

QUESTION TAKEN ON NOTICE

ADDITIONAL BUDGET ESTIMATES HEARING: 24 FEBRUARY 2009

IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP PORTFOLIO

(15) Output 1.2: Refugee and Humanitarian Entry and Stay

Senator Trood (L&CA 46–47) asked:

When you were giving notice of the statistics about the visas granted I thought they were in relation to refugees. You had Liberia in that list, in fourth or fifth position. Was that an unusual circumstance—that is, is Liberia unusually high on the list? If so, how is that explained? Is that the trend this year—is Liberia not as high on the list?

Answer:

The numbers provided were for Australia's Humanitarian Program. There are two visa categories for people applying outside Australia; the Refugee category for those subject to persecution in their home country and the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) category for people who, while not being refugees, are subject to substantial discrimination amounting to a gross violation of their human rights in their home country. An Australian citizen, permanent resident, eligible New Zealand citizen, or an organisation operating in Australia must propose SHP applicants.

Liberia has been in the top ten countries for Humanitarian Program grants for the last six years. In 2003, following the Peace Agreement, voluntary repatriation programs commenced to areas deemed safe, however the situation remained precarious for people displaced in neighbouring countries. Liberian refugees throughout the Africa region were subject to multiple displacements as conflicts erupted in neighbouring countries.

In 2004–05, Australia granted more than 855 refugee visas to Liberian nationals in Guinea, Ghana, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. This continued in 2005–06 with more than 820 visas granted to Liberian refugees. Priorities included Woman at Risk cases and survivors of violence and torture.

In 2006–07, 360 visas were granted to Liberian refugees. Refugee grants had reduced significantly while the number of SHP visas to Liberians increased (SHP grants rose from 67 in 2005–06 to 248 in 2006–07). Given the previous high representation of Liberians in the Refugee component of the Program, it is anticipated that Liberians will remain a part of the African SHP component as refugee entrants seek to propose extended family members and friends.

In 2007–08, Liberian nationals were the fifth highest nationality in terms of offshore grants, representing four per cent of offshore grants. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicated that the number of Liberian referrals would continue to decline as further breakthroughs were made in relation to return and local integration.

The Government of Sierra Leone supports local integration of Liberian refugees and in its 2009 Refugee Resettlement Report, UNHCR indicates that it anticipates very few referrals of Liberians for resettlement barring exceptional cases.

In Nigeria, Liberian refugees fall under agreements by ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) which allow them to avail themselves of regularising their status and obtaining work rights. Therefore, resettlement is not an option pursued by the UNHCR for this group.