

ACTION ALERT ON REFUGEES AND WAR IN SYRIA/IRAQ

This report gives the Prime Minister's statement on refugees from the war, and the decision to extend bombing into Syria. It also includes the responses of the Opposition and Greens. It concludes with a letter from the Presiding Clerk of Yearly Meeting to the Prime Minister.

Statement by Prime Minister, Tony Abbott MP, 9 September 2015

Today the Government is making two important announcements about the humanitarian and security crisis in the Middle East. The first is that Australia will resettle an additional 12,000 refugees from the Syria/Iraq conflict. These will be permanent resettlement places over and above Australia's existing humanitarian programme of 13,750 this year rising to 18,750 in three years' time.

This is a very significant increase in Australia's humanitarian intake and it's a generous response to the current emergency. This decision has been based on discussions that the Immigration Minister, Peter Dutton, has held this week with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other agencies in Geneva. As well, I've worked closely with senior Ministers and officials here to develop a response that best reflects Australia's proud history as a country with a generous heart.

As I indicated yesterday, and confirmed today, our focus for these new 12,000 permanent resettlement places will be those people most in need of permanent protection – women, children and families from persecuted minorities who have sought temporary refuge in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. I do want to stress women, children and families – the most vulnerable of all. The Government will shortly despatch officials to the region to begin working with the UNHCR to identify potential candidates for resettlement.

We will move very quickly but everyone who is resettled in Australia will be subject to the usual security, health and character checks. These checks are absolutely necessary. We must play our part in this humanitarian crisis but as Prime Minister I must always act in our national interest to promote community safety. I thank the state and territory leaders and community organisations for their public offers of support. These offers will be accepted as this is a burden that must be shared by all governments and by the wider community. Today's commitment by the Australian Government to take refugees on a permanent basis will be one of the largest commitments made to date anywhere in the world but hundreds of thousands of people are in camps and they need urgent assistance.

So, in addition to these new resettlement places, the Government is also announcing that we will directly pay for the support of 240,000 displaced people in countries neighbouring Syria and Iraq through the UNHCR and other agencies. This additional direct assistance will deliver food and blankets and other emergency supplies for the coming winter and is expected to cost \$44 million, bringing to \$230 million our total humanitarian contribution to the Syria/Iraq conflict.

There's no doubt that an effective international humanitarian response is vital, but we also have to address the fundamental reasons why people are fleeing. We have to act with our heads as well as with our hearts. As a free and democratic country, we must stand against those who wish to destroy life and to build a terrorist state. That's why after careful consideration and in response to the request some weeks ago by President Obama, the Government has also decided to extend Australia's current air strikes against Daesh in Iraq to Daesh targets in Syria as well. There can be no stability and no end to the persecution and suffering in the Middle East until the Daesh death cult is degraded and ultimately destroyed. That's what our armed forces are doing in Iraq and we need to do it in Syria too. As we all know, Daesh does not respect borders and its onslaught in Iraq is supported from bases in Syria. We cannot defeat Daesh in Iraq without defeating Daesh in Syria too.

I emphasise that our aircraft will be targeting Daesh, not the Assad regime, evil though it is. And we're not doing this alone. Other coalition countries including the United States, Canada, Arab countries and Turkey, are already striking Daesh in Syria. Others such as the United Kingdom are likely to join this effort soon. But I do want to stress, this is very much in Australia's national interest. We know from our intelligence agencies and from two terrorist incidents and six disrupted attacks that Daesh continues to reach out to Australia. Destroying this death cult is essential, not just to ending the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East but also to ending the threat to Australia and the wider world. So, as Prime Minister, I am proud of our armed forces personnel who will take up this fight in our name. I am proud of our Immigration officials and the community leaders who will work to resettle these vulnerable families in our country. But most of all, I'm proud that today our country and our people will be true to our history as a place where those in fear of their life – women, children and families – can rebuild and start again.

There is no sign that the new Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, will change these government decisions.

Leader of the Opposition, Bill Shorten MP, responded as follows:

Labor welcomes the Abbott Government's announcement today that it will provide an additional 12,000 places for people fleeing persecution in the Middle East. Australians called on Mr Abbott and his Government to do more – and this response is welcome. At last, Tony Abbott has recognized that Australia has a role to play in dealing with this significant humanitarian crisis that has seen the biggest number of displaced people since the Second World War.

We welcome the fact that Tony Abbott has been forced to change his mind and these places will be on top of Australia's annual humanitarian intake. Tony Abbott must commit to making these places available this financial year. It is vital that Australia offers these additional humanitarian places on a needs basis, without qualification or discrimination. Australia must be guided by the UNHCR to determine who is placed.

While Labor acknowledges the Abbott Government's commitment of an extra \$A44m to the UNHCR, we believe that contribution falls considerably short of what is required for this crisis. Labor has made it clear that based on need an extra \$A100m is required to aid humanitarian relief efforts effectively in response to the Syrian crisis. There is a high amount of goodwill within the Australian community, and we renew our call on the Abbott Government to convene a meeting of state, community and religious representatives to harness the many offers of assistance that have been made.

In a separate statement, Bill Shorten gave the Labor Party's conditional support to the decision to extend the bombing campaign into Syria. He saw it as consistent with the UN

principle of collective self-defence, and asked that any operation be conducted within that constraint. He also called on the Government to use “all available diplomatic and political means to support multilateral engagement by the international community in developing a durable solution to the current crisis”.

The Greens leader, Richard di Natale, offered the following comments:

Syria is being torn apart by a president who is killing his own people, as well as a brutal militant regime. If there's one thing that Syria doesn't need it's more bombs and more suffering. The PM also announced that Australia would welcome 12,000 Syrian refugees. Every refugee that the government accepts is another person with the chance to live in safety. We welcome that. But let's be clear dropping bombs on Syria will only create more refugees and more suffering. It won't make Syrians safer in Syria, and it won't make Australians any safer either.

Action

Letter by AYM Presiding Clerk on 14 September 2015 to Prime Minister

Dear Prime Minister,

On behalf of Australian Quakers I write to congratulate you and the Government for the decision to accept 12,000 additional refugees who are victims of the tragic war in Syria and Iraq. We are also pleased that UNHCR is being supported in its work, and that the refugees will be drawn mainly from the camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey where many have endured lengthy periods of hardship. We join with other voices that encourage the acceptance of people on a basis of need rather than ethnic, religious or family background. Our members around Australia are willing to be part of any program of practical assistance to incoming refugees.

At the same time we are opposed to further military action by Australia in the region, as this will only add to the suffering of civilians and prolong the war. We urge the Government to use its well-established reputation, from its term on the United Nations Security Council, to persuade all the parties involved in the conflict (directly on the ground and through the provision of arms) to achieve a negotiated end to the hostilities and a long term political settlement. Only then will there be a chance for adopting an effective plan for meeting the humanitarian needs of the many thousands affected.

Since the letter was sent it has become clear that there will be no discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds. Friends are encouraged to be in touch with their local refugee support network if they wish to offer practical assistance to the newly-arriving refugees. Some useful additional on-line information – ABC Radio National, *Saturday Extra* 19 September – interview with Professor Fredrick Heckmann about Germany's response – www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/saturdayextra/

and WILPF publication: *Not Women but Women and Children: The International Community Burying the Agency of Syrian Women*. (June 2015) www.wilpf.org/tying-language-to-syrias-changing-realities1.pdf

QPLC will provide additional information as it becomes available.

Canberra

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