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Govt's rationale for African refugee cut deeply concerning - Catholic Bishop

The Federal Government's revelation that it based its decision to cut the intake of African refugees on perceived problems with their ability to settle in to life in Australia was deeply concerning, a Catholic Bishop said today.

In August, the federal government cut African refugee numbers in 2007-2008 to allow for an increase from Asia and the Middle East (especially Iraq) where there is also great need for humanitarian resettlement places.

Given that Australia cannot accept all refugees in its annual humanitarian programme of 13,000 (an intake which many people, including the Catholic Bishops, have argued should be increased), this decision was generally accepted for the reasons given.

But last week, the Government said that perceived problems with the ability of refugees from Africa to settle into Australian society was also a reason for cutting the African intake.

Bishop Joseph Grech, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference delegate for immigration and refugee issues, said the comments from Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews raised important issues.

"The first and most fundamental principle in determining our refugee intake is that it must be based on need," Bishop Grech said. "And there can be no doubt that the situation of refugees from Sudan is among the most dire in the world, after years of civil war, violence and famine.

"We should be welcoming these people to our country and offering them every assistance to adjust to their new life in the best way possible."

Bishop Grech said Sudanese refugees faced the same challenges as all refugees when it came to settling into a new society.

"Because many of these people have languished in refugee camps in Africa for many years they face many hurdles when coming to a new country," he said.

"These can include lack of education, socialisation issues, fear of authority figures, difficulties finding employment, housing and dealing with bureaucracies. These challenges are common to many people who flee from strife-torn countries to Australia's protection.

"Rather than using these issues as a reason to cut back on refugee intake from certain areas, the government should instead increase its efforts to assist people in this situation."

Bishop Grech said the Catholic Church, through its education and social service agencies, was playing a role in helping the Sudanese community to settle into Australia, by providing comprehensive programs which cover education, English language tutoring, employment, and social assistance.

"As a prosperous, wealthy nation, we must live up to our obligations to assist our brothers and sisters who are most in need in every way possible," Bishop Grech said. "To cut the refugee intake for a certain area based on perceived problems with resettlement is both short-sighted and wrong and we would urge the Federal Government to reconsider its stated position on this issue."

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