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CAPSA urges Federal Government to do more to protect Afghan refugees

The Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA), representing leaders across the Catholic Church, health, education, refugee and social services, has called on the Morrison Federal Government to guarantee permanent visas for Afghans already in the country under temporary protection or currently being processed, and increase its intake of humanitarian refugees from Afghanistan.

The call follows a letter from CAPSA to Ministers Hawke and Andrews earlier this week on the situation in Afghanistan, and affirms our solidarity with sisters and brothers from Afghanistan.

Bishop of Parramatta, Vincent Long, called on the government to show the same compassion his own family was shown when fleeing Vietnam in the 1970s.

“I myself was a refugee once. I too fled by boat in the wake of the Fall of Saigon and the end of a protracted war in which Australia had been involved,” says Bishop Long. “My family was welcomed into Australia at a very difficult time. This is also a pivotal moment for us to step up and support those in need in Afghanistan as their country is irrevocably changed in front of their eyes. I hope to see the same level of bipartisan support for Afghan refugees now as there was for Vietnamese refugees then.”

CAPSA is co-convened by Jesuit Social Services and Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia with CEOs of both organisations committing to being part of the solution to supporting the increased intake if it occurs.

“The Catholic church, through its entities and its people, plays an active part in supporting people seeking asylum,” says Julie Edwards, CEO of Jesuit Social Services. “Our schools, health, refugee and social services have been assisting people fleeing humanitarian crises for years and continue to offer ourselves to help settle displaced people from Afghanistan.”

CAPSA Co-Chair and Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia Country Director Tamara Domicelj said that the Afghan diaspora, including refugees on temporary visas and people seeking asylum, contribute significantly to Australia and deserve certainty and dignity in their time of need.

“There are more than 5,100 Afghans, most of whom have been assessed as refugees, who demonstrably cannot return to Afghanistan, but are in long-term limbo. They have lived, worked, studied, volunteered and contributed to Australia for up to ten years and must be granted permanent protection visas so that they can rebuild their lives permanently,” said Ms. Domicelj

Afghanistan already faced a serious humanitarian crisis due to the impacts of COVID-19, prolonged conflict and climate change, now the Taliban’s seizure of control in Afghanistan places ethnic and religious minorities, ex-government officials, foreign embassies, and international NGOs and others at risk of targeted persecution. Horrifying accounts are already emerging of atrocities including extrajudicial executions, and the forced marriage of women and girls.

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This reality raises serious fears for members of the diaspora with parents, siblings, children, and other relatives still in Afghanistan.

“It is our collective duty as a society to foster and uphold the unity of the family, and in the context of Afghanistan, it includes enabling access to family reunion for refugees and members of the diaspora,” said Bishop Long.

CAPSA supports calls from Archbishop Coleridge and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to provide at least 20,000 humanitarian places for people fleeing Afghanistan.

CAPSA welcomes the Federal Government’s ongoing efforts to evacuate locally engaged employees and humanitarian visa holders in Afghanistan and acknowledge reports that the government is considering prioritising refugees from Afghanistan in the 2021-22 humanitarian intake but stress that urgent action is needed now and that more can be done to provide safety to men, women and children caught in the conflict.

“Between 1976 and 1982 Australia re-settled nearly 70,000 Indochinese and approximately 80,000 came afterwards via the orderly departure scheme and immigration channels established by the Fraser Government,” said Bishop Long.

“We have an opportunity now to provide hope and safety to tens of thousands of people at significant risk. As Pope Francis said in 2017 when speaking of people seeking asylum: ‘Defending their inalienable rights, ensuring their fundamental freedoms and respecting their dignity are duties from which no one can be exempted’.”

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