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Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
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Since offshore processing began 6 years ago, the Australian, Nauruan and Papua New Guinean governments have tried to suppress the flow of information from Nauru and Manus Island by claiming public interest immunity and secrecy laws. However, widespread reports from civil society organisations, the United Nations, human rights advocates as well as personal accounts by whistle-blowers who have lived or worked on Nauru or Manus Island have shed a light on the realities of offshore processing. The common safety and health issues that people on Nauru and Manus Island face are:

- Deteriorating mental health – extremely high levels of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder, alarming incidents of threatened or actual self-harm and high risk of suicide.
- Deteriorating physical health due to poor living conditions, limited access to medical facilities and doctors, and Immigration Department restrictions on transfers of people back to Australia (including the separation of families).
- Continued and escalating reports of sexual abuse and other serious harm committed by centre staff and security officers who are paid by the Australian government – at least 24 women have been flown to Australia to terminate pregnancies, many of them as a result of rape.
- Escalating pattern of deportations and ‘voluntary returns’ despite lack of fair process and clearly established risk of harm.
- Families separated between the islands and Australia, without any current hope of resolution.

Many incidents of abuse were not reported to the police. The few cases that were taken to the authorities were ignored or destroyed by police officers.

These issues combined with the lack of individual freedom, consistent exposure to re-traumatising experiences and deprivation of any opportunities for positive emotions are the reasons that experts say the people on Nauru and Manus Island are some of the most traumatised individuals they’ve encountered. In fact, the people on Manus Island have been reported to have the worst mental health rates for any surveyed population.

Australia and Papua New Guinea have ratified the Refugee Convention and are responsible for providing protection to refugees and people seeking asylum. Transporting them to Papua New Guinea and Nauru is in direct violation of Australia’s international law obligations under the Refugee Convention and international human rights law.

Since Australia has resumed its offshore processing and detention policy, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), the United Nations, medical bodies, hundreds of charities and community groups have made repeated calls to shut down Australia's offshore processing system due to the inhumane treatment of refugees and people seeking asylum on Manus and Nauru Island.

We support the RCOA proposal that Australia ends its detention and deterrence approach and responds to people seeking asylum in a manner that is in-line with their responsibilities under the Refugee Convention. This can be achieved by:

- Closing all Australian-funded offshore detention, processing and transit facilities.
- Ending the practice of 'turning back boats'
Providing search and rescue and cooperates with local authorities for safe disembarkation/reception and protection measures.
- Bringing all refugees and people seeking asylum to Australia while determinations are made about durable solutions.
- Ensuring all asylum applications are assessed fairly and quickly
- Giving recognised refugees' permanent protection.

Until this is achieved it is essential that the current medical evacuation legislation be maintained to ensure that people needing physical and mental medical treatment are transferred to Australia so that they can receive it.

Yours Sincerely

Robert Whiting