



Refugee Council of Australia

22 April 2014

Indonesian Foreign Minister's comments on refugee protection welcomed

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) today welcomed Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa's plea for countries in the Asia-Pacific region to share responsibility for the protection of refugees.

Mr Natalegawa, speaking at an international conference in Jakarta on irregular movement by sea, acknowledged the human rights of asylum seekers "no matter their legal status" and called for assistance to people smuggled across borders "simply because they are fellow human beings".

RCOA chief executive officer Paul Power said Mr Natalegawa's comments showed a quality of political leadership missing for some years from regional discussions about asylum.

"For years, the Asia-Pacific region has desperately needed constructive leadership on asylum policy to counter Australia's aggressive pursuit of deterrent measures to block people seeking protection.

"We have seen the Gillard, Rudd and Abbott governments maintain a singular focus on border protection, deterrence and repelling people seeking asylum in Australia. As time has gone by, Australia has not been content to repel asylum seekers from its own borders but has focused more and more attention on drawing other nations into its singular obsession with deterrence.

"Unfortunately, successive Australian governments have lacked the foresight and honesty to acknowledge, as Mr Natalegawa has done yesterday, that many people on the move in the region are vulnerable people who need protection from persecution, not detention and forced removal.

"In Australia, nearly all of the political debate has been focused on whether or not people have prior permission from governments to cross borders despite the fact that the great majority of the world's refugees have little choice but to cross borders without permission to reach places of safety.

"History has shown that most refugees cannot rely on states to protect them in their greatest need. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, millions of people attempting to escape Nazi Germany had their paths blocked and ultimately died because international assistance was limited to what other states regarded as manageable numbers.

"Part of the post-war response to this immense human tragedy was to develop the Refugee Convention, which came into force 60 years ago today. It was, in fact, Australia's ratification of the Convention on 22 January 1954, as the sixth state to accede, which brought it into force 90 days later.

"Six decades on, the Abbott Government could choose to play a similar leadership role to that played by the Coalition Government of Robert Menzies, looking at how the principles of the Refugee Convention can best be applied to meet the needs of people in our region who need its protection now.

"Regrettably, Australia's hard-line asylum policies have made the Asia-Pacific region a much more dangerous place for refugees and asylum seekers. This could change if the Abbott Government is prepared to consider Mr Natalegawa's comments and look again at the situation of highly vulnerable people in our region, considering practical steps to support neighbouring states to provide those seeking protection with the security they desperately need."

Media contact: Andrew Williams 0488 035 535

Suite 4A6, 410 Elizabeth Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010 Australia
Phone: (02) 9211 9333 • Fax: (02) 9211 9288
info@refugeecouncil.org.au • Web: www.refugeecouncil.org.au
Incorporated in ACT • ABN 87 956 673 083

The Refugee Council of Australia represents
non-government organisations and
individuals working with and for refugees
in Australia and around the world