

## **JRS Australia's Response to the Discussion Paper on Australia's Humanitarian Program 2025-26**

### **Introduction**

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) discussion paper on Australia's Humanitarian Program 2025-26.

JRS is an international Catholic organisation with a mission to accompany, serve, and advocate on behalf of refugees, people seeking asylum, and other forcibly displaced persons prioritising dignity, solidarity and justice. In 2024, JRS served 1,154,535 people across 58 different countries including Myanmar, Indonesia, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Iraq, Jordan, and Ukraine. JRS Australia is a part of the Asia Pacific region, and we connect with our regional partners regularly which provides us insights to key issues on the ground faced by our colleagues in these country offices.

In Australia JRS accompanies, serves and advocates for the rights of people seeking asylum, refugees, and migrants in situations of vulnerability. In 2024, we served over 3,600 people through our services. Our frontline services include specialist casework for individuals and families to address acute needs relating to physical and mental health, domestic and family violence (DFV), and housing, food and financial insecurity. We also support people to access safe and dignified employment, training, education, childcare, legal advice and other critical services. Further, we run a Refugee Leadership Program and other activities to strengthen social and community connections and development.

Beyond our service work JRS Australia is an integral member of the Jesuit and Catholic community across Australia, and we strive to amplify the voices of refugees and people seeking asylum within our church and broader society. In 2024 alone we were invited to run events, workshops and speaking engagements with over 27,000 people across Australia. Our work on the ground in Australia and our connection with our colleagues across the globe provides us with insights across a range of contexts of forced displacement and the key issues facing refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in situations of vulnerability.

### **Size and composition of the Humanitarian Program**

JRS Australia encourages the Australian Government to keep to its pledge made at the 2023 GRF to increase Australia's Humanitarian Program. We welcome the ALP's stated goal of 27,000 places and we note that an increase in our Humanitarian Program is needed now more than ever. According to the UNHCR, 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2024, the highest numbers of displacement on record.<sup>1</sup> The UNHCR'S 2026 Projected

Global Resettlement Needs Report estimated that in 2026 there will be 2.5 million refugees in need of urgent resettlement.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside this, the U.S Government's cuts to foreign aid in January 2025 has resulted in an 86% reduction in support for programs that serve refugees globally.<sup>3</sup> JRS country offices around the world were directly impacted by these cuts and have witnessed firsthand the significant vulnerability this has caused.

As well as foreign aid cuts the U.S Government has suspended the U.S Refugee Admissions Program since January 2025, causing significant disruptions to global resettlement efforts and leaving thousands in limbo, including those who had already undergone extensive screening and were awaiting departure.

Within this global context we encourage the Australian Government to consider scaling up the intake numbers of the Humanitarian Program to the ALP's projected goal to 27,000.

Australia has a legacy of leadership in global resettlement, and alongside Canada we can and should step up during this time of exceptional need.

### **Recommendation:**

#### **1. Australia to increase the Humanitarian Program to 27,000 places**

### **Refugees in Indonesia**

Thousands of refugees remain stranded in Indonesia, many having lived in limbo for over a decade without access to status or rights in Indonesia. At the end of 2024 Indonesia was hosting 12,275 displaced people,<sup>4</sup> despite not being a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Many of these refugees originally saw Indonesia as a transit country to seek asylum in Australia and many have familial connection to people in Australia. JRS Australia urges the Australian Government to consider its regional responsibility and the important role it has in resettling refugees from Indonesia. Our colleagues at JRS Indonesia work particularly with large numbers of Hazara refugees from Afghanistan and Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. As Australia recognises the significant needs of both groups, we urge the government to consider resettling refugees who have been waiting for significant periods in Indonesia. Of key concern are refugees in Indonesia with family connections in Australia.

### **Family Reunion**

JRS Australia notes the complexity in balancing the resettlement needs of the most vulnerable refugees identified by the UNHCR alongside those of applicants to the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) who have existing ties to Australia. However, we have witnessed that these two groups are not mutually exclusive, with many SHP applicants facing significant vulnerabilities equal to those identified through the UNHCR processes. We also acknowledge the significant harm that family separation causes to those in Australia

and the mental health implications of this have been clear amongst the people we serve in Australia.

### **Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP)**

JRS Australia receives over 1500 international requests for assistance per year. Although we are not a resettlement agency one issue we have considered is the need for a clearer referral channel to the CRISP program for those in need of resettlement.

Separately we urge the government to consider separating CRISP from the broader Humanitarian Program, acknowledging that resettlement supports are largely provided by the community and therefore this warrants a specific program. This would create additional capacity within the Humanitarian Program for government-supported resettlement.

