

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 4, 2011 at 11:48am

Bishops pleased by Afghan refugee policy

by Anthony Barich by Catholic News Service

PERTH, Australia -- Australia's Catholic bishops praised the Australian and Afghanistan governments for signing a deal they hope will be "a shift away from ineffective and cruel policies of deterrence to control forced migration."

The two governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding Jan. 17 with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

In a Feb. 4 statement, the Australian bishops' Migrant and Refugee Office expressed the hope that the agreement represents "a more proactive approach which addresses the underlying issue of war and instability in Afghanistan."

The bishops said that people smuggling activities cannot be controlled by returning unsuccessful asylum seekers to Afghanistan.

"The message is lost on people who are desperate and have no other choice," the statement said, and urged the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship Chris Bowen to guarantee "beyond doubt" that those who are returned to Afghanistan will be protected from violence and persecution.

"Australia is paving the way for the rest of the international community to start sending refugees back to Afghanistan. To do so would likely escalate the situation," the statement said.

Australia's current system for processing excised offshore asylum claims is "not sufficient to accurately justify the return of unsuccessful applicants," the statement said.

"It is vitally important, due to the uncertain and dangerous situation still present in Afghanistan, that Afghans claiming asylum be given the opportunity to have the merits of their case reviewed," the bishops'

office said.

The bishops also proposed that all claims for asylum undergo "a fairer and more robust process" under the current refugee status determination process operating on the mainland.

"We must remember the protection and welfare of all humans is paramount," the bishops said. "If there are concerns about unfair procedures and of the environment these persons will be returned to, we should give them the benefit of the doubt and the opportunity to remain."

The bishops also urged that members of the Afghan Hazara minority should not be forced to return even if they do not fit into the legally termed category of a "refugee" because they face severe persecution in their homeland.

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The UNHCR has reported that Afghanistan's capacity to absorb returnees is stretched to its limits.

Therefore, Australia should be "extremely cautious before sending a persecuted minority back to a country which does not have the capacity to guarantee their safety," the bishops said.

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