

Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia)



National Office: PO Box 1379, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia
Level 2, 161 Barry St, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia
p: +61 (0)3 8344 1637 f: +61 (0)3 8344 1638
e: mapw@mapw.org.au w: www.mapw.org.au
ABN: 15 779 883 661

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Senator the Hon Chris Evans
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Parliament House
Canberra, ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

Re: Humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka and asylum seekers

I write on behalf of the Medical Association for Prevention of War, an organisation of doctors and health professionals working to prevent war by addressing its causes and consequences.

We are deeply concerned about the evolving humanitarian crisis involving people fleeing the recent devastating war in Sri Lanka and its aftermath. We note that these people are escaping a situation where there has been truly shocking violence, which most of us in Australia can barely imagine. People seek refuge in other lands because conditions at home are unbearable.

The first phase in Australia's response to seaborne asylum-seekers occurred at the end of the Indochina war. Our response was generous, responsible and we were key contributors to an international effort that resettled more than 1.5 million refugees, with more than 100,000 settling in Australia. As Australia has taken a prominent role in the recent wars which have helped generate millions of refugees in Iraq and Afghanistan", for us to then turn away those fleeing war would be contemptible.

The number of asylum claims rose globally by 28 per cent to 839,000 last year, yet Australia accepts only a minute proportion of the world's refugees. Eighty per cent of the world's refugees are hosted by developing countries: Pakistan, Syria, Iran and Jordan. Meanwhile, the United States received 49,600 applications for asylum, France 35,400, Canada 34,800, Britain 30,500, and Italy 30,300. Australia received a total - including all people arriving by boat and plane - of 4500 asylum claims.

The current penalising of people who arrive by boat violates Australia's international obligations. The excision and offshore processing regime establishes a two-tiered and unfair system. We support the recent recommendation of the Human Rights Commission Christmas Island report that laws excising offshore territories be overturned immediately.

We further note that Australia has come to a recent agreement pertaining to asylum-seekers with the Government of Indonesia. Unlike Australia, Indonesia is not a signatory to the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees. This means that asylum seekers taken to Indonesia will not be able to seek protection from the Indonesian Government, and will not be granted many of the rights that asylum seekers are entitled to under international law.

We deplore talk and plans for harsher measures: the recent surge of refugees is mostly Sri Lankan because of the war there, not because of the changes to Australia's immigration laws. Evidence indicates that the situation for Tamils in Sri Lanka is appalling: hundreds of thousands of people hemmed together, unhygienic living conditions, with inadequate public health measures and ongoing repression by government security forces. According to Amnesty International, over one quarter of a million displaced people, including at least 50,000 children, are being accommodated in 41 camps.

The refugee-generating nature of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and now Sri Lanka reinforces the imperative to resolve conflicts without warfare, especially as global warming aggravates the problem. The arrival of a small number of people fleeing persecution requires an evidence-based and humane response. We urge that the Australian government address the arrival of asylum seekers in a humanitarian fashion, and in line with international human rights standards.



We encourage the Sri Lankan Government to

- end restrictions on liberty and freedom of movement and enable the hundreds of thousands of Tamils displaced by the recent war to return to their homes and livelihoods
- ensure that the detention camps are of a truly civilian nature and administered by civilian authorities, rather than under military supervisions
- give immediate and full access to national and international organisations and observers, including aid agencies, in order to monitor the situation and provide a safeguard against human rights violations

We request that the Australian Government

- urge the Sri Lankan Government to take the above steps, and
- advocate for an independent international investigation into allegations of human rights violations and war crimes in the closing stages of the civil war

In addition, negotiation is required to address the Tamils' claims of long-standing racial discrimination, and other matters relevant to the conflict. The United Nations is well placed to provide such mediation, and we urge you to promote such a process.

We ask you to act quickly so that further suffering of innocent people can be avoided, and this conflict resolved.

Yours sincerely



Dr Bill Williams
President, Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia)

CC:

The Hon. Kevin Rudd, MP; Prime Minister of Australia,
The Hon. Malcolm Turnbull, MP; Leader of the Opposition,
The Hon. Stephen Smith, MP; Minister for Foreign Affairs,
The Hon. Julie Bishop, MP; Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs,
The Hon Brendan O'Connor, MP, Minister for Home Affairs,
The Hon Sussan Ley, MP; Shadow Minister for Justice and Customs,
The Hon Sharman Stone, MP; Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship.