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Media Release

Faith leaders hold urgent meeting to call on politicians to restore the human dignity of refugees and asylum seekers.

Today more than 50 Leaders representing diverse faith groups met with Members and Senators at Parliament House, Canberra, calling on them to restore Australia's standing as a compassionate nation by winding back policies negatively impacting on people escaping violence, persecution and death.

As a positive step, the faith leaders asked all political parties and independents to join with them in establishing a task force to work together to change the political and public narrative regarding asylum seekers and refugees.

It is hoped the task force can build on the recent goodwill arising from the 12,000 Syrian refugee announcement and develop new policies for the thousands of other refugees including ending off-shore and mandatory detention, removing children from detention and abolishing temporary protection visas.

Sr Anne Lane PBVM, representing Catholic Religious Australia, said the faith leaders have asked all sides of politics to value the dignity of every human person.

"There have been many reputable reports which show that immigration detention causes significant psychological harm, particularly to children.

"It is never right to use people as a means to an end. It is morally wrong to punish one group of human beings by locking them up on off-shore islands in order to deter other people from coming to Australia.

"We cannot allow such cruel policies to continue," she said.

Sr Lane said it is time honesty was brought into this issue, with the whole mantra of 'stopping the boats' being just that, a mantra.

"Due to the lack of transparency, we don't know if or what boats have been turned back and what has resulted from those actions.

"It may simply mean stopping the boats in Australian waters, so that we can hold our heads high as vulnerable people die in other countries and situations to which we've returned them.

"Our nation's response is in stark contrast to the way the people of Europe have rescued and welcomed tens of thousands who arrived by boat on their shores," Sr Lane said. /2

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Sr Lane said economically the current policy is also destructive.

“In so far as we can estimate, the taxes of the Australian people are being squandered to the tune of more than \$5 billion in implementing the current border protection policies.

“This money would be better spent assisting refugees to make a meaningful contribution to society, as well as supporting the UNHCR and working with other countries in our region to develop a humane and effective regional solution,” she said.

Sr Lane said for many years religious groups have put their resources at the service of refugees and asylum seekers by providing housing support, employment, food and clothing, education and counselling.

“We say to our parliamentarians, stop mandatory detention and let more people into our country and we will work with you to ensure these people are looked after and are able to become part of the Australian community,” Sr Lane said.

Today’s Parliament House forum was the initiative of Catholic Religious Australia (the peak council of Catholic religious congregations) with the support of other Christian denominations and other faiths.

Other speakers included Sr Berneice Loch rsm (President of Catholic Religious Australia); Rabbi Alon Meltzer (National Jewish Memorial Centre); and, Hafez Kassem (President of Australian Federation of Islamic Councils).

It was co-hosted by Anna Burke MP (ALP), Russell Broadbent MP (Liberal), Cathy McGowan MP (Independent) and Senator Janet Rice (Australian Greens).

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