

Project SafeCom News and Updates

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1. Cricket-mad Sister Brigid Arthur goes into bat for refugee rights
2. Police scale base of Melbourne's Arts Centre spire to negotiate with Nauru serial protesters
3. Two women climb 162m Melbourne Arts Centre spire to fly #LetThemStay banner
4. Psychiatrist likens immigration detention to Nazis and gulags
5. Doctors to propose boycott of Australian immigration detention system
6. Doctors urged to boycott work in 'torturous' immigration detention centres
7. AMA: Prolonged detention is 'state-sanctioned child abuse', says head of doctors' group
8. Malcolm Turnbull plays down chances of New Zealand taking refugees who tried to reach Australia
9. Malcolm Turnbull's new push to resettle refugees on Nauru and Manus Island in third countries
10. Authorities preparing to remove asylum seeker baby from Lady Cilento Hospital, refugee advocates say
11. Baby Asha: protest swells at hospital amid fears of imminent removal
12. Call for Prime Minister to intervene to keep asylum seeker baby in Australia
13. More time needed to resettle Manus, Nauru asylum seekers, Julie Bishop says
14. Baby Asha may go to community detention, not Nauru – reports
15. AMA President Brian Owler says Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten have spoken over Baby Asha case
16. Baby Asha: immigration minister confirms community detention in Australia
17. Baby Asha will be transferred to Brisbane detention: Peter Dutton
18. Asylum seeker row: Baby Asha can stay in Australia, for now
19. MEDIA RELEASE: People power wins Asha's community detention: now free all the 267
20. Peter Dutton vows Baby Asha will be returned to Nauru
21. Water shortages, toilet restrictions and constant fear: details about life on Nauru revealed
22. Water, water everywhere but Nauru detainees missing out, critics say
23. Australian media 'lying and agenda-driven' over child abuse claims – Nauru
24. Nauru cancels visitor visas for Australian and New Zealand citizens
25. Nauru bans entry for Australians and New Zealanders without a visa
26. Refugee homestay agency AHN shuts down program over lack of 'progress'
27. Alleged organiser of people smuggling boat at centre of paid turn-back claims arrested in Indonesia

1. Cricket-mad Sister Brigid Arthur goes into bat for refugee rights

Feisty Sister Brigid Arthur, 81, is at the forefront of Christian social action.

Sydney Morning Herald
February 21, 2016
Rachel Kleinman

Being a cricket fan, Sister Brigid Arthur was killing time by listening to Test match commentary on her car radio while she waited for friends to return to their North Melbourne home.

It was March 2001, a few months before the watershed Tampa crisis and children-overboard scandal altered the course of the 2001 federal election campaign and Australia's political conscience on refugees.

Arthur had just become involved in asylum-seeker advocacy and was planning to start visiting detainees at Maribyrnong detention centre in Melbourne's west.

But what happened next that night put a dent in her plans.

Suddenly, the clunk of willow on ball was interrupted by an unknown man tapping on her passenger-seat window, gesturing to find out the time.

In hindsight, of course, Arthur says she should never have opened the door.

Political activist Sister Brigid Arthur is a key player in the Churches Refugee Taskforce, which is co-ordinating the sanctuary campaign for 267 asylum seekers set to return to Nauru. Photo: Penny Stephens

Next thing she knew, the 66-year-old nun was yanked out of the car and thrown viciously onto the road behind her car. In that moment, her biggest fear was that the man would start the car, reverse and run her over. She knew that if that happened, she would be dead.

Thankfully, before her attacker started the engine, a resident heard her screams and ran out of his house, scaring the man away. Arthur was packed off to the Royal Melbourne Hospital for surgery on a broken hip.

Arthur is sitting in her cramped, airless office in the Brigidine Order's lovely Albert Park headquarters as she remembers the brutal attack.

It's a glorious sunny day in bayside Melbourne but Arthur is oblivious – her desk is literally buried in work.

In retelling the story, Arthur is not focused on the trauma. Rather, she takes great delight in the next, synchronous part of the story.

