

CASE STUDY 2 – A PRICE TOO HIGH

Oxfam Australia and A Just Australia have formed a partnership to launch a new report called, *'A Price Too High: The cost of Australia's approach to Asylum Seekers.'*

The report's executive summary states:

In the six years since the Tampa crisis in August 2001, Australian taxpayers have spent more than \$1 billion to process less than 1,700 asylum seekers in offshore locations – or more than half a million dollars per person.

Most, if not all, of these asylum seekers have paid a substantial personal toll through poor mental and physical health and wellbeing. There have also been detrimental impacts on Australia's democratic and legal system, Australia's regional relationships and the international system of protection of refugees and asylum seekers.

This report – a joint project of A Just Australia and Oxfam Australia analyses the costs of the policy known as the "Pacific Solution". It critiques government claims that the policy is an efficient and effective means of achieving refugee protection and immigration control.

The costs examined in the report are human costs, financial costs, cost to Australian rule of law and democratic system, costs to the region and the cost to the international system of protection.

Human Cost:

- Detainees held in offshore locations often bear the brunt of the policies through poorer mental health and general well-being, both in the immediate and longer term.
- There are also higher costs borne by the broader Australian community as a result of having to integrate people who have been damaged by prolonged isolation in offshore processing centres.
- Medical studies, figures from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), testimony from staff and former asylum seekers on Nauru all paint a shocking picture of psychological damage for the detainees – including 45 people engaged in a serious hunger strike, multiple incidents of actual self-harm and dozens of detainees suffering from depression and other psychological conditions each year and being treated with anti-depressants or anti-psychotic medication.
- A lack of hospital infrastructure and a lack of timely access to adequate physical health care saw at least 40 people airlifted to Australia from Nauru for medical treatment. A 26-year old asylum seeker with no known physical or mental health problems died on Nauru in August 2002.

- The majority of detainees have spent two years on Nauru, with a smaller number being held for up to six years. As one Iraqi refugee told the authors: “Two years? It was 2,000 years. Every moment was like a year.”

Financial Cost:

Offshore processing in Nauru, Manus Island and Christmas Island has amounted to at least \$1 billion since 2001. By comparison, the latest estimates from DIAC suggest that to process 1,700 asylum seekers for 90 days each at Villawood detention centre in Sydney would have cost around \$35 million.

Regional cost – the cost to Australia’s aid program:

- Since the Tampa crisis of 2001 the aid program to Nauru has ballooned. Between 1992 and 2001, Australia only gave \$24.6 million in aid to Nauru. From the establishment of the detention centres in late 2001 until mid-2006, Australia gave over \$123 million in aid.
- Increases in Australian Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) have been directly tied to the Pacific Solution on Nauru.
- Nauru’s Foreign Minister has stated that money provided in the early years of the Pacific Solution under the previous government of President Rene Harris, was “basically just money poured into Nauru in order to ensure that the processing centre remains on Nauru.”
- Analysis of the 2005-07 MOU raises serious questions about the focus and priority of Australia’s aid program in Nauru, with serious imbalances in the allocation of aid. For example, from 2005 - 06, the aid program allocated \$6.6 million for the Police Development Program, but only \$2.1 million for health.

Cost to international system of protection

- The Pacific Solution fails to uphold Australia commitment under international law to provide for non-refoulement of refugees – the principle under international law that forbids sending a refugee back to a place where s/he might face persecution – and for the principle of asylum. Australia’s failure to respect these principles undermines the integrity of the international system.
- Under the Pacific Solution, there have been cases of refoulement of asylum-seekers to places where they faced danger and persecution, as documented in the report *Deported to Danger*.

- According to DIAC figures, 58 per cent of those found to be refugees or humanitarian cases on Nauru and Manus Island between September 2001 and February 2007 have been offered places in Australia (616 out of 1064 refugees and humanitarian cases). This does not adequately fulfill Australia's national responsibility towards those claiming asylum in Australia.
- Various member states of the European Union, notably the United Kingdom, have been considering moving toward an offshore processing regime premised on the Australian approach.

Recommendations

Based on this study, A Just Australia and Oxfam Australia believe there is a need for urgent reform of Australia's asylum seeker policies.

We believe it is critical that the Australian government:

1. End the "Pacific Solution" and the offshore detention and processing of asylum-seekers on Nauru, Manus Island and Christmas Island. Instead, asylum-seekers reaching excised areas of Australia by boat should be processed in mainland Australia in the same way as other asylum-seekers.
2. Initiate an Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) performance audit into the full financial costs involved in offshore detention, processing and boat interception policies – including Christmas Island as well as Nauru and Manus Island - across all relevant Government departments.
3. Improve processing standards to ensure appropriate access to legal assistance, medical care and social support, consistent with previous changes to Australia's refugee determination system outlined in the Palmer, Comrie and Commonwealth Ombudsman's reports and inquiries by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) - for however long offshore processing does continue.
4. Ensure that asylum-seekers currently being held on Nauru have their claims processed quickly and be offered resettlement in Australia if they are successful in their claims, recognising that resettlement in the United States or other countries represents an evasion of Australia's responsibilities towards those seeking protection.
5. Transform the overseas development assistance program to Nauru, following the permanent closure of the detention centres, in order to address Nauru's long term development needs rather than Australia's domestic political interests. The aid program should focus on the priorities of the Millennium Development Goals, re-focused on poverty alleviation, primary health and basic education needs in Nauru.

6. Engage in research to determine whether excision laws and offshore processing has impacted upon numbers of unauthorised arrivals. While there is a significant body of evidence to show the negative impacts of offshore processing, there has been no research conducted on the purported positive impacts claimed by both major political parties - that excision and offshore processing specifically reduces boat arrivals, thus reducing the number of people risking their lives in a boat journey to Australia. The evidence showing negative outcomes of this policy should be enough to urge policy makers to investigate whether this unsubstantiated policy goal is actually being attained.

Questions:

- What are your three key media messages?
- Where should the report launch take place – what day and time?
- Who should be the spokesperson?
- What difficult media questions should be anticipated?