

JRS Australia's Response to the Discussion Paper on Australia's Humanitarian Program 2026–27

Introduction

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Department of Home Affairs on Australia's Humanitarian Program for 2026–27 and its future policy settings.

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. Grounded in a mission to accompany, serve and advocate for people facing forced displacement, JRS operates in 58 countries worldwide and serves over 1.15 million people on the move each year.

Regionally, our colleagues in Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia work directly with displaced communities, including those living in protracted displacement and those newly displaced by conflict.

This global outreach, including a strong presence in the Asia-Pacific region, enables us to bring both frontline service experience in Australia and direct insight into displacement contexts in countries of origin, transit and asylum.

In Australia, JRS works closely with people seeking asylum and refugees experiencing acute vulnerability, including homelessness, barriers to healthcare and prolonged uncertainty due to visa status. In 2025 alone, JRS Australia supported more than 3,600 people through frontline services.

Our work domestically, combined with close engagement with JRS offices across the Asia-Pacific, provides a unique perspective on both settlement challenges in Australia and displacement dynamics in the region. We hope our insights can support the Department in determining the future and effectiveness of Australia's Humanitarian Program.

Size and Composition of the Humanitarian Program

International Responsibility Sharing and Responding to Global Realities

Australia's Humanitarian Program must remain focused on protection, prioritising refugees based on need while remaining flexible to respond quickly to emerging crises. It should be non-

discriminatory, aim for timely family reunification, operate with transparency and accountability, and uphold Australia's role in international responsibility-sharing.

JRS Australia therefore supports an increase in the size of Australia's Humanitarian Program toward the goal of 27,000 places, in line with the Australian Government's pledge at 2023 Global Refugee Forum. This reflects both the scale of global need and Australia's longstanding role in international responsibility sharing – a role that is now more important than ever.

Global displacement has reached unprecedented levels. By the end of 2025, more than 117 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, including 42.5 million refugees. Global resettlement needs continue to grow, with an estimated 2.5 million refugees requiring urgent resettlement in 2026.¹ Despite this, resettlement places globally remain extremely limited.

Recent reductions in international humanitarian funding, including significant cuts to United States AID programs, have further exacerbated this situation.² Across multiple contexts, JRS colleagues report such severe reductions in funding that programs to support displaced populations with access to essential services such as food assistance, healthcare and education, were forced to close, increasing the vulnerability of already at-risk populations.³

In this context, Australia's Humanitarian Program plays a critical role as a durable solution for those with no other pathway to safety. It also serves as a tangible demonstration of international responsibility sharing, supporting host countries that continue to accommodate the vast majority of the world's displaced populations.

Maintaining a Protection Focus

It is important to recognise that Australia's Humanitarian Program represents only a small proportion of overall migration to Australia. Over the past decade, only approximately 6% of net migration to Australia has been through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program. Despite its relatively small scale, its impact is significant, both for those resettled and for Australia's international standing.

Maintaining a protection-focused composition of the program is essential. Resettlement should continue to prioritise individuals and families based on vulnerability and protection need, rather than other factors such as employment readiness or financial capacity. This includes a strong Refugee stream centred on UNHCR referrals, the maintenance of places for women at risk,

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/figures-glance#:~:text=Global%20forced%20displacement%20trend%20over,ranges%20from%2013010000%20to%2043363000>.

² <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-funding-cuts-bite-some-11m-people-are-losing-aid>

³ <https://www.jrsusa.org/holding-the-line-foreign-aid-withdrawal/>

alongside the Special Humanitarian Program that facilitates family reunification and responds to protracted displacement.

Recent trends indicate a shift in the composition of the program, with a declining proportion of UNHCR-referred refugee places and increasing reliance on proposer- or sponsor-driven pathways. Any shift away from protection need as the primary basis for resettlement risks undermining the integrity and purpose of the program, and shifts focus away from those most in need of protection.

Maintaining a clear distinction between protection-based resettlement and other migration pathways is essential to ensuring the program remains fair, effective and consistent with Australia's international obligations.

Recommendation 1: Australia should increase the Humanitarian Program toward the Government's stated goal of 27,000 places, in line with its Global Refugee Forum commitments and to reflect the scale of global resettlement need.

Recommendation 2: The Australian Government should maintain a strong proportion of UNHCR-referred Refugee stream places within the Humanitarian Program, ensuring that protection need remains the primary basis for resettlement.

