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Australian bishops question returning asylum seekers to Afghanistan

Anthony Barich Catholic News Service | Dec. 15, 2010

PERTH, Australia -- The same day that up to 50 asylum seekers drowned off the coast of Australia, the nation's Catholic bishops questioned the planned repatriation of more than 300 ethnic Hazara asylum seekers to Afghanistan.

The Australian newspaper reported Dec. 14 that the government was on the verge of signing a memorandum of understanding with the Afghanistan government to allow the repatriation of the Hazaras to their troubled home country.

Bishop Joseph Grech of Sandhurst, the Australian bishops' delegate for migration issues, said in a Dec. 15 statement it seemed premature to be discussing repatriation to Afghanistan, "which is widely considered to be extremely dangerous."

This is especially the case, he said, considering that, until September, there was a freeze on asylum claims from Afghanistan.

Scalabrinian Fr. Maurizio Pettena, director of the Australian bishops' Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office, said there was not enough information 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," he said in a Dec. 15 statement.

"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 added.

On Dec. 15, up to 50 asylum seekers -- believed to be mostly Iraqi and Iranian -- drowned off Christmas Island after their boat crashed into cliffs in stormy seas. Officials said 41 people had been rescued by 3 p.m. that day.

Up to 70 asylum seekers were on board the vessel more than 1,600 miles northwest of Perth, which offered medical teams, police and other emergency services to help the rescue and recovery operation. A Western Australia police spokesman said it might send a forensic team to help identify the dead.

Grech said the deaths showed that seeking asylum is a very complex issue. In October, the attorney general's office said there were more than 2,000 people held in the island's immigration detention facility.

"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," Grech said.

"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," he added.

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