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Australia: "Pacific solution" one year on -- punishing the refugees

Although Australia has been automatically detaining asylum seekers who arrive without papers for ten years, the 'Tampa' boat incident a year ago showed just how desperate the government is to keep refugees out in the name of combatting people smuggling, Amnesty International said today releasing a new report on Australia's refugee policies.

"Church leaders, doctors, psychiatrists, lawyers, human rights groups and the UN have all asked the government to find a solution to the problem of people smuggling which does not compromise human dignity and health. For how much longer can the government refuse to listen?" the organization asked.

"The so-called 'Pacific Solution' -- diverting boats of asylum seekers to Pacific islands in exchange for aid and money -- is sending the wrong message to countries struggling to host refugees and respect human rights."

Today, at least 1,834 asylum seekers from the Tampa and other boats subsequently intercepted by Australia are dispersed across the Pacific region. Five hundred and eighty of them are recognised refugees. Hundreds remain detained in Australian-funded camps run by the International Organisation for Migration.

"The government has its priorities skewed; addressing the problem of international people smugglers should not mean punishing those they exploit. The problem requires international cooperation which targets the range of factors that have given rise to the lucrative smuggling market, including the root causes of refugee movements."

Asylum seekers who arrive on Australia's mainland without authorisation also continue to be punished for seeking refuge by being locked up in detention centres, sometimes for years at a time, without any chance to appeal for their release. The fact that up to 80 per cent of detainees have been granted refugee status shows that most are people who have fled human rights abuses.

Detention for limited, reviewable periods to check security and identity may in some cases be permissible, but prolonged mandatory detention for an unspecified time without judicial review is unquestionably a human rights violation. It has a serious impact on the mental and physical health of thousands of individuals. Humane alternatives to barbed wire camps are being all but ignored while millions of dollars continue to be spent on new detention centres.

A recent UN report found that detention conditions in the infamous Woomera detention centre

"offended human dignity". "However as with previous UN findings on Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, the government has yet again closed its eyes and ears to criticism, flatly rejecting the report," Amnesty International said. "The Australian Government is a lone voice in suggesting its human rights record is acceptable."

Amnesty International's report looks back at some of the developments since the Tampa incident, which coincided with a global backlash against refugees and migrants following the 11 September attacks in the USA. It calls on governments to share -- not shift -- responsibilities for refugee movements, to address their root causes and not just the symptoms, and to end arbitrary detention of asylum seekers and refugees as practised or funded by Australia.

"Addressing international people smuggling cannot justify letting children suffer behind barbed wire for years or splitting families on temporary visas. With US \$ 1.5 billion made available for Australia's aggressive 'border protection' policy, Australia can afford to find more humane ways of treating asylum seekers coming without visas."

For a copy of the report please see <http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/asa120092002>.

For fact sheets on refugees in Australia visit www.amnesty.org.au

For more information phone Amnesty International in London +44 7778 472 173 or in Sydney +61 413 028 191

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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