

Quaker Peace and Legislation Committee

An authorised committee of the Australian Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

P.O. Box 6063, O'Connor, ACT 2602.

25 April 2006

Senator the Hon Amanda Vanstone
Suite MF 40
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senator Vanstone,

We write to commend you on following approved and standard procedures for the treatment of asylum seekers in the case of the recent arrivals from West Papua who were subsequently granted temporary visas. At the same time, we wish to raise our concerns about the more recent decision of your Government to have boat arrivals to any part of Australia processed offshore.

Quakers have been committed to witnessing for peace for more than 350 years. We endeavour to prevent violent conflict by taking away the causes of war. We are committed to the principles of nonviolence and justice, and we believe that enmity can be transformed into friendship, strife into cooperation, poverty into well-being, and injustice into dignity and participation. We believe that ultimately goodness can prevail over evil.

In West Papua the situation continues to be grave with widespread extra-judicial killings and human rights abuses as documented by recent reports by Yale University Law School, by University of Sydney, and by the US State Department. The perpetrators of these human rights abuses have not been held accountable by the legal system in Indonesia which has led to grievances. In addition, those who have attempted to assert their Melanesian cultural identity have been attacked and persecuted. These attacks have included attempts to change the demographic make-up of West Papua through transmigration.

There is little doubt that those who seek asylum from the repressive regime do so at great risk to themselves and their families left behind. Future asylum seekers from West Papua are unlikely to receive the same treatment in their offshore processing of their claims as the first arrivals as, under proposed amendments to the Migration Act, those claims will be processed in foreign countries under foreign laws with lessened opportunities for legal and humanitarian assistance. The Pacific Solution is not a solution but an abrogation of Australia's responsibility to treat all claimants to asylum as equitably, expeditiously and humanely as possible. Placing this responsibility on a foreign country, which may be less sympathetic to the case of the asylum-seekers, is a giant cop-out, even if those countries are grateful to receive the no-doubt substantial payments for service rendered.

We ask you to use all possible influence to convince the Australian Government that the processing of asylum-seekers offshore is neither humane nor responsible, and is quite possibly illegal under international law. People seeking asylum in Australia can best be given a "fair-go" if their cases are heard and processed in Australia, at considerably less cost and inconvenience than offshore, we can assume. As you have demonstrated in the case of the previous arrivals, this can be done expeditiously and fairly by members of your Department in-country. If Indonesia is unhappy with the outcome, we can point out that, like them, we administer our law without favour.

Yours in peace,

(for) Brian Turner and Barbara Meyer,
Co-Conveners