



Union Aid Abroad

APHEDA

The Hon Kevin Rudd MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
28th of April 2010

Dear Prime Minister,

We are writing to express our concern at the growing stance of indifference towards and demonisation of asylum seekers from both sides of Australian politics. Instead, Australian unions restate the need for strong political leadership from all sides of politics that recognises and deals with the push factors that cause people to seek asylum, and Australia's international obligations to protect the rights of those most vulnerable in our global community.

Political parties should not exploit fear and xenophobia through the dehumanisation of refugees. These attitudes have been building for more than six months, culminating in the recent policy change by the Australian Government to suspend the processing of all new asylum claims by Afghan and Sri Lankan nationals. In devising this approach to deter "boat people", the Government has successfully alienated thousands of people seeking refuge from persecution, and forsaken Australia's "fair-go" spirit.

The decision to reopen the isolated Curtin detention facility in Western Australia is also very concerning. We want to avoid a repeat of the politics of fear that overcame Australia in the period of 2001 to 2004 - a period that brought shame upon Australia internationally, and divided the nation. It also created a situation of intolerable misery and anguish for asylum seekers, including children who arrived in Australia only to be shipped off to the Pacific Solution, locked into desert-bound detention centres, or placed in limbo through Temporary Protection Visas.



In using refugees as pawns in an election game, Australia is failing in its obligations as a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1976 Protocol to not discriminate in the treatment of refugees on the basis of race, religion or country of origin (Article 3). Sri Lankans and Afghans are being singled out purely based on race. Asylum seekers should be assessed case by case and this blanket decision to suspend asylum claims ignores real security threats existing in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

The Sri Lankan Government's persistent harassment and intimidation of journalists and human rights activists, arrests of opposition party members and continued incarceration of tens of thousands of Tamil refugees highlights the continuing political and social instability in Sri Lanka. A recent US Department of Stateⁱ report notes Tamils in Sri Lanka are also victims to extrajudicial killings and disappearances.

In Afghanistan, civilian casualties remain high, with 2009 representing the highest number of civilians killed in the armed conflict, according to Human Rights Watchⁱⁱ. Ethnic and religious minorities, including the Hazara population - the largest percentage fleeing the country, remain at risk of persecution while journalists continue to face threats in the pursuit of truth.

Permanent migration - including the humanitarian and refugee program - has and will continue to play an enormous role in Australia's growth and prosperity. It is time to back the words of our national anthem about the boundless plains to share for anybody who has travelled across the high seas. We call on all sides of politics to show some compassion and humanity in a bipartisan way, and we urge the Australian Government to act now to uphold its international obligations and live up to its election promise of a humane immigration and refugee policy.

Yours faithfully,

*Australian Council of Trade Unions, **President Sharan Burrow***

*Australian Education Union, **Federal Secretary Susan Hopgood***

*Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, **National Secretary Dave Oliver***

*Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union, **Federal Secretary Brian Crawford***

*Australian Nursing Federation, **Federal Secretary Ged Kearney***

*Australian Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union, **National Secretary Allan Barden***

*Australian Services Union, NSW & ACT (Services) Branch, **Branch Secretary Sally McManus***

*Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union of Australia, **National Secretary Peter Tighe***

*CPSU – SPSF Group, **Federal Secretary David Carey***



Evatt Foundation, Secretary Chris Gambian

Finance Sector Union, National Secretary Leon Carter

Independent Education Union of Australia, Federal Secretary Chris Watt

Labor for Refugees (NSW & VIC), Convenor Linda Scott (NSW) and Secretary Robin Rothfield (VIC)

Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, National Secretary Louise Tarrant

Maritime Union of Australia, National Secretary Paddy Crumlin

Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, Federal Secretary Christopher Warren

National Tertiary Education Union, General Secretary Grahame McCulloch

The Textile Clothing & Footwear Union of Australia, National Secretary Michele O'Neil

Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA, Executive Officer Peter Jennings

Unions NSW, Secretary Mark Lennon

cc. All members of Parliament

ⁱ U.S. Department of State, *2009 Human Rights Report: Sri Lanka*, 11 March 2010, available at:
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136093.htm> [accessed 27 April 2010]

ⁱⁱ Human Rights Watch, *Letter to Australian Minister of Immigration Chris Evans on Processing New Asylum Claims from Sri Lanka and Afghanistan*, 14 April 2010, available at:
<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/04/14/letter-australian-minister-immigration-chris-evans-processing-new-asylum-claims-sri->[accessed 27 April 2010]