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## Media release

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### **Budget misses the mark when it comes to enhancing refugee protection**

Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) has lamented the 2017 Federal Budget as a missed opportunity for Australia to show leadership in enhancing refugee protection in the Asia Pacific region.

Khahn Hoang, Co-Chair of ALHR's Refugee Rights Subcommittee said, "ALHR welcomes the announcement of an increase in Australia's refugee and humanitarian intake from 13,750 to 16,250 in 2017-18, though ALHR and other human rights bodies had called for an even higher increase. However, more needs to be done to support refugees and asylum seekers already in Australia, to find an alternative solution to offshore processing, and to create pathways for full integration of refugees into the Australian community."

#### **Community Sponsorship Program**

As part of the increased refugee and humanitarian intake, 1,000 places will be set aside for privately sponsored refugees through the Community Support Programme (CSP). The CSP will allow individuals and businesses to sponsor refugees to come to Australia. Sponsors will be required to support the settlement of these entrants for 12 months after their arrival.

While ALHR supports such a program in principle, such measures should be *complementary to*, rather than part of existing refugee quotas. Hoang, said "the idea of private sponsorship as providing a different pathway to protection for refugees is a good one" but that "it could be a slippery slope that in reality sees the government transfer protection responsibilities to the community and private sector to save costs". The budget papers reveal that the CSP will generate \$24 million over the next four years, while the cost of establishment is only \$364,000 for the first year and a total of \$1.26 million over four years. "Refugee resettlement should be focused on protection, not profit," Hoang noted.

#### **Offshore processing and detention**

The budget includes \$1.91 billion to offshore and onshore mandatory detention compliance programs. While the Manus Island detention centre will close down, the government has not detailed plans for those who are not accepted for resettlement to the US. Nauru will remain funded and operational. ALHR has ongoing concern for the safety and welfare of those on offshore processing centres and calls upon the government adhere to its international legal obligations, close the centres and bring people to safety in Australia.

Hoang said, "not only has offshore processing been extremely expensive, it has caused considerable harm to the refugees and asylum seekers to whom Australia owe international obligations, as well as to Australia's international reputation.. The budget allocation represents a considerable amount of money that could be better spent on enhancing refugee protection and settlement outcomes."

## **Citizenship amendments**

ALHR remains concerned about the Government's intention to press ahead with its proposed changes to Australia's citizenship rules. In particular, the proposed requirements for 4-years of permanent residence and competent English (6 in the IELTS test) will make difficult for many refugees to become permanent residents.

According to Hoang, "the ability to obtain citizenship is the end goal for most refugees. It facilitates their sense of belonging and inclusion into Australian community. By placing barriers to citizenship for refugees (and other migrants), Australia risks losing out on their considerable economic, social and political contributions". He further stated that, "as a multicultural society, Australia should embrace diversity and inclusion, not dislocation and exclusion".

"At a time when there are more people seeking refugee protection worldwide than ever before, Australia should be pursuing principled, yet pragmatic measures to enhance refugee protection and integration. This opportunity has been lost in the 2017 budget," lamented Hoang.

**To arrange an interview with Khanh Hoang, please contact Matt Mitchell on 0431 980 365.**