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Editorial:

 *Volunteers pull a raft packed with refugees and migrants as they arrive on a beach on the Greek island of Lesbos, January 29, 2016. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lup*

Stopping the boats – a false dichotomy

*Oliver White,
Assistant Director*

For the past three years we have been told by the Australian government that offshore processing on Nauru and Manus Island is necessary to deter others from making the dangerous journey to Australia by sea.

We have also been fed the line that this alone is not enough, and intercepting boats and returning the people in them is an indispensable part of the strategy to save lives at sea and to smash the predatory business of people smuggling.

This choice – the agony of the people sent to offshore centres, or deaths at sea – is a false dichotomy. This is not a Sophie's choice-scenario

where we are forced to choose between two unbearable options. There are alternatives; they are just not being implemented.

In the wake of the latest reports detailing the abhorrent conditions on Nauru and the recent announcement that the offshore processing centre on Manus Island will finally be closed, a shift has taken place in the public debate on the efficacy of offshore processing.

It has become increasingly apparent that detaining people in deplorable conditions on Nauru and Manus Island has no relation to the steep decline in boats trying to reach Australia. We are not seeing people arrive in boats because the government's Operation Sovereign Borders policy mandates the interception of boats on the high seas, and the return of their human cargo to whence they came.

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The boats can most certainly be stopped but this should not be achieved by force.

As this realisation takes hold, some people are arguing that we can close the offshore processing centres and end the suffering of the people in them, but only if we maintain Operation Sovereign Borders.

However, is the policy of interception and return acceptable and humane? People on those boats are denied access to a proper refugee status determination, and subjected to 'enhanced screening' or an attenuated assessment process. Without a proper assessment, the Australian government cannot genuinely determine whether it is safe to return people to their country of origin, and risks breaching the international principle of non-refoulement, the cornerstone of refugee protection.

JRS recognises the need for a pragmatic but principled solution to the status quo - after all, countries have a right to secure borders, and to regulate movement across those borders. That right, however, cannot be allowed to render void the right of people to cross borders to seek asylum under the conventions of international law. It also should not countenance the return of people to countries where they may face persecution, harm, and violations of their human rights, or where

they cannot receive a fair and timely hearing of their asylum claims.

Crucially, stopping the boats seriously undermines the international protection regime. This regime only works when all states respect a person's right to seek asylum by keeping their borders open to those fleeing persecution. It relies on states not to penalise those people without the correct documentation for legal entry into their countries. Most importantly, this regime depends on every country respecting the international legal principle of non-refoulement - the right not to be returned to persecution.

The boats can most certainly be stopped but this should not be achieved by force. The Australian government must first work with its neighbours in the region to remove the need for people to take dangerous journeys in the first place.

If displaced people in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand were given access to employment, health services, education and access to a fair, timely asylum process, they would be less likely to risk their lives trying to reach Australia on the open seas. By protecting and fulfilling the fundamental rights of people seeking safety, the boats would stop by themselves.

Volunteers have the courage to take a stand

The theme for Australia's Refugee Week 2016 was "With courage let us all combine", words taken from the second verse of the national anthem, *Advance Australia Fair*.

There is no doubt that refugees and asylum seekers are courageous. The mothers who cling tightly to their children as they cross seas and oceans seeking safety in any direction are courageous. The young men who sell everything they own to cross borders seeking protection from threats, persecution, and almost certain death are courageous. The children who endure years in detention are courageous.

We who are advocates, caseworkers, volunteers, teachers, community members, and even the politicians - we, too, need to be courageous. Anne and Rob Porter, long-time JRS volunteers, are courageous (although they are far too humble to admit this). At the 2016 NSW Refugee Week Launch, they were honoured with the STARTTS



 Anne & Rob Porter

Humanitarian Award for their service to refugees. They give their time and effort year after year, show endless compassion, and are the embodiment of accompaniment.

"What we do for JRS is a rather small attempt to mitigate the politicians' attempts to demonise and demoralise people who have fled to Australia and have the right to claim asylum. It is not part of the values with which we grew up or associate with being Australian," says Anne.