"I couldn't go and start visiting the asylum seekers because I was laid up, so I started writing letters. A few weeks later, when I was recovering, I decided to stop in at Maribyrnong on my way to Echuca and meet one of the men I'd been writing to. I was on my crutches and out comes this bloke on crutches."

It turned out he had fallen over at the detention centre and broken his hip. He was carrying exactly the same injury as Arthur.

"It was very funny," she says now, in her even but slightly gravelly voice.

Arthur is tenacious and passionate. Since that visit, she has made many hundreds more to detention centres and doggedly fought for the rights of asylum seekers across Australia. At 81, with wrinkles criss-crossing her face and a spark in her eye, she shows no sign of letting up.

Arthur had a long career as a teacher and principal within the Catholic education system before moving into a consulting role, which left more time for campaigning.

She co-founded the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project in 2001, is a board member of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and vice-chairwoman of the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce. She is also involved in Love Makes a Way, a religious organisation that organises peaceful sit-ins at the offices of prominent politicians to protest asylum-seeker policies.

That's how she got herself arrested in 2014. Not once but twice.

"I took part in two demonstrations – one at [Opposition Leader] Bill Shorten's office and one at Kelly O'Dwyer's [the Liberal member for Higgins in Melbourne]," Arthur says.

"The police came in and said: 'Do you want be escorted out or do you want to be carried?' I decided being escorted would be enough."

Religious organisations hit the headlines this month when church leaders kick-started the controversial "sanctuary" campaign in response to a High Court appeal.

The appeal ruled that the federal government could legally return 267 asylum seekers, who had been receiving medical treatment in Australia, to Nauru. This prompted dozens of church leaders, spearheaded by Anglican Dean of Brisbane, Dr Peter Catt, to declare they would turn their places of worship into sanctuaries to stop the asylum seekers being returned. Catt is chairman of the Churches Refugee Taskforce.

Arthur describes the taskforce as an umbrella organisation, which didn't plan the campaign, but supports the individual churches in their push. Nevertheless, she has been called on by the media to explain and defend the religious response to what she brands as the federal government's "calculated cruelty".

Pamela Curr, a refugee advocate with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, says she has never seen Arthur lose her temper. But Curr quickly dispels any notion of a saintly demeanour. "[Arthur] doesn't roll over. I have seen her in plenty of meetings with immigration officials where she fights like a tiger."

Curr has been glad of Arthur's company on many a long road trip to Canberra, and not just for her determination.

"One time I was going with Brigid and a couple of other nuns," Curr says.

"They stayed in this rundown motel because they didn't want to spend money. So we pulled up at this place and there was nothing around. Brigid opened up the boot and out wafted the smells of this delicious chicken curry with rice she had prepared before we left. She loves to cook."

So how did this cricket-loving, curry-cooking girl from the country end up as an octogenarian human rights advocate, protester and leader?

Unsurprisingly, she is the eldest of eight children, raised in Victoria's Wimmera region, so she knows how to take charge. But she is refreshingly honest about her entry into the order – it wasn't piety that grabbed her and there was certainly no epiphany.

"I was more enthused by the Christian social action group I had been involved with at school, which had the motto: 'See, Judge and Act'. That had a huge impact on me ... and I'd already thought I wanted to teach. So I [entered] but I still thought, 'I probably won't stay but I'll have a go'."

So we could call you the reluctant nun?

"I'm not sure about reluctant," she says after a pause. "I was ambivalent."

Her regard for the Catholic Church has changed significantly in the six decades she has served it.

"I no longer think of the church as having all the answers ... And I believe that clericalism [maintaining the church hierarchy] has done us a great disservice," she says.

Arthur has no intention of stopping her advocacy work any time soon. But she does acknowledge that the worldwide Brigidine Order is coming to the end of its shelf life.

"We've been around for 200 years (founded in Ireland) ... we've satisfied a particular niche and this is the end of an era. Our youngest person is 50 and we're not trying to attract anybody. It's time to pull up stumps."

Ah, the cricket analogy. What about the push for generational change in her beloved game?

