Craig Foster, is the public face of the campaign. The USA, Canada, Switzerland, and New Zealand have stepped up to accept refugees from these offshore centres in recent years. Since 2013, the New Zealand government has offered to resettle 150 people per year. To date, the Australian government has inexplicably refused this offer. The #Gameover campaign calls on Australia to act now: "It's time to call 'Game Over' and get these people to safety so they can rebuild their lives." The Uniting Church in Australia is an official partner to Gameover, together with 48 others.

¹ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/commission-general/universal-declaration-human-rights-human-rights-your-fingertips-human>

Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (CRSI)

We know that Australians are willing and able to be more involved in supporting refugees into our communities, however Australia's current private sponsorship program is not designed to encourage widespread community participation in this important area. The CRSI recommends guiding principles for a new Community Support Program, which will enable members of the Australian community to sponsor visas for refugees who wish to rebuild their lives in Australia. The ACRT works together with the Refugee Council of Australia, Amnesty International, Save the Children, Welcoming Australia, Rural Australians for Refugees, and the Sanctuary Australia Foundation in this project.

References:

Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce <https://www.ncca.org.au/departments/acrt-2>

Australian Refugee Action Network <https://aran.net.au/campaigns/palm-sunday-2021/>

Game Over Campaign <https://gameover.org.au/>

Time for a Home Campaign <https://www.timeforahome.com.au/>

The end of detention we are free but we need to recover from all those years <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/07/the-end-of-detention-we-are-free-but-we-need-to-recover-from-all-those-years>

Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative <https://www.ausrefugeesponsorship.com.au/>