

5 December 2001

AI Index ASA 12/010/2001 - News Service Nr. 215

Australia: Asylum seekers - where to now?

Returning from a research mission to Nauru, Amnesty International delegate Dr John Pace said today that, "Off-loading asylum-seekers onto Pacific island nations is an unsustainable and inhumane policy which must be urgently addressed."

The recently-elected Australian government must seriously consider the consequences of its dispersal policy. "While the world has been focused on the humanitarian and refugee crisis unfolding in and around Afghanistan, the Australian government has been sending boatloads of Afghans and other asylum-seekers around the Pacific," Dr Pace added.

"The policy has clearly failed to stop desperate asylum-seekers trying to reach Australia, and the people smuggling rings have not been broken. While the government has been creating a 'fortress Australia', hundreds of men, women and children fleeing persecution and attempting to reach safety, are being arbitrarily detained in camps and on boats, often in very poor conditions."

Moreover Dr Pace added, "Diverting boats to other countries in exchange for aid and money amounts to a trade in human misery. The Australian government should instead increase efforts towards an international solution that tackles root causes of refugee movements and people smuggling. It should treat asylum-seekers fairly and humanely, and not push boats away from Australian waters."

Following his mission to Nauru, Dr Pace met with the Australian government to discuss its plans for the asylum-seekers. The Immigration Minister, Phillip Ruddock, refused to disclose what would happen to them

after their asylum claims had been processed. Amnesty International is calling on the government to publicly reveal its long term plans.

An international conference hosted by The University of New South Wales's Centre for Refugee Research will open today to examine the effectiveness of the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees and clarify Australia's obligations as a member of the international community.

The Centre for Refugee Research Director, Eileen Pittaway, said, "Governments have been reacting to the problems of unprecedented forced migration and people movement with increasingly punitive measures. The ways in which the Refugee Convention is interpreted and applied is clearly failing. We have to explore new and more effective ways to provide protection for these people."

Press Conference

A press conference on Amnesty International's mission to Nauru, headed by Dr John Pace, former secretary of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights will be held at:

1.00 pm Thursday December 6, 2001
Arcade Room, Matthews Arcade
Gate 9, High Street, University of NSW
Sydney, Australia

Joining Dr Pace will be representatives from Amnesty International Australia. Eileen Pittaway, Centre for Refugee Research, will be present to discuss the International Refugee Conference.

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