

6 August 2014

The Prime Minister
Parliament of Australia
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Tony Abbott

It is exactly one year since I wrote to the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on behalf of Australian Quakers about our concern that, in forming policies on asylum seekers and refugees, both major political parties (Liberal-National Coalition and ALP) are placing too low a priority on the human factor in favour of border protection. We are saddened that the points set out below from our letter of 6 August 2013 are as much a matter of concern to us today as they were one year ago:

- 1. The increasing evidence of distress among those detained on Christmas Island, Manus Island and Nauru, and the outbreaks of violence that have ensued.*
- 2. The splitting up of families and the continuing detention of children.*
- 3. The emphasis on the so-called 'pull' factors rather than the 'push' factors that lead people to leave their homelands in the wake of war and persecution.*
- 4. The failure to maintain policies that conform to the letter and spirit of the Refugee Convention and other international humanitarian law.*
- 5. The enhancement of community fears of being overwhelmed by an influx of refugees, when the relative numbers are low by comparison with other parts of the world.*
- 6. The focus on 'stopping the boats' by creating more off-shore processing and resettlement arrangements that could undermine Australia's international obligations.*
- 7. UNHCR's assessment that there is an absence of adequate protection standards and safeguards for asylum seekers and refugees in Papua New Guinea.*
- 8. The lack of recognition in the public debate that many Australians wish to welcome those in need and have done so in many practical ways.*

Representatives of each of our Regional Meetings gathered for our mid-year Standing Committee last month affirmed our desire for the Australian Government to treat people seeking asylum in our country with respect and compassion. We consider any other approach to be inhumane and unacceptable, and potentially in breach of international law.

We believe that our present treatment of people seeking asylum is alienating us from our neighbours and is counterproductive for safety, wellbeing and peace in our region. The disparity between our nation's stability and that of neighbouring countries fuels many people's wish to come to Australia. This calls for a positive long-term solution, not the present stopgap and often brutal policy.

As stated in our letter of 6 August 2013: *We strongly support an increase in the humanitarian intake within the migration program. We would also like to see greater funding for UNHCR to assist processing of claims for refugee status, expansion of the use of community detention arrangements, and a review of the work requirements for refugees. We stand ready to assist the government in living up to the higher ideals on which our nation has been developed.*

In peace

Julian Robertson

Julian Robertson
Presiding Clerk

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