We are grateful that Anne and Rob, and the more than 60 other JRS volunteers who have been trained in the past year-and-a-half, have had the courage to take a stand, to recognise our shared humanity, and to reach out and welcome asylum seekers.

Maeve Brown, Manager, Arrupe Project

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JRS winter clothing appeal

Over 300 asylum seekers living in Western Sydney benefited from JRS' second annual Winter Clothing Bazaar recently.

Hundreds of donated items were delivered in the days leading up to the bazaar, highlighting the fact that many people in the community are concerned about the welfare of those seeking asylum.

Over 24 volunteers assisted in the planning, sorting, and distribution of the clothes and blankets, including school students and JRS'

own battalion of committed and hardworking volunteers.

The hardships face by many of those seeking asylum in Australia are legion: minimal government support; difficulty in finding employment; dealing with past trauma; compounded mental health issues; and indefinite waiting times for protection visa applications, to name just a few.

While the bazaar provided an opportunity for the wider community to provide much-needed, warm

winter clothes, it also created a space for interaction between members of the community and people seeking asylum.

It is this willingness by Australians to engage, listen, and to hear the life stories of people asking for our protection that will lead to a greater demand for more just and humane refugee policies.

Matt Potts, Community Development and Schools Engagement Officer

A place of welcome and hospitality

Arrupe Place Community Centre, JRS' second drop-in centre in Western Sydney, is providing new opportunities for asylum seekers living in the area – many of whom have been waiting between two and four years to have their claims for protection assessed.

One such programme, a fortnightly craft group, is being run by two Iranian sisters who have a natural flair for all things artistic. Their group provides a valuable opportunity for

conversation and the learning of new skills, and is a necessary distraction from the difficulties of life as an asylum seeker.

The people who access these programmes continue to show incredible resilience against all odds. Despite meagre government assistance, ongoing discrimination because of their temporary status, and the weight of Australia's unjust deterrence regime, they commit to learning English, finding employment, and defying the

xenophobic comments by contributing significantly to society rather than burdening it.

Places of welcome and mutual learning like Arrupe Place are essential in the effort to provide an alternative vision to offshore processing and punitive deterrence policies. They highlight what the Australian community can gain from welcoming refugees – and encourage policies that will reflect this longstanding tradition of welcome and hospitality.



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JRS wins community grant

A community grant awarded to JRS by the City of Parramatta will be used to provide employment training and English language classes to people seeking asylum who are living in the Parramatta Local Government Area. The classes will support these people in becoming self-sufficient, connected and productive members of the local community. “Support for asylum seekers at the early stages of migration is essential if they are to become self-sufficient and successfully integrate into the Australian community,” says Maeve Brown, Manager of the Arrupe Project.

Typically, people seeking asylum in Australia receive minimal and restricted support from Commonwealth-funded services. Despite this lack of support, they face a host of

challenges, including access to affordable and safe housing, securing employment, dealing with past trauma, and connecting with the broader community.

“These pressures often lead to asylum seekers becoming depressed and socially isolated, and thus the process of settlement upon being granted asylum is delayed,” says Ms Brown.

The classes will equip asylum seekers with language skills and job-seeking knowledge, and will help increase their sense of belonging within the local community. Moreover, the project will train and equip local volunteers with the teaching skills needed to run employment training workshops and English language classes on an on-going basis.

social media

JRS on Twitter

You can follow JRS on Twitter at @JRS_Aus where we will highlight developments around Australian asylum seeker and refugee policy, raise awareness of the plight of refugees seeking asylum in this country, and continue to advocate on behalf of these vulnerable people in the powerful social media sphere. This is your opportunity to follow us, dialogue with us and share the story of JRS and the people it serves.

donate

How your donation will help

Donations to Arrupe Place will directly fund the following:

- Emergency assistance (medication, travel, rent...)
- Food vouchers
- Casework services
- Home visiting services
- Legal advice
- Social support activities

link online

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