

## **Federal Government shows little compassion for asylum seekers**

Proposed changes to the refugee decision making and review processes will see the introduction of impractical, unrealistic requirements imposed on many people seeking asylum in our country.

The changes announced by the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, the Hon. Phillip Ruddock, on 20 March 1997 claim to improve efficiency, credibility and accountability. We believe the changes will lessen justice, compassion and due process of the law for genuine asylum seekers.

"The Government is seeking to introduce a post-decision fee of \$1,000 for the Refugee Review Tribunal if the application is unsuccessful, designed to deter bogus claims," said Archbishop Hickey, Chairman of the Bishops' Committee for Migrants and Refugees. "However, for many refugee claimants who are without much money when they arrive in Australia I believe that the mere threat of such an amount will be a deterrent for even the most bona-fide of refugees."

Asylum seekers are often called 'illegal immigrants', this is a misnomer. They do not claim to be migrating but to be seeking refuge from persecution. Calling them 'illegal' undermines public sympathy and creates an unwillingness to listen to their story.

Asylum seekers hold no legal status or rights. Community and church organisations, many of which are heavily reliant on government funding, try to provide asylum seekers with assistance, advice and acceptance on their arrival in Australia. "It is a pity to see that some concerned organisations do not feel in a position to speak out against the proposed changes for fear of financial retribution," said Archbishop Hickey.

The other matter of concern is the requirement that asylum seekers must submit their application for a work permit within two weeks of arriving in Australia. "This is a highly impractical concept on the basis that some asylum seekers 'lie low' when they arrive in Australia; have very little command, if any, of the English language; or are wary of authoritarian bodies or figures. Who is to inform these people of Australian regulations?"