***Visit of Asia Pacific refugee Rights Network (APRRN) delegation to Australia and New Zealand: 3 September 2015***

The afternoon panel discussion was held at the office of Settlement Services International (SSI) at Ashfield.

Participants

1. APRRN Chair (Nepal): Dr Gopal Siwakoti

2. APRRN Secretariat (Thailand): Anoop Sukumaran

3. Indonesia: Yunita, SUAKA

4. Malaysia: Sharuna Verghis, Health Equity Initiatives

5. Sri Lanka: Lakshan Dias, SANRIM

(Chaired by Paul Power, CEO, Refugee Council of Australia)

Paul Power invited each panellist to speak and then there were some questions from the audience of about 30 people.

The points made by the panellists, all leaders of NGOs working with refugees in the region, included:

* How is Australia viewed? People used to expect support from Australia, but now this is problematic. In fact Australia's cruel treatment of asylum seekers is emboldening others in the region to get tougher. They reason that if this behaviour is acceptable for a country which is a signatory to the Refugee Convention, what is the difficulty with poorer countries which are not signatories going down the same path. In the May crisis, Australia was sidelined, caught up in domestic politics at the expense of persecuted people.
* In Indonesia, people can be detained for up to 10 years. Nevertheless people are queuing up to go into detention because they cannot obtain food. The IOM (with funding support from Australia) requires people to go into detention. What is needed is support for alternatives to detention and support for making the environment in Indonesia better for asylum seekers and refugees.
* Australia has supported the Malaysian Government in stopping the issuing of visas at airports in Malaysia, thus not only closing its own borders but also plugging other spaces further afield.
* Conditions are deplorable in Malaysia. Migration centres are set up in hospitals so that people are detained once they seek treatment.
* There is a non-refoulement risk with turnbacks, particularly to Sri Lanka (and Australia has been muted when refoulement has occurred elsewhere). This kind of Australian imperialism likely to be followed by other (only Afghanistan in the region is a signatory).
* Many countries lack an established legal framework, and many have no human rights protections. Also, because of insufficient resources (donor fatigue) arrangements are ad hoc and casual. In these conditions, people who need protection make painful and perilous journeys.

In the Q and A session, the following points were made:

* The UNHCR is unable to do much more that some processing of claims. This creates a sense of desperation which leads people to get onto boats. When they are turned back their situation can be very dire as they have exhausted their savings and can be punished.
* In the Sri Lankan case, people smugglers were no involved. A group of people got themselves a boat. After they were returned to Sri Lanka three of the families escaped to Nepal where they were recognised as refugees.
* The increasing militarisation of Australia (with rhetoric such as 'global war on terror', 'border force') meant that people needing protection turned instead to Turkey and Europe and made even more perilous journeys. False passports and visas were becoming much more common.
* The advice these NGO leaders from our region would be giving th Australian government would be to increase the number of resettlement places; to engage with regional partners to find durable solutions; and, in order to facilitate voluntary repatriation, work towards peace-building in troubled areas. Australia should also work to alleviate the hardship of those in refugee camps, and should monitor those whom it has turned back to establish their fate. Australia could work harder to support the rule of law in other countries and to support democratic institutions. But above all, Australia must stop discriminating against people seeking protection based on their mode of travel. It is simply irrelevant to the strength of their claim for protection. We might think of asylum seekers on the move as 'floating people'.

Documents made available at the seminar were:

APRRN Country briefings for Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. These briefings contain up to date information about conditions in each country and specific recommendations to the Australian Government. These can be found at: <http://www.aprrn.info/1/pdf/Combined_AUS_Final.pdf>

Documents provided by the Refugee Council of Australia included:

Recent Changes in Australian refugee Policy: <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Aust-refugee-policy-changes-stats-150812.pdf>

Improving Refugee Protection in Asia-pacific: [http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Australias-response-to-region-150720.pdf](how%20Australia%20can%20make%20a%20practical%20difference%3A%20http%3A/www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Australias-response-to-region-150720.pdf)

The delegation was going to Canberra to meet, amongst others, Richard Marles.

Notes by Catherine Crittenden, Labor for Refugees.