



Jesuit Refugee Service Australia

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MEDIA RELEASE

20 November 2009

For immediate release

Jesuit Refugee Service Australia has called on the Australian government to ensure that child refugees and asylum seekers continue to be treated according to humane immigration policy guidelines, especially those outlined in the 'New Directions in Detention' document released in July 2008.

Speaking on the occasion of today's Universal Children's Day 2009, the Director of JRS, Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, says that while some families are accommodated in the community on Christmas Island, others, including their children, are housed in detention-like conditions for periods of up to several months. This practice threatens to breach the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children should be detained as a last resort, and for the shortest possible period of time.

Following a recent visit to Christmas Island, Fr Bermudez-Goldman said that while asylum seekers—both children and adults—would be better served by the newly-planned, expanded Australian facility, the practice of offshore processing constituted a heavy burden for overstretched government and other staff providing services to the detainees.

'I was heartened by the level of compassion and care that many of the Department of Immigration staff and other service providers had for the asylum seekers, but the reality is that unfortunately we are asking too much from them and the limited resources available on the island.'

Fr Bermudez-Goldman said that while JRS commends the Australian government for the positive changes it has made in relation to the detention of children, it calls for alternative arrangements to be made for child refugees and asylum seekers and their families, in particular on Christmas Island.

'Initial detention at Christmas Island should be limited to identity, health and security checks. Once those checks are complete, asylum seekers, and first and foremost those with families, should be moved to the mainland, where greater resources and alternatives are available.'

JRS says the success of various pilot projects implemented on the Australian mainland in the past three years reinforces the advantages of alternative accommodation models. The pilot projects have resulted in positive welfare outcomes and have, on average, yielded a 94% compliance rate.

An estimated one million children are affected by immigration detention policies worldwide

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