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The Director
Economic and Environment Section
Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs
PO Box 25
Belconnen
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Dear Director

Attached is a short submission in response to the call by the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs for comments on the 2002 –2003 Migration and Humanitarian Programs and associated settlement issues.

The Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA) would welcome an opportunity for a representative of the organisation to meet with the Minister and Departmental Office to discuss the contents of this submission at an appropriate time. ARHA would also be willing to expand or clarify any points made in this submission.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Dianne Proctor
Chief Executive Officer.





**Submission on behalf of
The Australian Reproductive Health Alliance Inc
On
The 2002-2003 Migration and Humanitarian Programs and
Associated Settlement Issues**

**Australian Reproductive Health Alliance
PO Box 3937
Weston ACT 2611**

February 2002

1. Introduction

The Australian Reproductive Health Alliance has the following mission statement

1 To promote public support, both within Australia and internationally, for the improvement in the well-being and status of women and the development of reproductive health in families and individuals by means including—

- the production of educational materials;*
- the organisation of seminars and workshops;*
- the preparation of briefing materials for members of the press;*
- networking with parliamentarians, government departments and other interested parties as required;*
- the support and promotion of alliances of opinion makers with comparable aims and objectives.*

2 To promote knowledge, education and research relating to the development of family planning and other reproductive health services, paying particular attention to the needs of Indigenous People, both within Australia and internationally.

3 Where appropriate, to identify and support specific development projects which promote reproductive health, and enhance the status of women and girls, either working independently or with partner organisations.

4 To promote, maintain and extend the interest of ARHA members in a broad range of issues concerning reproductive health and its role in development.

This statement was adopted in line with the Cairo Program of Action (POA), which was the outcome of the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development. ARHA was established as a direct outcome of that conference by a group of Australian Citizens, concerned that the Australian Government should meet its obligations under the POA.

ARHA not only conducts a wide range of public education programs, including youth conferences, on population and development but has also been instrumental in establishing and supporting the Australian All Party Parliamentary Group on Population and Development.

Attached as an appendix (appendix 1) to this submission is the latest Annual Report of ARHA, which gives a broad outline of the work of the organisation.

2. Cairo Program of Action Obligations.

The Australian Government has agreed under the POA to develop a comprehensive national population policy, which encompasses broad ranging issues around reproductive health and rights, education (particularly of women and girls), agreement to uphold various human rights laws and conventions and also to protect the rights of migrants in accordance with international law and covenants. Australia was an active participant in development of the original Program of Action and also, the current Australian Government reiterated its support for the POA at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (Cairo +5) held in New York in 1999.

3. Implementation of the Program of Action and its relevance to the 2002-3 Immigration and Migration Program.

Each Year, since at least 1996, ARHA has strongly recommended that all aspects of the immigration program be looked at in the context of a broader population policy. We are well aware of the difficulties of this approach in that there is no consensus either in the general community, political parties or even among experts as to what such a policy should contain.

However, we do believe that there are factors currently in place in the Australian society, which give the Government of the day a real chance to progress this issue.

There now appears to be growing interest across the broader community in the need for the development of a coherent policy. This interest has been sparked by a number of issues.

The obvious and most pressing one is the growing public concern on the way Australia is handling the issue of asylum seekers. While there was initially great support for the Government's approach to this issue, more people of all political persuasions including parliamentarians from all parties, churches, unions, and academics are concluding that the government's current policy is not sustainable, either from a purely economic viewpoint or from a humanitarian viewpoint.

Much has been written, from many points of view, on this matter, and we do not intend to canvass the whole matter again in this short paper. Suffice it to say that Australia is suffering damage both nationally (from a social cohesion viewpoint) and internationally (from a good international citizen viewpoint). The so-called Pacific Solution is totally unsustainable financially and is in danger of severely damaging our relationships within the region and also skewing our already totally inadequate overseas aid budget in the Pacific region. A recent report by Oxfam/Community Aid Abroad indicates that Nauru is being allocated an extra \$30 million in aid (an amount greater than all AusAID funds provided to Nauru between 1993-2001) as part of the Pacific Solution, but the government has not indicated whether such funding levels will be maintained, or whether the country will simply benefit from a one-off windfall, with no sustainability of programs. It is also not clear whether some of this money will be taken from other parts of the aid program, undermining efforts to improve governance and alleviate poverty in the region. The same report makes it clear that there has been extensive criticism of the government's policy from Presidents, Prime Ministers, church leaders and non-government organizations in the Pacific.

The world is facing a major crisis in dealing with the ever growing problem of both internal and external migration and not only are national policies vital to address this issue, but also, international cooperation is required at a level unprecedented since the end of the second World War. A growing number—now 125 million people—are living outside the countries of their birth (including refugees and undocumented migrants). International migration is projected to remain high during the twenty-first century. The more developed regions are expected to remain net receivers of international migrants, with an average gain of about 2 million per year over the next 50 years.

Apart from the crisis surrounding the international migration problem, there is an emerging sense of urgency developing (again both nationally and internationally) regarding environmental issues.

Whether we look at issues such as water, land degradation, global warming or deforestation, it becomes obvious that there is no short, technical quick fix to the problems facing humankind at the moment.

We do not intend to go into the whole issue of the impact of population growth and its impact on these matters. Any person purporting to be dealing with immigration and sustainable future development must surely be aware of the well documented implications of these issues.

