

Churches pressure Government to increase refugee intake

Pressure is growing from Australian Church leaders on the Australian Government to increase the refugee intake from Afghanistan.

The Afghan community and many refugee and faith organisations are calling for a commitment to taking 20,000 refugees from. Afghanistan, matching a pledge from Canada.

The Australian Government, however, has said it will offer 3,000 places in its humanitarian visa program specifically for those now fleeing Afghanistan.

Priority will be given to people with family already in Australia, women and girls, children and persecuted minorities like Hazaras.

But this is not a special intake of refugees. The 3,000 will come from within the existing number of available humanitarian visas.

Australia is currently offering 13,750 humanitarian visas each year.

While stopping short of putting a number on the refugees Australia should take in the Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia, Archbishop Geoff Smith in a statement on the situation, urged the government to do all it can to ensure safe passage for Afghan citizens, particularly those who assisted

Australian troops in Afghanistan over the past 20 years.

The National Council of Churches in Australia and the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce, meanwhile, have written to the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, calling for a new humanitarian intake of 20,000 Afghan refugees to match the Canadian commitment.

â??The situation is increasingly desperate for the many Afghan refugees in Australia who are on Temporary Protection Visas or in immigration detention. It may never be safe again for them to return to Afghanistan,â?• Elizabeth Stone, the General Secretary wrote.

The Australian Catholic Bishop Conference president Archbishop Mark Coleridge also called fro the Government to provide at least 20,000 humanitarian places for Afghans in the wake of the Taliban takeover.

His call was echoed by Catholic organisations working with refugees such as the Jesuit Refugee Service, which called for permanent protection to the estimated 5,100 Afghan refugees who have been living and working in Australia on temporary visas.

In a letter to the Prime Minister, Archbishop Coleridge said the 3,000 places offered above and beyond 8,000 places over the past decade â??is a substantial commitment, but more is neededâ?•.

â??Australia has stepped up before in response to significant humanitarian crises, and I urge your government to be generous,â?• he wrote. he said Catholic agencies â??stand ready to assist your government with resettlement of refugees as an expression of our great concern for the people of Afghanistanâ?•.

The Uniting Church in Australia Assembly more than 300 organisations in signing a joint letter to all Federal MPs and Senators urging them to take seven practical actions, including increasing the refugee intake, to help those fleeing the security situation in Afghanistan.

UCA President Rev Sharon Hollis encouraged Uniting Church members to pray for the people of Afghanistan impacted by the violence and for those desperately seeking protection and safety.

â??We hold in our prayers the people of Afghanistan who long for peace after decades of armed conflict, and we pray for the safety and security of all Afghan people in this latest crisis,â?• said Rev Hollis.

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