Special Humanitarian Program, Protection and Family Reunification

The Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) remains a critical component of Australia's protection framework, which should continue to prioritise those in greatest need of protection, and who may not otherwise meet the criteria for the Refugee component.

Further to this, family unity is a fundamental principle of effective refugee protection and should remain central as a tool for decision-making within SHP. Family reunification is not only a humanitarian imperative but also a key factor in successful settlement outcomes.

Through our work, JRS Australia consistently observes the impacts of prolonged family separation, including on mental health, housing stability, and economic participation. Reuniting families supports both individual wellbeing and long-term integration, while reducing reliance on services and strengthening community connections.

Prioritisation within the SHP should recognise that those seeking reunion often also face significant protection risks. Many individuals applying through the SHP are living in situations of protracted displacement, with limited rights and restricted access to basic services.

Recommendation 3: The Australian Government should continue to prioritise applicants through the Special Humanitarian Program based on greatest need for protection, and where necessary triage further to prioritise those with family links in Australia.

Refugees in Indonesia

Refugees in Indonesia represent a cohort in particular need of permanent protection. As of 2025, Indonesia was hosting more than 13,000 refugees and people seeking asylum,⁴ many of whom have been living in the country for extended periods without access to durable solutions.

Indonesia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and refugees there are unable to work legally and have limited access to education and healthcare. As a result, many experience long-term dependency, which threatens their lives, livelihoods and wellbeing.⁵

A significant proportion of refugees in Indonesia have close family connections in Australia and are seeking reunification through the SHP pathways. Prioritising this cohort would address acute humanitarian need while also supporting more effective settlement outcomes through existing family and community networks.

Recommendation 4: The Australian Government should seek to engage the Indonesian Government in further discussions around long-term pathways for permanency, protection and access to rights for refugees stranded in Indonesia.

Recommendation 5: The Australian Government should consider prioritising places within the Special Humanitarian Program for those refugees in Indonesia who are in the greatest need of protection, who have experienced protracted displacement, and who have no other prospects for permanent protection.

Regional Displacement and the Crisis in Myanmar

JRS Australia's regional network provides direct insight into displacement dynamics across the Asia-Pacific. In this context, the crisis in Myanmar has been identified as the most significant and proximate displacement crisis affecting the region.

Since the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar has experienced widespread and ongoing human rights violations, including indiscriminate violence against civilians, forced conscription, arbitrary detention and destruction of communities.⁶ These conditions have driven large-scale

⁴ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/indonesia-call-for-leadership-refugee-protection/#:~:text=Indonesia%20currently%20hosts%20more%20than,in%20Indonesia%2C%20after%20fleeing%20Afghanistan.>

⁵ https://rightnow.org.au/opinion/indonesia-the-green-hell/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAYnJpZBEwbW5LMIFSdml0a3RPc1dRdHNYdGMGYXBwX2IkEDlyMjAzOTE3ODgyMDA4OTIAAR4Ddg_EvKfL7qY4BGcEAn3XxQ6iq0doxLX9A1NQ1_miPiOL7Z3-46jEjYMBKA_aem_kZ5Cnv3o6HDYz1U6DNzusw

⁶ <https://jrs.net/en/news/myanmar-four-years-on-the-future-must-be-peace/>

displacement, with nearly four million people internally displaced and millions more forced to flee across borders into neighbouring countries.⁷

Across the region, displaced people from Myanmar face significant protection challenges. Many lack legal status and are at risk of detention, exploitation and forced return. Access to education, healthcare and livelihoods is often severely limited, particularly for those living outside formal camp settings.⁸

JRS colleagues and regional partners have reported directly to us that humanitarian access remains constrained, with local civil society organisations frequently acting as the primary providers of assistance. These organisations are now under increasing strain due to reductions in international funding. In multiple locations, JRS and partner organisations have been forced to scale back or stop essential services, including education programs for children, mental health support and livelihood assistance.

These reductions are increasing vulnerability among already precarious populations and reducing resilience in host communities, including in Thailand and Indonesia, and the displacement crisis is now a severe humanitarian crisis, threatening the lives of those displaced, and in particular the lives of women and children who are now facing increased risks of violence.⁹

In this context, Australia's Humanitarian Program is an important mechanism for providing durable protection to those displaced by the crisis in Myanmar. Given the scale, proximity and ongoing nature of the crisis, there is a strong case for recognising Myanmar as a priority within Australia's regional humanitarian response.

Recommendation 6: The Australian Government should recognise the crisis in Myanmar as a priority regional displacement crisis, and provide targeted resettlement opportunities, including a dedicated allocation for people displaced by this crisis in Myanmar.

