

MEDIA RELEASE

Additional release of Medevac detainees welcomed by SA refugee advocates

29 January 2021



South Australian refugee advocates have welcomed the Federal Government's latest release of another group of refugees brought to Australia under the Medevac legislation, which was in place between 2 March 2019 and 4 December 2019. This comes a week after the release of 46 fellow detainees who had been in Melbourne hotels for more than a year. The rereleases have come with little or no warning to refugees or their supporters.

Those released were some of the 192 so-called "transitory persons" brought to Australia during the months the Medevac laws were in effect. Since the overturning of the Medevac laws they have been housed in hotels, mainly in Melbourne and Brisbane, which the Department of Home Affairs insists on calling "Alternative Places of Detention", or APODs.

Rev Sandy Boyce, spokesperson for Justice for Refugees SA, welcomed the ending of the detention for these individuals: "This action has been a long time coming. On the Government's own account, these people posed no risk to the community but were kept in limbo for more than a year for political rather than security or practical reasons". Rev Boyce said despite a long-running community campaign for the release, little explanation had been given for why they had been released now.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton has indicated the decisions to release groups of detainees is based on concerns about the cost of holding people in the hotels. He told radio station 2GB, "It's cheaper for people to be in the community than it is to be at a hotel or for us to be paying for them to be in detention." (Transcript, Interview with Ray Hadley, radio station 2GB, Thursday, 21 January 2021: <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/peterdutton/Pages/ray-hadley-21012021.aspx>)

"You don't need to be a financial expert to reach that conclusion. We've been telling successive governments that very point for many years," Rev Boyce said. "The bottom line is decisions about refugee policy, over a long period of time by governments of all stripes, have been about politics, pure and simple." Rev Boyce raised concern that the Government may use this as an opportunity to walk away from its responsibility to provide basic supports for these vulnerable people. "Sure, there will be joy and relief about being released, and a sense that whatever comes next has to be better than being locked detention," she said. "But the Government must also provide a financial safety net if vulnerable people and families need it: they must not be left to become destitute."

Justice for Refugees SA is also concerned that the Home Affairs Minister's decision means State Government services, Non-Government Organisations funded by State agencies, local government, unfunded community service providers and volunteer groups will be left to deal with the human and social costs of the Federal Government's failure to take its responsibilities seriously.

Those released have been put on the Orwellian sounding "Final Departure Bridging Visas." While this appears to suggest those assigned with visas will be leaving Australia sometime soon, that reality is highly unlikely. This means those released could be left without support indefinitely.

Justice for Refugees SA is a non-partisan community organisation working for the just and humane treatment of people seeking asylum in Australia, and those who have come to Australia as refugees, building on Australian traditions of generosity, openness, and fairness.

Ends

Justice for Refugees SA contact for comment:

Contact details (Not for Publication): Rev Sandy Boyce. Chair, Justice for Refugees SA
0409 283 004 info@justiceforrefugeessa.org www.justiceforrefugeessa.org