#### **Recommendation:**

- 2. Establish the CRISP program as a separate standalone pathway outside of the Humanitarian Program, with its own quota.**

### **Emergency Humanitarian Crisis Response**

JRS Australia commends the Australian Government's efforts to respond with flexibility to key humanitarian crises, including in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Palestine, through pathways outside the Humanitarian Program. However, we acknowledge that there have been different responses to different crises, and there have been some global crises which have not been afforded any special measures to meet resettlement needs. This raises concerns of differential treatment, where some people impacted by crises are offered a pathway to safety whilst others are not. Whilst we acknowledge that Australia cannot alone meet the demands of numerous and complex global crises, we do suggest that there may be a methodology that would result in a more equitable and efficient response. JRS Australia endorses the work done by the UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law on developing an Emergency Protection Framework, which would be an "overarching decision-making framework" providing a "ready-made plan" and enabling a "swift, considered, equitable, well-coordinated and effective emergency respond to a conflict, disaster or other declared humanitarian crises overseas."<sup>5</sup>

#### **Recommendation:**

- 3. Australian Government to adopt an Emergency Protection Framework as proposed by the UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law**

### **Crisis in Sudan:**

JRS Australia draws attention to the situation in Sudan. Since 2023 when a conflict broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, Sudan has been facing one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with 14.3 million Sudanese people, a third of the nation's population, displaced by the end of 2024.<sup>6</sup> Humanitarian concerns extend beyond conflict and displacement, with hunger crisis being a grave concern for the region. In August 2024, famine was confirmed in the Zamzam IDP camp in North Darfur, and the UN World Food Programme has been unable to deliver food to starving people trapped inside the besieged capital, El Fasher. A total of 24.6 million people are acutely food insecure with 637,000 facing catastrophic levels of hunger.<sup>7</sup>

JRS has been responding to the crisis through our country offices in Chad and South Sudan supporting those who have crossed the border into neighbouring countries with education, child protection and emergency support services.<sup>8</sup>

JRS Australia commends the Australian government for its provision of \$50 million in foreign aid but urges the government to consider an emergency resettlement response, offering a pathway to safety for people impacted by this escalating catastrophe.

At JRS Australia, we have supported some Sudanese people through our services, but we are not seeing the level of engagement we would expect given the number of Sudanese nationals we understand to be currently seeking asylum in Australia based on advocacy networks we participate in. We are concerned that many may be unaware of the support available to them. We encourage the Government to proactively communicate with this cohort to ensure they know they can access services through JRS and other community-based agencies. Sudanese nationals on bridging visas are without a clear pathway to permanency and have no safety net – a key issue we witness for people on bridging visas. We urge the Government to provide a clear and compassionate pathway to safety for Sudanese nationals currently in Australia on temporary visas, recognising the gravity of the crisis in Sudan and the urgent need for protection.

### **Recommendations:**

- 4. Australian Government should consider an emergency resettlement response including a special allocation for people impacted by the conflict in Sudan**
- 5. Australian Government should provide a pathway to safety for Sudanese nationals currently in Australia on temporary visas**

### **Crisis in Myanmar:**

Myanmar is facing a severe and escalating humanitarian crisis driven by armed conflict, political instability, and economic collapse following the 2021 military coup. With

widespread human rights violations, including targeted violence against ethnic minorities such as the Rohingya, over 3.5 million have been displaced, one third of which are children.<sup>9</sup> Alongside violence and displacement, Myanmar has been devastated by natural disaster and the impacts of climate change. As millions have fled Myanmar seeking safety, there are numerous situations of ongoing hardship for the displaced as people face pushbacks to Myanmar, exploitation including forced labour, human trafficking, and significant precarity. JRS country offices across Asia Pacific work with refugees from Myanmar who are in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, refugee camps on the Thai/Myanmar border, and those internally displaced in Myanmar. Millions are in urgent need of food, shelter, and medical assistance, while humanitarian access remains heavily restricted.

In Thailand, over 100,000 displaced people from Myanmar live precariously in temporary shelters and refugee camps. JRS Thailand works with these people on the Thai/Myanmar border, providing basic education, financial assistance, mental health services and accompaniment. However, JRS Thailand was significantly impacted U.S foreign aid funding cuts with many programs now critically underfunded and having to be scaled back, resulting in children going without education, parents losing income and communities without access to life-saving care.<sup>10</sup>

JRS Australia commends the Australian Government for its \$370 million commitment to a new 3-year program starting in 2026 to provide humanitarian assistance to Myanmar and Bangladesh, specifically recognising the needs of Rohingya refugees. Alongside this, JRS Australia urges the Government to consider an emergency resettlement response, offering a pathway to safety for those who have fled Myanmar.

