



Refugee Council of Australia

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Operation Sovereign Borders an immature response to serious humanitarian challenges

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) today called on both major political parties to pull back from the race to the bottom on asylum policy, warning tougher policies are jeopardising the changes needed to find safe pathways to refugee protection in the Asia-Pacific region.

RCOA chief executive officer Paul Power said the Federal Opposition's decision to appoint a three-star general to head a military operation to expel asylum seekers travelling by boat to Australia was an immature and inappropriate response to the serious humanitarian challenges facing the region.

"Operation Sovereign Borders is yet another deterrence policy that punishes vulnerable people and presents Australia to the world as a self-absorbed nation, ignorant of the challenges faced by its neighbours," Mr Power said.

"Like the Government's agreement with Papua New Guinea to deny asylum seekers the chance to resettle in Australia, Operation Sovereign Borders will prove destructive to efforts to build the cooperation in the region that is needed to bolster refugee protection.

"If we are serious about finding ways of reducing the risks associated with boat journeys to Australia, we need to find ways of providing better protection for those who need it at points closer to their countries of origin.

"Australia needs to be at the forefront of efforts to remove barriers to refugee status determination processes in the region, to ensure non-government organisations and UNHCR are better resourced, and to develop policies based on providing refugees with some form of legal status, freedom from detention and access to education, health services and work."

Mr Power said his organisation regularly heard through international networks of distressed people being denied access to asylum processes in different parts of Asia or being asked to wait more than a year for an initial asylum interview.

"How can Australian politicians suggest that asylum seekers should follow regular migration pathways in a region where so many people in distress are left with nowhere to turn?

"Australian politicians need to move on from shrill and outlandish claims about Australia's borders being under threat and consider how Australia can make a constructive difference, like it did 30 years ago in response to the Indochinese refugee crisis.

"As it is in our national interest to see refugees better protected in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh and Pakistan, Australia should be doing everything possible to broker increased international support for Asian nations prepared to improve conditions for people seeking asylum."

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