



Senator Chris Evans
Leader of the Government in the Senate
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship

Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mrs Irwin *Julia*

Thank you for your letter of 26 November 2008 concerning a petition submitted to the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives in relation to Australian Government assistance for Iraqi Christians.

The petition asks that the House take serious note of the plight of Iraqi Christians, provide aid and relief for the refugees and give refuge to some of them in Australia.

The Government remains concerned and is well briefed about violence in Iraq and reports of persecution of minority groups, including Christians. While the Iraqi Constitution describes rights and protections for Iraq's minorities, regrettably, extremist groups in Iraq have demonstrated their will and ability to take Iraqi lives regardless. Minorities have been the victims of particularly vicious attacks, including the frequent bombing of Christian churches.

Australia continues to urge the Iraqi Government to do all it can to protect the human rights of all Iraqis. Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Steven Smith MP, raised Australia's concerns about the protection of human rights in Iraq when he met with Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Mr Barham Salih, in Baghdad in June 2008. The Government will continue to monitor human rights in Iraq and raise any concerns with the Iraqi government.

The Australian Government is committed to addressing the urgent humanitarian needs of internally displaced Iraqis and those who have fled Iraq to neighbouring countries. Since March 2003, Australia has spent over \$195 million on rehabilitation, capacity building and humanitarian projects to assist Iraqis, including providing support for Iraqi refugees and displaced persons.

The Government also provides assistance for displaced Iraqis through the Displaced Persons Program. The Program supports activities such as the provision of emergency humanitarian relief for displaced persons, support for education programs in refugee camps and the protection of vulnerable displaced persons.

In 2008–09 the Government provided an additional \$10 million specifically to help address the protracted situation of displaced Iraqis. This extra funding is being spent on projects supporting neighbouring and transit countries, creating protection space and enabling displaced Iraqis outside Iraq to settle with security and dignity pending long term resolution of their situation.

I appreciate the request that Australia provide resettlement places for Iraqi Christians. As you may be aware, Iraqi refugees are a priority group for resettlement under Australia's Humanitarian Program. In the last five years more than 8 700 humanitarian visas have been granted to Iraqi nationals in need of permanent resettlement. In 2008-09, the Humanitarian Program has been increased by 500 places to 13 500 places. The one-off increase of 500 places is specifically for Iraqi refugees in recognition of their critical resettlement needs. This is in addition to the existing allocation of places under the Humanitarian Program for the Middle East region, which already includes significant numbers of Iraqi nationals, including Iraqi Christians.

There are currently more than two million Iraqis displaced in neighbouring countries, many of whom are seeking international resettlement. You will appreciate that, given the finite number of places available under Australia's Humanitarian Program, many more people apply to be resettled than Australia can accept. In 2007-08, more than 47 000 people applied for resettlement under the Humanitarian Program for a total of 10 800 offshore places. This included applications from more than 21 700 Iraqi nationals, many of whom have relatives in Australia.

While Australia does not have the capacity to resettle all Iraqis who apply under the Humanitarian Program, Australia works closely with international organisations and countries of first asylum to ensure that effective protection is available.

Australia's Humanitarian Program is global and non-discriminatory and is focused on assisting people who are subject to persecution or substantial discrimination amounting to a gross violation of human rights. I can assure you that all applications for a humanitarian visa, including those lodged by Iraqi Christians, are assessed individually on their merits against legal requirements set out in the Migration Act and Regulations to ensure the places go to those individuals in greatest need of resettlement.

No religious group is given priority over another under the Humanitarian Program. Rather, the Government is committed to resettling those displaced Iraqi refugees who have been found by UNHCR to be particularly vulnerable and in need of third-country resettlement. This includes minority groups such as Christians and women at risk as well as those who have close family members in Australia.

As there is no provision in the Migration Regulations to grant humanitarian visas on the basis of religion, no statistics are recorded on the religion of persons granted humanitarian visas. My Department does, however, record information on religion for settlement purposes once visas have been granted. This information is available from the Settlement Database on the Department's website. Of the 1665 Iraqis who arrived under the Humanitarian Program in 2007-08, 45.4 per cent stated their religion as Christian, 38.7 per cent Muslim and 15.4 per cent Sabian Mandæan. It is expected that Christians and other minority groups will continue to be well represented in the Iraqi intake during 2008-09.

I trust this information is of assistance. Thank you for bringing the petition to my attention.

Yours sincerely

CHRIS EVANS

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