Minister reports to Parliament on processing arrangements in Nauru and PNG for 2013—14

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On 4 December 2014, the last scheduled parliamentary sitting day for the year, a report was tabled in Parliament on the regional processing arrangements for unauthorised maritime arrivals. The Minister’s report covers arrangements made during the period 1 July 2013 to 30 June 2014. The statutory obligation to produce such a report comes from section 198AJ of the Migration Act which was inserted by the former Government to give effect to a recommendation of the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee. The Committee considered that ‘a comprehensive reporting requirement would be desirable, to ensure transparency and accountability in relation to regional processing arrangements’ and that ‘such an important requirement should be included in the Bill, to enable the Parliament to properly scrutinise the arrangements for unauthorised maritime arrivals transferred to regional processing countries’. Though the report is currently not available electronically, the following is a summary of its contents.

**Papua New Guinea**

The former Government designated Papua New Guinea (PNG) to be a ‘regional processing country’ on 9 October 2012 and began transferring asylum seekers there more than two years ago, in November 2012. According to Departmental statistics, at the end of the last financial year (30 June 2014), Australia had transferred more than 1,000 asylum seekers to PNG. The Minister’s report states that during the last financial year, the Government of PNG had not made any final determinations on the claims made by the asylum seekers, but it had provided 56 initial refugee status assessments. Thus, during the reporting period no asylum seekers had been determined to be refugees under PNG’s Migration Act 1978. Asylum seekers are provided with claims assistance and advice through contracted providers funded by Australia.

With respect to *accommodation*, the Minister’s report states that ‘family groups were accommodated in hard walled structures until 4 July 2013 when they were transferred to Australia. Single adult males were accommodated in military style tents until 6 July 2013*
when they were relocated into existing hard walled structures previously occupied by family groups. New hard walled marquee accommodation came online in September 2013. New containerised accommodation came online in November 2013. Upgrades to amenities and security are progressively being made’. Regarding education, English as a second language classes were run daily by the Salvation Army up until 21 February 2014, when their contract ceased. From then, Transfield Services provided a range of programmes including English, to support the wellbeing of asylum seekers.

With respect to health care, services were provided by contracted health services provider, International Health and Medical Services (IHMS). ‘IHMS engages general practitioners, nurses, paramedics, psychologists, counsellors and visiting specialists to deliver onsite emergency, primary and mental health care services to transferees that are the best available in the circumstances and broadly comparable with health services available within the Australian community’.

Nauru
The former Government designated Nauru to be a ‘regional processing country’ on 10 September 2012 and began transferring asylum seekers four days later. According to Departmental statistics, as at 30 June 2014, there were more than 1,000 asylum seekers (including nearly 200 children) on Nauru. The Minister’s report states that Nauru commenced assessing refugee claims under its Refugees Convention Act 2012 on 19 March 2013 and during the last financial year, finalised 128 claims for asylum (representing only 11 per cent of the caseload). 99 asylum seekers were determined to be refugees and granted temporary visas. Asylum seekers on Nauru were also provided with claims assistance and advice funded by Australia.

With respect to accommodation, the Minister’s report states that asylum seekers were accommodated in soft-walled marquee–style accommodation. Families with children aged up to four years and unaccompanied minors were accommodated in air conditioned accommodation. Dining, education, recreational, administrative, and medical facilities were available for use.

Regarding education for children, Save the Children Australia (SCA) was contracted by the Australian Government to provide specialist care and support services for families with children, including the provision of education services to children. The educational programmes were delivered onsite and were in line with Nauruan educational standards. The curriculum was an Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority based curriculum. Twelve refugee children living in the community were enrolled in Nauruan schools during the reporting period.

The Minister’s comments with respect to education for adults and healthcare in Nauru were identical to those made with respect to PNG (see above).

Though the Minister’s report is an official parliamentary record of the arrangements that have been made in the last financial year for asylum seekers transferred to regional processing countries, it is not entirely clear whether as a result of its delayed tabling, Parliament will have the opportunity to ‘properly scrutinise’ its contents, as was the original intention for the insertion of the reporting obligation.