



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

CONSTITUENCY STATEMENTS

Asylum Seekers

SPEECH

Wednesday, 12 August 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Bandt, Adam, MP

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Mr BANDT (Melbourne) (10:36): Australians do not often have a chance to see the reality behind the Abbott government's cruel policies against asylum seekers, but sometimes stories get out that let us see into the darkness of this government's secret on-water matters. In April this year a fishing boat carrying 46 Vietnamese asylum seekers was intercepted by Australian authorities. Rather than granting these asylum seekers the right to have their claims assessed, the government simply returned them to the very government they were fleeing.

Nobody chooses to get on a boat and leave behind their lives. Forty years after the end of the war in Vietnam, the Vietnamese community in Australia tells of the reality that many people still face: the capture, torture and incarceration of religious leaders, the bulldozing of land from the poor farmers and the lost opportunity to fish to earn a living, with the Vietnamese government giving away land and territorial waters. Despite this, in July this year, Minister Peter Dutton and the Abbott government returned to Vietnam another 50 asylum seekers on board the boat 96282. We have heard disturbing reports that some have since been detained. In fact, we know that at least one person on that boat, Hai Nguyen, remains in prison. Several others repeatedly faced hostile interrogation by the authorities.

Today I call on the government to come clean. Does the Minister for Immigration know for certain the fate of these asylum seekers that he forced back to the very country they were seeking protection from? If not, how can the government be sure Australia is living up to its most basic and serious obligation under the Refugee Convention and customary international law not to refole refugees to their countries of origin? What assurance has the government received that these asylum seekers will be safe? What measures did the Australian government take to assess these asylum seekers' claims?

Sadly, on the very same weekend that our immigration minister was secretly sending asylum seekers back to the country they had fled, the ALP followed opposition leader Bill Shorten's lead and formalised its support for turning back asylum seekers. Boat turn-backs mean returning people to danger, to persecution, to face imprisonment or death somewhere else, out of sight, out of mind.

The Vietnamese community in Australia has been very clear: we must say no to refolement. No person should ever be returned to danger anywhere in the world. This year, 2015, marks the 40th anniversary of the Vietnamese community here in Australia, and Australians have rightly celebrated the outstanding contribution that Vietnamese Australians have made over this time, not least to my electorate of Melbourne. But had we done 40 years ago what this government is doing now we would not have the Vietnamese community in Australia that we currently have.

It is vital that when we celebrate these achievements we also recognise that human rights everywhere, including in Vietnam, must still be defended and that Australia must remain a place where we welcome and support those who come here for safety. The Vietnamese community here in Australia shows us that Australia is a better place when we say 'welcome', and, no matter what your political persuasion, no Australian could be anything but deeply moved to see Vietnamese Australians and the way they are being treated.