



Asylum seekers and refugees on Manus Island and Nauru

For more than four years, asylum seekers and refugees on Manus Island and Nauru have endured ongoing uncertainty, psychological suffering, and conditions that are inhumane and degrading. The Society has consistently raised concerns about offshore processing and argued for a more humane and compassionate approach.

Four years after these camps reopened, more than 1,000 people remained stranded on Manus Island and Nauru. Recent policy developments have heightened fears among those held offshore and exposed them to a greater risk of violence and harm. We fear that, unless urgent action is taken, further critical incidents and loss of life are inevitable.

We are encouraging Vincentians to write to their Federal MPs, urging them to take action to end the suffering and further harmful incidents. Further information about this issue, and how to contact your local MP, are provided below.

Why are we concerned?

- ***Overwhelming evidence of abuse, harm and neglect***

There is overwhelming evidence of the harms and suffering endured by those detained offshore. More than seven men have died, rates of mental illness are catastrophically high, and there are substantiated cases of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Five Parliamentary and Departmental inquiries, more than six UN investigations, several reports by the Australian Human Rights Commission, and numerous whistle-blower accounts have repeatedly told us the same horrific truth – the offshore camps are unsafe, inhumane, and profoundly damaging to the health and wellbeing of those stranded there.

- ***Recent deterioration in conditions***

The situation on Manus Island is tense and precarious. Several Vincentians have visited the Island in recent months, and their accounts paint a disturbing picture of deepening despair, escalating tensions and ongoing threats to health and safety. Such concerns have been underlined by the recent death of an Iranian man and a spate of machete attacks on refugees, with several refugees requiring medical evacuation for treatment of their injuries.

The Australian Government is closing down the Manus Island camp and has announced that services and security will be withdrawn by October 2017. The planned closure of the Centre, along with the announced withdrawal of medical care, torture and trauma support and security services, is exacerbating a highly stressful situation. The authorities have tried to coerce people into relocating to the Manus Island township of Lorengau, or elsewhere in PNG, by cutting off power, water and essential services. Many of the 700 or so men who remain on Manus fear for their safety outside the Centre, particularly in the wake of recent violent incidents.

- ***Ongoing uncertainty and the lack of a durable solution***

After more than four years, the fate of the men, women and children on Manus Island and Nauru remains uncertain. Most have been assessed to be refugees, yet the Australian Government has failed to provide a safe and appropriate place for them to be resettled.

Manus Island and Nauru are not safe or appropriate places for resettling refugees. The UN has stated that the sustainable integration of refugees into the PNG community “will raise formidable challenges and protection concerns.” Early attempts to resettle a handful of men from Manus elsewhere in PNG were fraught and unsuccessful, and the PNG Prime Minister stated that his country does not have the resources and infrastructure to resettle refugees.



Similarly, the UN has argued that the health, educational, child protection and welfare, and social and vocational needs of refugees on Nauru “grossly exceed” the capacity of Nauruan services. According to the UN, refugees on Nauru face ongoing discrimination and there are “grave concerns about inadequate protection measures for woman and children in Nauru”.

The Australian Government rejected an offer from New Zealand to resettle 150 refugees from Manus Island and Nauru, but in November 2016 the Australian Government announced it had struck a resettlement deal with the United States. Ten months later, not a single refugee has been resettled in the US. However, on 20 September, around 50 refugees from Manus and Nauru were informed that they would be resettled in the US.

While the announcement that some refugees will be resettled in the US is welcome, it doesn't resolve the uncertainty and fear for the overwhelming majority of men, women and children who remain stranded on Manus and Nauru. While the full details of the US resettlement deal are unclear, the Government has indicated that the US will not provide enough places to resettle all of those found to be refugees on Manus and Nauru.

While most on Manus and Nauru have been found to be refugees, there are a small number whose claim for asylum has been rejected. This includes stateless people, who are not recognised as a citizen by any country and cannot return to their country of origin. The Australian Government is proposing to incarcerate this group indefinitely, and has funded the construction of a \$20 million facility for this purpose on the outskirts of the PNG capital, Port Moresby.

What are we asking for?

Four years after the Australian Government recommenced offshore processing, it is unconscionable that people continue to languish on PNG and Nauru. Beyond the reports of physical and sexual abuse, inadequate medical attention and degrading living conditions, the extinguishment of hope and endless wait has pushed people to the edge.

As the situation on the ground deteriorates, there is a real threat of further serious harm. We are urging the Australian Government to act urgently to avert any further tragedies and to provide a durable and safe solution for resettling refugees:

- To prevent an escalation of the crisis, the Australian Government must maintain **adequate healthcare, security and other critical services**. Any further reduction of fundamental support for refugees and asylum-seekers in PNG or Nauru would add to the already serious health and security risks.
- The Australian Government must end the uncertainty and **provide a safe, appropriate and permanent option for resettling those still on Manus Island and Nauru**.

Australia's treatment of people seeking asylum ought to reflect our collective values of solidarity, compassion, respect for human dignity, and our desire to do good – not harm. We have consistently urged the Federal Government to bring the people held on Manus and Nauru to Australia and to grant permanent protection to those found to be refugees.



Why write to your Federal Member of Parliament (MP)?

Letters are one of the most simple and effective ways to engage your Member of Parliament (MP) about an issue you care about. While the political debate on asylum seekers and refugees may seem deeply polarised and entrenched, MPs tend to pay close attention to mail from constituents.

The Society has a long history of supporting migrants and refugees, and we have consistently called for a more compassionate asylum seeker policy. Although our public advocacy at the national level is important, raising issues as a 'grassroots' constituent and community member can have a powerful impact and shouldn't be underestimated. This point has been emphasised to us by Federal Parliamentarians from both sides of politics who support a more humane and just asylum seeker policy.

How to write to your MP

▪ Contacting your local MP

You can find your MP and their contact details on the Parliamentary website at http://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members.

A consolidated list of the names and postal address of MPs in each state and territory can also be found at <http://bit.ly/2xb85e2>.

▪ Writing the letter

To help you write to your MP, we have prepared a letter template which can be found at <http://bit.ly/2ymkljv>.

Although you can communicate with your MP via email, letters that are printed and sent via the post tend to have more impact and are more likely to receive a personalised response.

Don't forget to include your name and contact details, so that your MP can respond to your letter. You may also like to add a few sentences to personalise the letter and to emphasise why Australia's treatment of asylum seekers is an issue that is important to you.

There are certain protocols on how to address your MP when writing to them. For details, see these [Guidelines for Contacting Senators and Members](#).

For further information or assistance

If you have any questions or require additional information, you can contact Corinne Dobson at the National Office on (02) 6202 1200, or via email at policy@svdp.org.au. We would also welcome any feedback or information about responses you get from your MP.

The information provided in this briefing, along with links to the letter template and contact details of MPs, can be found at our website at <http://bit.ly/2xNfiBF>.

Further information about the Society's policy on asylum seekers and refugees, and our media releases and ongoing advocacy on this issue, can be found at https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Our_Impact/Asylum_Seekers_Migrants_Refugees/.