

## Australia's Humanitarian Program 2011–12 and beyond Discussion Paper December 2010

**Submission from RAMAG (The Refugee and Migrant Action Group) based in Caboolture in Queensland. We are a community volunteer organisation with a multicultural membership drawn from diverse backgrounds. Our organisation has been assisting refugees and migrants locally for over 10 years and is affiliated with the Moreton Bay Regional Council through their CARM Network.**

The points we wish to make are:

1. There is an immediate need to **decouple the onshore and offshore programs** & have **separate quotas for each**. This would negate the perception that "boat people" are "stealing" places from "more deserving" offshore applicants.
2. Departmental publicity needs to focus on the small & tightly controlled **numbers of refugees** (13,750 in 2009-10) in a total migration pool of 168,623 for the same pool. Numbers **need to rise** but this must be sold to the Australian people first and is therefore **a longer term aim**.
3. **Priority** should be highest for **those** deemed to be **most at risk**. Consideration should now be given to moving those refugees in the family reunion category into the general migration quota.
4. It is critically important that the **breaking up of (offshore) family groups be avoided**. This has caused RAMAG as a group the greatest concern in dealing with refugee families coming to our area. The best way to assimilate refugees & minimise mental health problems is to keep family groups together. To assist in this aim, we recommend that registered refugees retain the grouping that they had when registered with UNHCR. As resettlement often takes a very long time eligible children in UNHCR registered refugee families who achieve adulthood while waiting for resettlement should not be disadvantaged by any change of states. They should be considered to still be children when the assessment is done if their changed state would disadvantage their application or end up splitting the family group. **Family groups support each other – split families become dysfunctional.**
5. To strike a balance, maximum flexibility is needed so that **each case is able to be dealt with on its merits** in a humane and fair manner. Better liaison with volunteer & church support groups will help to establish this. The Australian community expects a more humane approach to the problem of refugees to be taken. Problems of settling in of refugees can then be more readily identified and dealt with by organisations and the community.
6. Better provision of information to asylum seekers at point of entry is needed. **Refugees** (and their advocates and sponsors) involved in cases being dealt with both on and off shore **need to be fully and better informed of progress**. This information should include legal & cultural aspects of Australian life, as well as well as complete, accurate and up to date information of what will happen to each individual in the short & medium term. Information vacuums are invariably filled by

rumours, leading to mental health problems, riots, self harm and suicides etc.

7. Where refugees are settled in groups (particularly in regional areas), **assistance should be given to the establishment and funding of volunteer support groups in the local community.** This assistance should also include establishment of classes in English and Australian culture & legal systems. Current community networks can assist in finding programs already available and in identifying and filling any gaps.

8. Many refugees that apply to come to Australia already have mental health issues because of trauma, separation, living conditions, uncertainty, dispossession and worry. **Mental health services in Australia need to be strengthened** to adequately deal with the needs of arriving refugees. This need also extends to the second generation of refugees growing up in Australia who have problems trying to meet the expectations of parents and relatives as well as those of fellow Australians. Refugee families cannot assimilate until their underlying mental health problems have been adequately addressed and dealt with. Many of the current failures in the system stem from this unmet need. The social integration of refugee children into Australian society should become a priority. This will in turn help their parents in the process.

Specifically addressing the points raised by the Department:

What should the priorities of the offshore SHP places be? Should immediate family continue to be the highest priority group? **No – risk status should be a priority and we support the minimum 12% of total numbers being *women at risk* and ask that this *category* now **be extended to include families at risk.****

- Are there alternative ways to identify and prioritise applicants who are in refugee-like situations, but do not have close family links to Australia? *It is essential for Australia to regain a position as a country that accepts refugees and treats them fairly. **Many refugees who do not fit this criteria will make excellent citizens – especially if they have community and political support already arranged for them in Australia prior to assessment.***
- How could immediate family places be “rationed” or prioritised within the caseload? *By separating out the family reunion groups who are not at immediate risk and making them eligible migrants and not refugees. **The proof required by refugees that they are at risk in their country of refuge or in their country of origin is often hard or impossible to obtain** because of bureaucracy, lack of resources, requests for bribes, corruption, language difficulties and isolation. A rigid application of the rules in this situation often excludes the very people most in need of a place as a refugee in Australia and a chance at a better life.*
- Should higher priority be given to those in the greatest need of resettlement? **Safety should be a priority in these applications.** *However being at risk in a foreign country is a hard thing to prove. Assessment of these people should include any letters emails and contacts they have made and written in the time they have been registered as refugees. Those without such a history should be viewed*

*suspiciously. Those who have made efforts to learn English should be scored more highly in their assessment.*

- Should a balance be struck between these competing priorities and if so, how could this balance be achieved? To achieve a balance and fairness **those registered with UNHCR for the longest time should be given some priority.** *Formation of a category which recognises this group and has a numerical quota will go a long way to showing Australia is being open and fair to those who have been displaced, have followed the rules, and have waited patiently in line for a place in Australia.*

By taking these measures, the Department will gain credibility with support groups that are already in place to assist refugees and will then have allies rather than critics in the efforts made to assist refugees gain entry to Australia. They will be better placed to sell their policies and have them explained to the wider community. A grant program to assist these community groups must be part of the continuing program in the period 2011-12. Together we can make the Humanitarian Program fair and equitable and together we can allay the fears (often unfounded) that the wider population has about the dangers that refugees pose. Australians want to offer refugees a fair go. They do want the program to allow in those that have waited patiently, aren't a threat to Australian security, and will work hard and not become a burden on society. Community groups are best placed to identify the needs these people have when they arrive and find the assistance that they need to become self sufficient and productive citizens.