



media release

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Asylum-seeker regional processing idea needs careful handling, says overseas aid peak

The idea of a regional processing centre for asylum-seekers has implications for Australia's development assistance program and requires respectful conversations with partners in the region, says the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), peak body for Australian overseas development agencies.

Australia, as the richest country in the region, should not be diverting asylum-seekers to the least developed countries in our part of the world," said Dr Susan Harris Rimmer, ACFID Advocacy Manager.

"The proposal to open a regional processing centre, if handled well, could be the start of a truly regional and cooperative approach if it were to also focus on long-term durable regional solutions for asylum-seekers. A regional solution requires the involvement of Indonesia and Malaysia, and will also require very close human rights scrutiny".

Dr Harris Rimmer warned that if the reality ended up being vast amounts of money injected into a fragile country to keep vulnerable people in detention for long periods of time, without a strong focus on finding solutions and without building local capacity in immigration, justice and human rights monitoring, then it would be a backwards step both for asylum-seekers and for the local community.

"This policy idea also has implications for Australia's aid budget. Under the Howard Government, high levels of aid money channelled through Nauru and Manus Island distorted the focus of Australia's official development assistance program. For example, after the Tampa crisis of 2001 the aid program to Nauru ballooned from \$24.6 million in aid between 1992 and 2001, to over \$123 million in aid from late 2001 until mid-2006. It cost the Australian taxpayer more than \$500,000 per person to process fewer than 1,700 asylum-seekers. Most of the asylum seekers involved in the Pacific Solution were recognised as refugees and were resettled in Australia."

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