Recommendation 7: The Australian Government should provide a pathway to safety for Myanmar nationals currently in Australia on temporary visas, who cannot return home due to the risk of targeted violence and persecution.

Humanitarian Response to International Crises

While regional dynamics are of particular relevance, it is important that Australia's Humanitarian Program retains the capacity to respond to major global crises in a consistent and equitable manner. To this end, JRS Australia supports the methodology and recommendations for a

⁷ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar>

⁸ <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/global-humanitarian-overview-2025/article/myanmar-2>

⁹ <https://jrs.net/en/news/myanmars-displacement-crisis-deepens-amid-illegitimate-elections-leaving-millions-with-nowhere-to-flee/>

humanitarian approach to international crises as set out by the Kaldor Centre for International Law in the brief ‘Ensuring protection in humanitarian emergencies: A framework for Australia.’¹⁰

Sudan

The conflict in Sudan, for example, has resulted in one of the largest displacement crises globally, which has escalated substantially in the last year.

Since 2023, more than 15 million people have been displaced, representing approximately one-third of the country’s population.¹¹ Humanitarian conditions continue to deteriorate, with widespread food insecurity and limited access to assistance.¹²

Women and girls in particular are facing profound risks to their lives, as sexual violence is being increasingly used as a weapon of war.¹³ Displaced women and children face further risks of violence in displacement settings as humanitarian relief remains under-resourced and oversubscribed, as per accounts from our JRS colleagues in Chad and South Sudan.¹⁴

In such contexts, resettlement plays a critical role for those with no viable pathway to safety. Australia’s response to global crises would benefit from greater consistency and transparency, including consideration of structured approaches to emergency protection. This would support timely, equitable and principled decision-making and provide relief to people in the greatest need of protection.

Recommendation 8: The Australian Government should consider an emergency settlement response for international crises consistent with the Kaldor Centre for International Law’s policy brief ‘Ensuring protection in humanitarian emergencies: A framework for Australia’, including the facilitation of emergency responses to humanitarian crises outside the Humanitarian Program quota.

Recommendation 9: The Australian Government should consider a special allocation within the Humanitarian Program for people displaced by the conflict in Sudan, prioritising women and girls at risk of sexual and gender-based violence.

¹⁰ <https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/law/kaldor/2024-09-policy-brief-15-emergency-protection.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.iom.int/news/one-third-sudan-displaced-1000-days-conflict-iom-urges-urgent-and-sustained-action>

¹² <https://aus.jrs.net/en/news/sudan-crisis-we-are-called-to-accompany-those-whose-suffering-goes-unseen/>

¹³ <https://aus.jrs.net/en/news/sudan-crisis-we-are-called-to-accompany-those-whose-suffering-goes-unseen/>

¹⁴ <https://jrs.net/en/story/two-years-of-conflict-in-sudan-families-still-hope-for-lasting-solutions/>

Recommendation 10: Given the severity of the crisis in Sudan, the Australian Government should provide a pathway to safety for Sudanese nationals currently in Australia on temporary visas, particularly in the case of women and girls who have faced sexual and gender-based violence.

Complementary Pathways and Humanitarian Program Integrity

The Community Sponsorship Program, and other complementary pathways such as the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot and Refugee Student Settlement Pathway Pilot, are welcome initiatives to expand protection opportunities for displaced people. However, these pathways must be carefully designed to ensure that they complement, rather than diminish, the core Humanitarian Program.

The primary purpose of the Humanitarian Program must remain the provision of protection to those most in need. As such, complementary pathways should operate outside the humanitarian cap and provide additional places. JRS Australia welcomes the approach taken with the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot in this sense, and encourages the Government to apply similar principles to the other complementary pathways.

Recommendation 11: The Australian Government should separate complementary pathways from the Humanitarian Program quota, and ensure places granted through complementary pathways are not granted at the expense of UNHCR-referred resettlement cases.

Community Sponsorship Program

The Community Support Program (CSP) requires reform to ensure that it is accessible, sustainable and aligned with its original intent.

In particular, the current backlog and extended processing times risk undermining settlement outcomes, as applicants may no longer be in the circumstances anticipated at the time of application. Reform should ensure that the program operates as a genuine additional pathway and is developed in consultation with civil society and affected communities.

We are looking forward to working with the Department through further consultation on the CSP, including to facilitate consultation with people with lived experience.

