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The Hon Chris Bowen MP
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship

16 AUG 2011

The Hon John Murphy MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

RECEIVED
22 AUG 2011
PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Dear Mr Murphy

Thank you for your letter of 4 July 2011 concerning a petition submitted to the Standing Committee on Petitions on the decentralisation of population from cities to towns.

The petition addresses issues related to the 1951 Convention, potential migration from the South Pacific region and settlement locations of refugees and migrants, matters which fall within my responsibilities as Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. In accordance with Standing Order 209(b), please find attached a response to Committee on the issues raised in the petition.

Thank you for drawing this matter to my attention.

Yours sincerely

CHRIS BOWEN

Response to petition submitted to the Standing Committee on Petitions on the decentralisation of population from cities to towns

Suggestion that the Government succeed from the Refugees Convention

Australia takes its international treaty obligations seriously and has no plans to abandon these obligations. Indeed, in 2001 Australia joined with the international community to renew its commitment to the Refugees Convention.

As a member of the international community, Australia shares responsibility for protecting refugees worldwide and resolving refugee situations through the system of international refugee protection. A total of 147 countries are signatory to the *1951 Convention* and/or its *1967 Protocol*.

Regional settlement

The Australian Government understands the importance of balancing migration across Australia's metropolitan and regional areas, and has initiatives in place to promote migration to regional areas.

The Australian Government recognises that the settlement of refugees and migrants in regional areas has benefits for both refugees and migrants and the receiving communities. Regional settlement can provide refugees and migrants with good social and economic prospects, while at the same time reduce the load on services in cities, offset regional population decline and increase community diversity in regional areas.

It is however, important to note that, like Australian citizens, new entrants have a choice as to where they wish to live, and often move to larger cities because of the employment and education opportunities that larger cities can offer.

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship has directly settled humanitarian entrants in regional areas for some years now. Around 14,000 new humanitarian entrants are settled in Australia each year, 15-20 per cent of whom are directly settled in regional locations. Other migrants will decide to move to regional areas to benefit themselves and their families.

While the Australian Government is seeking to increase the number of humanitarian entrants who settle in regional centres, this can only occur where there are appropriate services, support from government agencies and support from the local community. In settling new refugees, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship needs to ensure it provides the best assistance possible to each person. Some refugees, for example, experience severe torture or trauma before arriving to Australia, and therefore need to be initially settled in a metropolitan city where they can access suitable counselling services. Others have existing 'links' in Australia, such as family, friends or a proposer, and are therefore settled near their links so that they can receive valuable post-arrival settlement and social support.

The Australian Government is committed to maintaining a skilled regional migration program that meets the current skill needs of regional employers, while ensuring the sustainable development and growth of regional communities.

As part of the 2011-12 Budget, the Government announced a number of regional measures which include:

- streamlining the permanent residence process for skilled migrants who are living and working in Australia on certain temporary visas;
- the introduction of Regional Migration Agreements, a new migration initiative that will bring together local employers, local and state governments, and unions to cooperate on addressing local labour market needs through a labour agreement arrangement which caters specifically to the needs of a particular region (rather than an industry or project);
- increasing the number of regional employer sponsored visa grants for 2011-12 to 16 000 places through the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme, which represents 12.5 per cent of the overall Skilled Migration program; and
- expanding the Regional Outreach Network to support a new Regional Engagement Strategy to actively disseminate information to better assist regional employers with identifying migration program options that suit their needs.

Assistance to South Pacific islanders

The Australian Government is aware of and concerned about the complex relationship between environmental degradation, climate change and migration. We note that Pacific island leaders, in *The Niue Declaration on Climate Change*, have made it clear that the first priority of Pacific peoples is to continue to live in their own countries, where possible, or in the Pacific region.

The Government believes that the most effective way to reduce the likelihood of climate change induced displacement is to reach a strong and effective global agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. For this reason, Australia is committed to playing its full and fair role in strong and decisive action to avert dangerous climate change.

Given that some impacts of climate change and other forms of environmental degradation are unavoidable and are already being felt by Pacific island countries, building communities' resilience to climate change and environmental impacts is vital. Sustainable development activities and measures directly aimed at adaptation are vital to securing livelihoods and helping people have the choice to remain in their homes wherever possible. The Australian Government provides substantial efforts to both support sustainable development while building resilience to climate change, mainly through its *International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative*.

There is also a long history of temporary and permanent migration in the Pacific, including between and within Pacific Island countries themselves and to other destinations such as Australia. Australia has in place policies to improve international mobility opportunities for Pacific islanders. These are not a relocation program, nor are the effects of climate change the primary reason for such assistance. Such programs are intended to bolster economic growth in the Pacific by helping to develop a more competitive regional workforce and strengthen the ability of Pacific islanders to access employment internationally, should they wish to move.

In the longer term, the possibility remains that migration could become an option for some Pacific islanders. In these circumstances, Australia would work in close consultation with the region to ensure that Pacific islanders' vital interests —economic, social and cultural— are addressed.