



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

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Repatriation of Hazaras questioned by Catholic Church as Asylum Seekers drown off Christmas Island

The Catholic Bishops have questioned the possible repatriation of over 300 Hazara asylum seekers to Afghanistan at a time when it is unclear if the country is safe.

The Australian Newspaper reported yesterday that the Gillard Government is on the verge of signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which has been drafted between Canberra and Kabul, which would allow the possible repatriation of over 300 Hazaras to Afghanistan.

Australian Bishops' delegate for Migration issues Bishop Joe Grech is very worried about what this would mean for the vulnerable Hazara group.

“Considering that earlier this year, there was a freeze on asylum seeker claims from Afghanistan which was only lifted in late September, it seems to be extremely premature discussing repatriation to this country, which is widely considered to be extremely dangerous”, he said.

Director of the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office Fr Maurizio Pettena said that the information at hand is not satisfactory to make a decision to repatriate so many.

“When assessing cases of people like the Hazara group, it is essential that we have accurate information about the state of affairs in that country. It is my belief that people are fleeing with very good reason and may be in need of international refugee protection.”

“We would ask the Australian Government to consider very carefully its motives for repatriation, considering the increasing numbers of arrivals on our shores from this part of the world and consider how they would be monitored following their repatriation”, he said.

This move comes at the same time as up to 40 Asylum Seekers drowned off Christmas Island in stormy seas this morning.

Bishop Joe said that this tragedy shows that seeking asylum is a very complex issue.

“We need to really respect that people are fleeing desperate circumstances and take into very strong consideration what has led people to make this decision.”

“Our hearts and prayers go out to these people and their families who remain. To make the arduous journey by boat and to lose their lives just short of safety is tragic. This just puts into perspective the incredible risks taken by people to escape their homelands. They make this journey with children, so they are obviously escaping very dire circumstances. They are not coming for a holiday”, said Bishop Joe.

The asylum seekers who drowned were apparently mostly Iraqis and Iranians.

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