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The Pacific Solution: A \$1 billion 'living hell'

New report shows flawed system costs Australian taxpayer \$500,000 a person, fuels mental illness in refugees, is unaccountable and diverts Australian aid from poverty reduction

Six years since the Tampa crisis of the 2001 Federal election, urgent reform of Australia's asylum seeker policies is called for after a new report published today (August 25) found that the Pacific Solution had so far squandered \$1 billion of taxpayers' money, exacerbated mental illness of refugees and was operating without scrutiny.

'A Price Too High: The cost of Australia's approach to Asylum Seekers,' a joint report by Oxfam and A Just Australia, presents new research that found since 2001 it has cost the Australian taxpayer more than \$500,000 per person to process fewer than 1,700 asylum seekers in Nauru, Manus and Christmas Island. By comparison, the latest estimate from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship suggests that the cost of holding asylum seekers in a mainland Australian detention centre is only 3.5% of the running costs of the Pacific Solution.

'The Pacific Solution is neither value for money nor humane,' said Executive Director of Oxfam Australia, Andrew Hewett. In six years since Tampa the cost of the Pacific Solution to the Australian taxpayer has been \$1 billion. We are calling on the Australian National Audit Office to investigate the full financial cost of the Pacific Solution.'

The research found that The Pacific Solution has been both costly to the nation's taxpayers as well as to the health and wellbeing of asylum seekers who have had to endure years of isolated offshore detention, compounding post traumatic stress disorder after having fled persecution from Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

'It has tarnished Australia's reputation as a nation that upholds human rights and does not mistreat people,' said Mr Hewett.

National Coordinator of A Just Australia, Kate Gauthier said, 'The Pacific Solution has failed. It has robbed vulnerable people who arrive by boat in Australia of their dignity and health. The culture of unaccountability exposed in the Department of Immigration and Citizenship that saw Australian citizens Vivian Solon and Cornelia Rau detained continues in the Pacific Solution.'

'We are calling for an immediate end to costly and inhumane offshore processing and an urgent reform of Australia's asylum seeker policies to ensure that people claiming asylum have their cases processed quickly, accountably and are treated humanely. Refugees deserve to be treated better by Australia, and Australians deserve to have their taxes put to less inhumane uses,' she added.

'A Price Too High' also found:

- Manus Island has been empty since 2004 but is maintained at an annual cost of \$2 million in readiness for new asylum seekers
- it costs \$1,830 per detainee a day to keep someone on Christmas Island compared to \$238 per detainee a day at Sydney's Villawood detention centre
- evidence of multiple asylum seeker mental health problems including self harm as well as attempted suicide as a result of prolonged isolation in offshore detention centres, where access to mental health services such as counseling and psycho-social support are limited or non-existent
- a lack of hospital infrastructure in offshore processing centres leading to the unnecessary death of a 26-year old asylum seeker with no known physical and mental problems on Nauru in 2002
- The Pacific Solution fails to uphold Australia's commitment under international law not to return refugees to a place where she or he might face persecution or even death
- Government claims that the Pacific Solution is an efficient and effective means of achieving refugee protection and immigration control are false

According to the study, the Australian Government must immediately reform the present system and:

- end the Pacific Solution as well as offshore detention and processing of asylum seekers on Nauru, Manus and Christmas Island. Instead all asylum seekers should be processed in mainland Australia
- initiate an Australian National Audit into the full financial cost of the Pacific Solution
- improve asylum seekers access to legal assistance, medical care and social support
- ensure that asylum-seekers currently held on Nauru have their claims processed quickly and be offered resettlement in Australia if successful
- transform the overseas development assistance program to Nauru to focus on the Millennium Development Goals of poverty reduction, primary health care and basic education
- commission research to determine whether The Pacific Solution has impacted upon the number of people arriving in Australia by boat