



Refugee Council of Australia

4 July 2013

Australia's doubling of Refugee Program praised in global resettlement forum

The staff of Australia's Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have deservedly won international praise for their efforts in achieving the doubling of Australia's Refugee Program during 2012-13, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) says.

Speaking at the end of the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) in Geneva, RCOA chief executive officer Paul Power said the expansion of Australia's Refugee Program from 6000 to 12,000 places was noted by consultation participants as the most significant global achievement in refugee resettlement in the past year.

"While RCOA has rightly expressed deep concern about many recent national policy changes which have stripped away important protections for people seeking asylum, we agree that the successful doubling of the government-UNHCR resettlement program deserves recognition as a significant humanitarian contribution," Mr Power said.

"The increase of the Refugee Program to 12,000 places was the major part of the expansion of the Refugee and Humanitarian Program to 20,000 places, recommended by the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers and adopted by the Australian Government on 13 August 2012.

"This decision left DIAC and UNHCR staff with the significant logistical challenge of doubling, at very short notice, their collective capacity to identify, interview and process the resettlement applications of refugees bound for Australia.

"The issuing of 12,000 Refugee Program visas before last weekend's close to the financial year was achieved through hard work and, at times, heroic efforts. UNHCR staff continued to keep offices functioning in Syria as bombing continued nearby, ensuring that Australian officials based in Jordan could continue videoconference interviews with Iraqi refugees applying for resettlement.

"Our organisation and our members have been advocating for years for a significant increase in refugee resettlement in view of the desperate circumstances of millions of the world's refugees. The brutal civil war in Syria, previously a safe haven for one million Iraqi refugees, has provided the starkest reminder of how refugee resettlement can be vital in saving lives."

This week's ATCR gathering in Geneva, which concluded overnight (Australian time), brought together more than 200 representatives of governments and NGOs in 29 countries and senior staff of UNHCR and other international bodies to discuss the planning and implementation of the global refugee resettlement effort.

UNHCR released its Global Resettlement Needs analysis for 2014, identifying 690,915 of the 10.5 million refugees under UNHCR's mandate as being in priority need of resettlement. The total number of resettlement places offered by government is expected to be only 86,000, most of them in the USA, Australia and Canada.

Government, NGO and UNHCR delegates applauded the Australian Government's announcement that it had achieved its goal of issuing 12,000 Refugee Program visas in 2012-13.

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The Refugee Council of Australia represents
non-government organisations and
individuals working with and for refugees
in Australia and around the world

Despite this, Mr Power said, many individuals involved in international refugee policy remained baffled by the contrast between Australia's impressive record in refugee resettlement and the harshness of its policies towards asylum seekers. Others were worried that some states were starting to copy aspects of Australian asylum policies.

NGO delegates, in their joint statement at the beginning of the meeting, expressed concern about the growing tendency of states "to play off resettlement against asylum and position resettlement as the 'preferred' or 'right' way to seek protection". "This attitude," the NGO statement said, "undermines the international system of protection by denigrating asylum; misrepresents the complementary role of resettlement in addressing protection needs; and ignores the fact that most refugees will never have access to resettlement."

Three Australian NGO representatives – Paul Power, Dr Melika Sheikh-Eldin (AMES Victoria and RCOA Board) and Cedric Manen (Settlement Council of Australia) – participated in the ATCR, along with Alfred Kamara, a former refugee from Liberia who, as Australia's designated refugee representative, spoke about his work in employment support with Access Community Services in Queensland. DIAC was represented by Jim O'Callaghan, Romany Nanayakkara, Kate O'Malley and Susan Love.

While the refugee crisis in the region surrounding Syria was a dominant theme, delegates discussed ways of improving access to resettlement for particular refugee populations, including those from Afghanistan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Colombia. Discussion also focused on separated children, women and girls at risk, gay and lesbian refugees, mental health issues and refugees' access to employment.

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