Recommendation 12: The Australian Government should separate places granted through the CSP pathway from the Humanitarian Program quota, and ensure places granted through the CSP are not granted at the expense of UNHCR-referred resettlement cases.

Recommendation 13: The Australian Government should co-design a reformed CSP through consultation with stakeholders, prioritising learning from the experiences of people who have been resettled through the CSP and CRISP.

Onshore component

The overwhelming majority of JRS Australia’s clients – up to 3,000 of a given year – are people seeking asylum who have applied for protection onshore. In many cases the people we serve have spent several years enduring instability on temporary visas, with insecure access to rights, including to work, tertiary study, education, housing, healthcare and other social or financial relief. As a result, the majority of the people we serve are at severe risk of, or are already facing, food insecurity, and primary or secondary homelessness.¹⁵

Our Finding Safety Project supports women and girls in these circumstances who have also faced sexual and gender-based violence, both on their journey to Australia and once living in Australia.¹⁶ This cohort of women and children face extremely limited pathways to accessing support, and are often forced to remain in violent situations, as a direct result of their temporary visa status.¹⁷

As the cost-of-living crisis continues to escalate, frontline services and community organisations like ours are increasingly unable to meet demand for emergency relief. Therefore, we stress the importance of prioritising this cohort to ensure access to services, and increase opportunities for self-sufficiency in Australia. Within this cohort, we recommend expediting the processing of people on temporary visas who are already onshore, and are evidently unable to return home due to ongoing crisis and/or conflict in their home countries.

Specifically, given the ongoing conflict in Iran, and amid the decision to ban entry to Iranian nationals,¹⁸ we encourage the government to process applications from Iranian nationals who are already onshore, living and contributing to the Australian community, and yet have no pathway to permanency.¹⁹

Recommendation 14: The Australian Government should expedite the processing of people seeking asylum onshore, who have experienced protracted wait times, and are unable to return home due to conflict or persecution.

Settlement and Supporting the Most Vulnerable

Settlement support is a critical component of the Humanitarian Program and directly influences long-term outcomes for individuals and communities.

¹⁵ <https://aus.jrs.net/en/news/homelessness-week-2025/>

¹⁶ <https://aus.jrs.net/en/womens-space-finding-safety/>

¹⁷ <https://aus.jrs.net/en/news/anitas-story/>

¹⁸ <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/TonyBurke/Pages/protecting-integrity-and-sustainability-of-our-migration-system.aspx>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/mar/12/iranian-women-refugee-asylum-visa-australia-nauru>

While global instability and rising costs are placing pressure on settlement systems, it is essential that the program continues to prioritise those with the greatest need. A shift away from this focus risks poorer integration outcomes, reduced coordination, and increased pressure on community services.

Government-funded settlement services provide a necessary foundation, particularly for individuals and families with complex needs. Community and diaspora support plays an important complementary role, including through the provision of social networks, cultural knowledge and practical assistance.

Through our work in Australia, JRS continues to see high levels of vulnerability among refugees, including financial, food and housing insecurity resulting from barriers to accessing meaningful work. These experiences highlight the importance of maintaining a strong and adequately resourced settlement framework.

We also note the mutual importance of additional support, funding and consistency of referrals for refugee settlement in rural and regional Australia, where communities are eager to welcome refugees and to benefit from their skills and contributions.²⁰

Recommendation 15: The Australian Government should continue investment in co-designed and community-driven settlement support services that are responsive to the needs of those accessing the services, particularly in regional and rural settings where supports can be more limited.

Conclusion

Australia's Humanitarian Program is a vital component of our country's response to global displacement and contribution to international responsibility sharing. In a context of record levels of displacement, limited resettlement opportunities and increasing regional pressures, there is a clear case for strengthening Australia's commitment to humanitarian protection.

JRS Australia encourages the Australian Government to increase the size of the Humanitarian Program, maintaining its overarching protection focus, prioritising those in the greatest need, and responding to both regional and global crises in a consistent and principled manner.

Australia has a long history of providing protection to refugees and humanitarian migrants, and has benefited greatly from the contributions of people who have arrived through the Humanitarian Program. Continuing this legacy requires a program that remains compassionate, effective, and firmly grounded in the principles of protection and human dignity.

²⁰ <https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2026/i-lost-hope-in-humanity-but-i-now-call-myself-human.php>

JRS Australia looks forward to ongoing engagement with the Department in shaping the future of Australia's Humanitarian Program, including opportunities to connect the Department with our colleagues in the region should this be of interest to the Department.