"I did get into watching some Big Bash [cricket] over summer and I didn't mind it. I was quite surprised actually," she says.

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/cricketmad-sister-brigid-arthur-goes-into-bat-for-refugee-rights-20160216-gmvd8f.html>

2. Police scale base of Melbourne's Arts Centre spire to negotiate with Nauru serial protesters

ABC News Online

First posted Fri 19 Feb 2016, 4:35am

Updated Fri 19 Feb 2016, 10:38am

A search and rescue crew has climbed the base of Melbourne's Arts Centre and prepared rigging ahead of expected negotiations with two women who scaled it to protest against offshore detention.

The team is still a long way from the two women, aged in their 20s, who climbed the 162-metre spire about 3:30am on Friday.

A police spokeswoman said the search and rescue crew was doing a safety check.

Earlier, Senior Sergeant Dean Delle-Vergini said police were "intending to commence some negotiations with the two protesters".

"Search and rescue guys are here on scene, they've assessed the liability of going up to the tower, that would be our last resort, we're trying to get the climbers to come down of their own free will," he said.

If the search and rescue team did go up the spire, they would climb up the middle in the same way the climbers did, he said.

Senior Sergeant Delle-Vergini said the protesters were disrupting the Arts Centre's preparations for Saturday's White Night event, but he said there was no deadline for when police would go up.

Police have been trying to negotiate with the women through a third party, he said.

Womens' second asylum seeker protest

The Whistleblowers Activist Citizens Alliance (WACA) named the two women as Hannah Patchett, 22, and Katherine Woskett, 25.

WACA said the women were acting in support of doctors at Lady Cilento Hospital in Brisbane, who were refusing to release the one-year-old daughter of asylum seekers in case she were to be returned to Nauru.

It is understood the baby, named Asha, who suffered burns last month, is in a stable condition.

Both her parents are in Brisbane and have been visiting her daily.

Asha is one of a group of 267 people, including more than 30 babies, who could be sent back to Nauru after the High Court threw out a challenge to the Government's offshore detention network earlier this month.

WACA's Helen War told 774 ABC Melbourne that the two women, professional climbers, were also behind a #LetThemStay banner that caused traffic havoc on Melbourne's Eastern Freeway last week.

"These women both have deeply held passions in the social justice movement and in the environment movement; it's part of the reason that they're so experienced ... and why they're able to climb up the spire today in the most professional way and unfurl the banner," she said.

Senior Sergeant Delle-Vergini said he believed the protesters had "got their message across".

He said the women could face trespass charges over the Arts Centre protest, and their abseiling gear could be confiscated.

The pair were not charged over the Eastern Freeway stunt.

"From my understanding there was no power to retain their gear from their last protest, which was held in a public place, this is obviously a different situation because it's a private premises," Senior Sergeant Delle-Vergini said.

Ms War said they had provisions and supplies to remain up the spire comfortably for the rest of the day.

"It's not likely to be days, we'll see how the rest of the day unfolds," she said.

"We'll see what the police decide to do.

"At this stage, these women have decided to stay up there, with the message let them stay, until that message has been heard properly by the Government, who are still staying silent on this issue."

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-19/two-women-climb-melbournes-arts-centre-spire-victoria-police/7182670>

3. Two women climb 162m Melbourne Arts Centre spire to fly #LetThemStay banner

Action is part of #LetThemStay protest over 267 asylum seekers facing deportation to Nauru after high court found Australia's offshore detention legal

The Guardian

Paul Karp

Thursday 18 February 2016 17.33 EST

Two women have climbed the 162 metre tall Melbourne arts centre spire as part of a Let Them Stay protest action opposing the deportation of asylum seekers to Nauru.

Police were called to the arts centre on St Kilda Road at 3.30am and attempted to negotiate with the two women, according to Fairfax Media.

The pair eventually unfurled a #LetThemStay banner, in reference to the 267 asylum seekers facing deportation to Nauru after the high court found Australia's offshore detention regime was legal.

