



Darwin Asylum Seeker Support and Advocacy Network

About Us

Darwin Asylum Seekers Support and Advocacy Network (DASSAN) was established in mid-2010 in response to growing concerns about asylum seekers in immigration detention in Darwin. DASSAN now has over 450 members who provide voluntary support to people in detention through various activities, including visiting individuals in detention, letter writing, coordinating community donations and running community education events. DASSAN members also advocate on behalf of individuals in detention when requested and against mandatory detention in general. DASSAN's membership is made up of people from a wide range of backgrounds with varied political views and religious beliefs.

DASSAN acknowledges the step forward in terms of the formation of an expert panel (the panel) to provide a report on the best way forward for Australia to prevent asylum seekers risking their lives on dangerous boat journeys to Australia. In the spirit of participation DASSAN wishes to submit the following information for consideration as part of our contribution to the process.

DASSAN recognizes the issues are complex and we understand that whilst there is conflict, political instability or oppression there can be no final solutions. That does not mean there cannot be the view that where we participate in conflict we need to be investing equally in the idea of peace and stability, if not more so.

Dassan submits the following

Review of issues and detailed analysis of the reasons that lead people to undertake the dangerous journey by boat and a realistic and concrete attempt to address those issues.

- Addressing such questions as to why they are making this decision to risk their lives rather than waiting for offshore processing.
- Addressing **Issues of safety in relation to those waiting** extended periods of time in regions beyond their country of origin that are unsafe and unsustainable.
- Looking at issues around **stateless persons**, who when trapped in their country of birth or residence have no capacity to make application for refugee status despite being unrecognized as a citizen of any country.
- Addressing the fact that by July of this year we have accepted less than half of the 300 that Australia committed to for 2012 from Indonesia. **Immediately commencing the settlement process** for 1,000 refugees from Indonesia and 4,000 from Malaysia.
- Improvements to the present system of **family reunion** (including de-linking the onshore and offshore quotas) so that the wait isn't so long that family

members are left with little choice but to board a boat.

- **Increasing our annual refugee intake** from its current quota.
- **Increasing our funding to UNHCR and regional neighbours for specific purposes around asylum seekers/refugees.** Ensuring that distribution of funding is monitored and acquitted in a responsible manner and not just used in a punitive way.
- **Evaluation of current search and rescue methods for boats in distress** for the purposes of addressing gaps in current processes and procedures, in order to save lives.
- **Improving the legal issues and waiting times** around family reunion so individuals who arrive by boat are less likely to attempt to bring their families in the same manner.
- **Rejecting offshore processing** given questions around the efficacy of current proposal. Issues regarding statelessness, signatories to refugee conventions and safety concerns are not addressed in either of these policies. Adequate protections of individuals who are already vulnerable are not being addressed. Nor is the assurance that there will be adequate monitoring of systems to ensure that there will be protections and a system of honest processing of asylum claims (by external and impartial monitors).
- **Rejection of Malaysian solution as a viable alternative**, given the previous high court decision and the risks posed to those who would be returned to Malaysia. The government has already shown it has difficulty reaching its promises regarding quotas (eg: taking 300 from Indonesia) so additionally we would add that there is no guarantees that the government would fulfill its side of the agreement. It is also abhorrent to think that Australia could engage in a people swap arrangement that may endanger the lives of vulnerable people. Malaysia is not a signatory to the refugee convention and it the conditions and punishments within the walls of its detention system are well known.
- We would additionally **reject plans to turn boats back** given the chances of substantial increase in deaths at sea, and the violation of various International conventions to which Australia is a signatory. The lack of support from Indonesian authorities, Chief of Australian Navy and the UNHCR also support the idea that this is not a viable means of addressing the issues.

DASSAN supports the idea of the pursuit in the long term ideal of a framework that is not an unconsidered, knee jerk response, but something that is well researched , well resourced and a safe alternative to risking lives at sea. We would ask that time and attention be put to having an intelligent debate about what the framework could look like, through consultations of ALL stakeholders including those of refugee background.

We would argue that the politicization of vulnerable people is an unacceptable act and a real attempt must be made to re-frame the issue so that scare-mongering using a highly vulnerable group of traumatized individuals is no longer seen as a viable means of addressing a highly complex and world-wide problem. Australia is in fact a minor player in the issue of numbers of arrivals supposedly pouring over our borders.

The Australian government and opposition have demonized refugees, as a way of political point scoring and in doing so have failed the Australian public, through the perpetuation of myths and half truths. Australia needs to take responsibility in how it can more intelligently approach the debate and the development of a regional

framework that protects people fleeing from war, persecution and torture. For these people leaving home and family to start again in a completely new place is not a choice but a necessity for survival.

Australia has standing in the international community but the senseless politicization of the issues around boat arrivals diminishes our reputation as a country.

The costs of detention outweigh significantly the more humane means of processing people in a fair, sustainable manner within the community; similar to that which is undertaken with asylum seekers who arrive by other means. We can learn from what has gone on before, both within Australia and internationally, in relation to the methods of addressing the issues of asylum seekers .

We also want to ensure that it is noted that individuals from backgrounds of trauma and torture are further harmed in our current systems, as the process of detention further compounds those issues. Not only is their suffering magnified and prolonged, but the ultimate cost to health services in this country is unnecessarily increased.

We must recognize that asylum seekers are a long term and ongoing issue across the globe and not something restricted to Australia.