ARHA is not prepared to throw its hands up in despair, and would therefore urge the Government to take the following steps to creating a long term, coherent population policy which would include an overall immigration policy.

- a) Immediately increase its overseas aid budget to 0.35% of GNP as a step towards meeting its agreed and endorsed UN target of 0.7% of GNP. Some of this increase should be directed to assisting countries currently coping with large refugee problems (whether internal or external). The best way of achieving this is probably by a judicious mixture of increased funding to the UNHCR, bilateral aid and a significant increase to NGOs working constructively at the coalface in this area.
- b) Australia does not need to alter its existing overseas aid policy in order to achieve this aim. The alleviation of poverty – which is the aid program's prime focus – fits in exactly with the need to assist those countries which are striving to cope with vast numbers of internally displaced people, due either to war, famine, environmental causes or a mixture of all of these.
- c) Immediately increasing the Australian Government's intake in the humanitarian and refugee categories of immigration, if necessary by decreasing other less urgent categories seeking assistance, especially business migration (it must be stressed this is a short term proposal only while long term strategies are pursued.).
- d) Setting in place machinery for the closure of existing "detention camps" by the expeditious screening of asylum seekers through some sort of preliminary holding procedure, pending the release of the vast majority of such asylum seekers into the wider community while they await the assessment of their cases. This would also by implication mean the abandonment of the so-called Pacific Solution to the issue of asylum seekers. It would be essential for the Australian Government to undertake this course of action in conjunction with a vigorous education program for the general community so that they understood that this reversal of existing policy was not going to "open the floodgates" and was merely bringing Australia into line with procedures already adopted by most developed countries. It also would be necessary for the Government to ensure that the community understood that the numbers of asylum seekers arriving on Australia's shores by boats was minute both in comparison with the 60 000 "over stayers" in this country; in comparison with the size of the international refugee problem, currently around 22 million; and in comparison to the number of people seeking asylum in other countries – for example 82 787 in Germany and 20 955 in Sweden between January and November 2001, compared to 10 341 in Australia
- e) Concurrent with implementing strategies outlined in (a) – (d) above, the

Government should form a Department of Population with Cabinet level ministerial representation. Immigration, environment and other relevant scientific and demographic functions could be brought under this portfolio. (Possibly the ABS, and some sections of CSIRO would also fall under this portfolio). Also, in light of falling fertility and the increase in ageing of the population, strong links would have to be in place (formally) with the relevant Departments dealing with these issues.

- f) The first objective of such a new Department would be to draw up short, medium and long term population plans for the future population levels of the country. Such plans, especially the medium and long term ones, would need to be flexible in order to respond adequately to changing national and international circumstances.
- g) ARHA would maintain that by taking such radical action quickly, early in its current term of office, the current Government could show admirable leadership towards developing a long term and coherent plan for the sustainable development of this country. Such action would also earn the support of many sections of the community who see current policies as incoherent and drifting without purpose towards increasing unsustainability and social instability.

4. Conclusion.

ARHA is well aware that the suggestions made above will sound radical but, as mentioned previously, in preparing this submission, the organisation has been looking at its previous submissions on this issue. Each year, we have made a plea for the development of an overall population policy for this country. Each year, we have been courteously received at the hearings. However, as the world and Australian situations have deteriorated, absolutely nothing of any substance has been done. The international situation has grown worse. Competing interests in Australia continue to bicker about the size of immigrant intake (in any category) and disputes about environmental impacts are still completely at an impasse, even though it is obvious that most people are deeply concerned about the future of this country and its responsible participation in the global discussions on these vital matters.

In light of this, ARHA has departed from its usual participation in a rather crude numbers game to express strongly its desire (and its perception that the Australian community would agree – whatever point of view was held) that the time for this annual game playing must cease and that people of goodwill from government level right across all interest groups and the larger community must participate in a serious process to develop a plan for the future of an Australian population policy which, while responsive to short term needs, also addresses long term sustainability.

ARHA requests the opportunity to speak to this submission at the planned hearings.

Dianne Proctor
February 11, 2002.

Key recommendations

ARHA calls on the government to:

1. **immediately increase its overseas aid budget to 0.35% of GNP** as a step towards meeting its agreed and endorsed UN target of 0.7% of GNP. Some of this increase should be directed to assisting countries currently coping with large refugee problems (whether internal or external).

2. **immediately increase the Australian government's intake in the humanitarian and refugee categories of immigration**, if necessary by decreasing other less urgent categories seeking assistance, especially business migration

3. **change its approach to the issue of asylum seekers**, namely by:

- **closing existing "detention camps"** by the expeditious screening of asylum seekers through some sort of preliminary holding procedure, pending the release of the vast majority of such asylum seekers into the wider community while they await the assessment of their cases;
- **abandoning the so-called Pacific Solution** to the issue of asylum seekers;
- **beginning a vigorous education program for the general community** so that they understood that this reversal of existing policy was not going to "open the floodgates" and was merely bringing Australia into line with procedures already adopted by most developed countries; also to ensure that the community understands that the numbers of asylum seekers arriving on Australia's shores by boats was minute in comparison with: the numbers of "over stayers" in this country; the size of the international refugee problem; and the number of people seeking asylum in other countries.

4. **form a Department of Population** with Cabinet level ministerial representation. Immigration, environment and other relevant scientific and demographic functions could be brought under this portfolio.