Last week, Whistleblowers Activists & Citizens Alliance (Waca) activists Katherine Woskett, 25, and Hannah Patchett, 22, suspended themselves from a Melbourne bridge as part of a Let Them Stay protest against the possible deportation of 267 asylum seekers to Nauru.

The #LetThemStay slogan has become the rallying cry to keep the asylum seekers in Australia, with protests across Australia. Most of the group of 267 have been brought to Australia from Nauru for their own, or a family member's, medical treatment.

The group includes 37 babies born in Australia, as well as 54 children, more than 30 of whom are now attending Australian schools.

On Friday morning, Waca posted a tweet asking their followers to "stay tuned" for direct action.

Waca then confirmed on Twitter that "Kat & Hannah" were the pair unfurling the banner.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/feb/19/two-women-climb-melbourne-arts-centre-spire-to-fly-letthemstay-banner>

4. Psychiatrist likens immigration detention to Nazis and gulags

The Age
February 18, 2016 - 12:56PM
Nicole Hasham

"Public numbing and indifference" towards state abuses in Nazi Germany resembles that enabling Australia's immigration detention centres, a prominent psychiatrist says, also likening public complicity in the detention regime to the White Australia policy.

On Thursday Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, in Washington to discuss border protection at a Five Country ministerial meeting, repeated the Turnbull government's insistence that asylum seekers and refugees in Australia for medical care, and their families, would be returned to Nauru once their treatment has finished.

"The government has been consistent all along in relation to our strong stance to make sure we keep our borders secure," he said.

In a paper published in the Australasian Psychiatry journal this month, Dr Michael Dudley, a psychiatrist at Sydney Children's Hospital and a senior University of NSW lecturer, wrote that prolonged immigration detention shows "reckless indifference and calculated cruelty".

Such policies misuse health and welfare professionals to "underwrite state abuses and promote public numbing and indifference resembling other state abuses," he said, citing the so-called "war on terror" and, with qualification, Nazi Germany.

Dr Dudley said various modern states have purported to protect citizens by identifying security threats, targeting "undesirables" and eliminating public scrutiny.

"Australians may be psychically numbed about boat interceptions and gulags, but cannot claim ignorance," he wrote.

He later told Fairfax Media that the Nazi regime relied on an underlying ideological commitment in which "the end is seen as justifying the means".

"We haven't seen Nazi death camps in Australia ... but we have had some pretty extraordinary policies historically in this country, which include policies towards indigenous people.

"I think White Australia has links to our current policies towards boat people in our unwillingness to systematically think about this issue, to contemplate alternatives."

He said like gulags, detention centres were "places out of sight, out of mind where terrible things are happening and we are assuming the state is looking after us".

In the journal, Dr Dudley said health and welfare workers who assisted the Nazi regime were usually ordinary people motivated by "peer and situational pressures, careerism and ideological commitments", and that "euphemism, bureaucratic routines and missionary zeal facilitated psychic numbing and denial".

He called for the healthcare of asylum seekers to be transferred from the immigration bureaucracy to state and federal health departments to strengthen clinical independence and help uphold ethical codes.

Dr Dudley said health professionals working in the detention regime were "lending credibility to abuses", whether deliberately or inadvertently.

His comments came as the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists on Thursday released new guidelines for those working in immigration detention. It includes a statement that advocating against policies that harm mental health is a "non-partisan activity integral to delivering quality healthcare".

A spokesman for Mr Dutton said the government had a "compassionate approach toward vulnerable people, but our hardline against people smugglers remains resolute. We are not going to allow the deaths at sea to recommence."

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/psychiatrist-likens-immigration-detention-to-nazis-and-gulags-20160216-gmv833.html>

5. Doctors to propose boycott of Australian immigration detention system

At upcoming AMA forum to debate healthcare of asylum seekers, several doctors will put to the meeting the radical step of refusing to participate in the system

The Guardian
Ben Doherty and Helen Davidson
Friday 19 February 2016 00.04 EST

Doctors are preparing to discuss a boycott of Australia's immigration detention system and flouting the legal restrictions on speaking out about conditions.

