

SUBMISSION TO AUSTRALIA'S HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM 2026-27 CONSULTATION



Introduction

Australia has a proud multicultural history. Extending a hand to people in need is central to the Australian ideal of “mateship” and recently, Australia welcomed the country’s one millionth refugee.¹ From offering protection to people from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia during the Vietnam War to supporting people fleeing Afghanistan and Ukraine in more recent years, Australia is at its best when opening its arms out to people in need of safety.

As the Government considers the size and composition of Australia’s Humanitarian Program from 2026-2027, the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this public consultation.

The Government has stated that they intend for the Humanitarian Program to retain 20,000 spaces in the coming year 2026/2027. It is our belief that a program of this size constitutes a basic fulfilment of Australia’s humanitarian obligations and that the Government should strive towards a larger program, akin to the 27,000 spaces promised in the Australian Labor Party’s previous policy platforms.²

Last year, the number of protection visas issued as part of Australia’s humanitarian intake sat at around 4,000.³ This figure constitutes only a small proportion of the humanitarian intake and in this response we will set out why we believe it must be expanded.

Finally, we note that as part of this consultation, the Government is also seeking feedback on the “longer-term policy settings to ensure the Humanitarian Program remains sustainable and best responds to community needs.” The ASC rejects any future cuts to Australia’s already limited Humanitarian Program and any shift away from prioritising referrals from UNHCR or places offered through the onshore protection program within the overall program.

¹ Celebrating the stories of Australia’s million refugees, Refugee Council of Australia, 18 March 2026, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/2026-autumn-your-voice-celebrating-stories-australias-million-refugees/>

² Australian Labor Party National Platform, 49th National Conference, 17-19 August 2023, <https://www.alp.org.au/media/3569/2023-alp-national-platform.pdf>

³ Onshore Humanitarian Program 2024–25, Department of Home Affairs, 30 June 2025, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/ohp-june-25..pdf>

The size of the Humanitarian Program – 2026-27 and beyond

While we welcomed the Labor Government's decision to increase Australia's humanitarian intake upon first entering office, we continue to believe that the 20,000 places available through this program remains a basic fulfilment of Australia's humanitarian obligations. For a large and prosperous country like Australia, the decision to only support 20,000 new refugees each year remains unambitious. It is useful to note that over the last 10 years, the Refugee and Humanitarian Program contributed less than 10% of Australia's net overseas migration but has made a big impact for the families resettled, for Australia's international relations, and for what we gain as a country.⁴

In previous policy platforms, the Australian Labor party has set out its ambition to increase Australia's humanitarian intake to around 27,000 places.⁵ We call on the Government to fulfil that promise.

The Onshore Protection Program

As previously noted, the number of protection visas issued in FY24-25 as part of Australia's 20,000 humanitarian places was around 4,000,⁶ which as a proportion of the program remains very low. Offering protection to people who have been able to arrive safely in Australia is a crucial component of Australia's legal obligations as a party to the Refugee Convention 1951.

For almost 30 years, refugee civil society members have called for the Australian Government to break the link between the onshore protection visa program and the offshore Humanitarian Program. The Refugee Council of Australia notes that no other resettlement country in the world links their onshore refugee grants with their overseas resettlement places.⁷ Capping the number of people granted formal refugee status annually through the onshore protection program creates unnecessary backlogs in the system. This approach also fails those people who have come to Australia fleeing war and persecution by making them wait to fit into the quotas allocated to this part of the humanitarian program, rather than granting them safety and supporting them when they need it based on the evidence they provide.

⁴ How many refugees have come to Australia?, Refugee Council of Australia, 19 February 2025, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/how-many-refugees-have-come/2/>

⁵ Australian Labor Party National Platform, 49th National Conference, 17-19 August 2023, <https://www.alp.org.au/media/3569/2023-alp-national-platform.pdf>

⁶ Onshore Humanitarian Program 2024–25, Department of Home Affairs, 30 June 2025, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/ohp-june-25..pdf>

⁷ Key Points on Australia's Humanitarian Program 2024-25 Discussion Paper, Refugee Council of Australia, 4 June 2024, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/key-points-2024-25-humanitarian-program/>

We believe the onshore protection program should be uncapped and protection-focused, leaving decision-makers to issue visas as required to ensure the safety of refugees found to meet Australia's international protection obligations. Continuing to link the onshore and offshore programs constrains Australia's ability to meaningfully respond to refugee resettlement needs, and new and protracted crises.

Pulling up the ladder

We are deeply concerned by recent legislative developments, including the expanded ministerial powers ('Arrival Control Determination') to block entry for temporary visa holders from overseas via the Migration Amendment (2026 Measures No. 1) Act 2026. Given the concerted efforts consecutive governments have made to ensure people seeking asylum arrive in Australia through safe, "legal" routes, this legislation risks blocking onshore protection applications, thus threatening the integrity of Australia's onshore protection program and asylum system in general.

This move also increases the risk that in the absence of safe and so-called legal routes, people fleeing war and persecution may once again be pushed towards other, less safe means of attempting to reach Australia.

Conclusion

While we welcomed the Labor Government's decision to increase Australia's humanitarian intake upon first entering office, we continue to believe that the 20,000 places available through this program remains a basic fulfilment of Australia's humanitarian obligations. We believe the Government should strive towards a larger program, akin to the 27,000 spaces promised in the Australian Labor Party's previous policy platforms.⁸

Recommendations

- The Government should strive towards a larger humanitarian program, akin to the 27,000 spaces promised in the Australian Labor Party's previous policy platforms.⁹
- Expanded ministerial powers ('Arrival Control Determinations') created via the Migration Amendment (2026 Measures No. 1) Act 2026 threaten to undermine Australia's humanitarian obligations and should be scrapped.
- Protection decisions should be driven by legal obligations, needs and evidence, not by annual quotas. The Government should uncap the onshore protection program and end its linkage to the offshore quota.

⁸ Australian Labor Party National Platform, 49th National Conference, 17-19 August 2023, <https://www.alp.org.au/media/3569/2023-alp-national-platform.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

The Asylum Seekers Centre

Established in 1993, the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC) was the first organisation in Australia to open its doors to specifically welcome and support people seeking asylum. We provide practical and personal support for people seeking safety in Greater Sydney, and advocate for fair and humane policies at every level.

In the last financial year, we supported approximately 4,600 people seeking asylum, including around 1,000 children, from more than 90 countries.

For more information, please contact the ASC's Advocacy Lead, Mark Johnson - mark.johnson@asylumseekerscentre.org.au