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JRS calls on Australian Government to reinstate work rights and provide vulnerable families with adequate support

For immediate release

The government's decision to release families on bridging visas is a positive step but the omission of work rights from the policy will put asylum seekers at high risk of destitution, says Jesuit Refugee Service Australia.

"Denying families the right to work is a contravention of their human rights, and places them in the invidious position of being a burden to the community," says the Director of JRS Australia, Fr Aloysius Mowe.

Fr Mowe says JRS hopes the "adequate support" promised by the government will be truly adequate, and that at-risk families with children are not compromised. In the past, asylum seekers deemed in need of support have been given 89 percent of the minimum Centrelink entitlement - around \$200 a week.

"While this may have been regarded as 'adequate' for a short period of time, the reality today is that the affected asylum seekers will be living in the community for extended periods of time because of the large numbers waiting to be processed.

Even if they have been processed they will continue to live in the community with no work rights because the government has pledged not to grant them permanent visas in accordance with its 'no advantage' policy," he says.

"The 89 percent of minimum Centrelink entitlements is no longer a rational or humane way of calculating what is adequate for asylum seekers, and the government must thoroughly reassess the needs of the asylum seekers that it places in the community."

Meanwhile, the transfer of children to Curtin Immigration Detention Centre in Melbourne and Wickham Point near Darwin contravenes the government's own stated principle of keeping children out of detention.

"This government gets around its repeated pledge not to place children in detention centres by reclassifying sections of detention centres as APODs, or Alternative Places of Detention," says Fr Mowe.

"It does not matter what the government chooses to call these sections of the detention centres: the children are still being held in remote detention centres. Turning off the motion-sensor and electric fences does not magically transform a detention centre into a child- and family-friendly 'Alternative Place of Detention.'"

The Department of Immigration's own submission to a Parliamentary inquiry in 2011 admitted that "detention has an impact on children and families" and that it can be associated with "post-traumatic stress disorder, high levels of depression and poor mental health."

JRS recognises the need for health, security and identity checks for asylum seeker families and children, but calls on the government to do this quickly and efficiently.

"The average time for this to take place is supposed to be three months according to current guidelines; the reality is that the average time recently has been almost five months. Given this fact, we have little confidence in the minister's statement that families with children will be kept in secure detention facilities for 'the shortest possible time.'"

JRS is calling on the government to set a benchmark of a few weeks at most, and to put resources into ensuring that it keeps its pledge.

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