### **Recommendation:**

- 6. Australian Government should consider an emergency resettlement response including a special allocation for people impacted by the situation in Myanmar.**

### **Concerns for Palestinians in Australia:**

JRS Australia holds deep concerns for Palestinian individuals and families currently living in Australia, many of whom remain in prolonged uncertainty with no clear pathway to permanency. Over the past 12 months JRS Australia has supported approximately 70 people from Gaza who had an application for a Permanent Protection (subclass 866) visa in place and have now been granted a Temporary Humanitarian Concern (subclass 786) visa. Whilst the special provision of Temporary Humanitarian Concern (subclass 786) visas offered to this cohort has provided them access to services and supports, it has effectively excluded them from access to a permanent protection pathway, leaving many in a protracted situation of uncertainty. Further, JRS Australia is currently providing support to 9 Palestinians who remain on a bridging visa, with an active 866 application in place, who have not yet been invited to apply for a Temporary Humanitarian Concern visa.



Whilst we acknowledge the Government's recognition of the humanitarian crisis facing Palestinians and the tailored response provided to date, we urge the Government to consider a permanent solution for this cohort. Nearly two years into the decimation of Gaza, many Palestinians in Australia will be unable to return even after three years, with no homes or safe conditions to return to.

**Recommendation:**

- 7. Australian Government should consider providing permanent protection to Palestinians currently in Australia on temporary visas, acknowledging the unlikelihood of the crisis dissipating and the reality that many Palestinians have no safe conditions to return to.**

**Onshore Component**

JRS Australia strongly urges the government to consider de-linking the onshore component of the Humanitarian Program from the offshore component. This is common practice across all other resettlement countries. A more efficient way forward would be to address onshore applications separately, allowing the quota for onshore places to be redistributed to the offshore component. Further, rather than allocating a specific number designated for onshore protection places, it would be more efficient to consider that visa grants should fluctuate depending on context and need.

**Recommendations:**

- 8. Australian Government should de-link the onshore component from the offshore component of the Humanitarian Program, as is common practice internationally.**
- 9. Australian Government should remove the designation of a cap on onshore visa allocations and instead allow the number to fluctuate based on context and need.**

**SRSS and those deemed 'finally determined'**

Currently, many people seeking asylum at post-administrative appeal are denied Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), unless the Department provides special consideration. Many from this cohort include people at judicial review, people failed by the grossly inadequate 'fast track' process, and women with refused visas who have escaped domestic violence.

JRS Australia is continuing to receive referrals from SRSS service providers requesting support (predominantly financial) for families that have been exited from the SRSS program.

This brings into question once more why vulnerable families are being exited from the program based on 'finally determined' status, despite having clear physical vulnerabilities and mental ill health. This comes despite participation in Judicial Review and Ministerial Intervention, both of which are considered by DHA to be legitimate and recognised components of the asylum process.

JRS Australia and other sector service providers, has provided support to upwards of 95 people seeking asylum who have been deemed finally determined, many of whom have received continuous support for up to 10 years. Despite multiple reapplications, all have been refused or exited from the SRSS program and are now either at risk of homelessness, or experiencing primary, secondary or tertiary homelessness.

#### **Recommendation:**

- 10. SRSS should be accessible for people with vulnerabilities who are unable to support themselves if they are currently engaged in any component of the asylum process including Merits and Judicial Review and Ministerial Intervention.**

#### **Homelessness**

Last financial year, JRS Australia received over 200 referrals for people experiencing homelessness, at risk of eviction, and in unstable and unsuitable housing arrangements - making up approximately 60% of our total referral number.

In addition, were 61 referrals for women subject to sexual and other gender-based violence at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The total cost incurred to address homelessness for JRS (FY 24-25) was \$827,786.61.

Homelessness is an issue prevalent amongst bridging visa holders, driven by limited or unstable access to work, precarious mental health, and the absence of a safety net or access to mainstream support services.

#### **Special Concern for Elderly People Seeking Asylum**

In the last 5 months, we have seen a rise in elderly people seeking asylum who are in need of support, inclusive of 10 individuals we have provided with intensive casework support. These individuals have significant health concerns, high medication costs and are unable to

work due to their age. Many have arrived in Australia intending to visit relatives and have found that they cannot return home to their countries of origins and have sought asylum.

Without access to income support and means to find their own housing, they are forced to rely on their relatives - many of whom are struggling financially themselves.

**Recommendation:**

- 11. Ensure access to social and public housing for those on temporary visas.**
- 12. Ensure all on bridging visas have access to Medicare and that SRSS is an accessible program for those on bridging visas who are unable to support themselves.**

JRS Australia welcomes the opportunity to engage in dialogue with DHA and the Federal Government on all matters outlined in this letter in existing or extraordinary forums, as relevant.