At an Australian Medical Association forum in Sydney on Sunday to debate healthcare of asylum seekers, several doctors will propose the radical step of refusing to participate in the system, Guardian Australia understands.

Doctors at Brisbane's Lady Cilento hospital continue to refuse to discharge Baby Asha, the Australian-born infant of Nepalese asylum seekers, arguing that returning her to Nauru would be unsafe. Protesters have maintained a vigil at the hospital's front doors for a week.

Dr John-Paul Sanggaran, who worked at the Christmas Island detention centre, has argued in the Fairfax press that the current detention system is "a form a systematic child abuse ... a form of torture".

"The only course left to us is to refuse to participate.

"The AMA's own code of ethics states: 'regardless of society's attitudes, ensure that you do not countenance, condone or participate in the practice of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading procedures, whatever the offence of which the victim of such procedures is suspected, accused or convicted'.

"The code of conduct could not speak more clearly or directly. By continuing to work within immigration detention we merely provide legitimacy to those that would lie and mislead the public into believing healthcare of a respectable standard is being delivered."

Dr Peter Young, formerly the director of mental health services at International Health and Medical Services (IHMS), said doctors could not arrive at the decision to withdraw their services lightly.

"But the system as it is set up, and the restrictions under the contractual arrangements that doctors and psychiatrists are made to work under, you can't practise ethically, and you can't practise according to professional guidelines, and if that is the case, then you shouldn't be doing it.

"The situation as it is now, doctors participating in the system, more than being able to minimise harm for these patients, are enabling the system to continue, and lending it legitimacy."

Young resigned from IHMS in 2014, frustrated by persistent failures in the system that were not addressed despite a series of complaints.

Young signed an open letter from health and legal professionals supporting the Lady Cilento staff and calling for an end to offshore processing, deportations and the Border Force Act, which prevents professionals speaking out about detention conditions.

The group, which calls itself the Asylum Seeker Health Advocacy Group (Ashag), on Friday wrote to the prime minister and leader of the opposition, and the ministers and shadow ministers for health and immigration.

Ashag also demanded asylum seeker health services be managed through health departments with regular professional and ethical standards.

It accused the government of "acting to a political agenda, rather than the best interests of the patient under care".

"Ashag notes that all clinicians have an ethical responsibility to speak out about government policy which is damaging to health and mental health and to resist practices which compromise clinical care and render doctors powerless in a politicised and punitive system," the letter said.

"The current system of immigration detention, including detention of infants and children, is substandard. Offshore locations are not able to provide humane care and actively cause harm: long-term psychological damage will be the consequence of these enduring, unmodified policies."

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists released new guidelines on Thursday for psychiatrists working in immigration detention, insisting that doctors must be free to publicly advocate better care or to highlight cases of abuse or inadequate medical care.

"Doing so should not expose psychiatrists to risk or perceived risk under the Australian Border Force Act," the guidelines say. Currently doctors face the possibility of a two-year jail term for speaking out about abuse or healthcare failures.

Dr Nick Kowalenko, chair of the Faculty of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, said indefinite detention had causal links to mental illness and "in the case of children and adolescents, prolonged detention makes them sick and is an unnecessary cruelty".

"The guidelines published by the RANZCP make it clear that psychiatrists are behaving appropriately in questioning the practices of immigration detention and its impact upon patients of all ages."

The minister for immigration has been contacted for comment.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/feb/19/doctors-to-propose-boycott-of-australian-immigration-detention-system>

6. Doctors urged to boycott work in 'torturous' immigration detention centres

The Age
February 19, 2016 - 11:00PM
Julia Medew

Australian doctors may soon boycott work inside immigration detention centres in the hope it will break down the Australian government's policy of holding asylum seekers in conditions doctors describe as torturous.

As paediatricians in Brisbane enter the seventh day of their protest against the government's intention to send the baby of asylum seeker parents back to Nauru, debate is raging in the medical fraternity about the "impossible" ethical and legal position doctors are finding themselves in.

On Sunday more than 300 doctors and nurses will gather at a forum run by the Australian Medical Association to discuss the harms caused by immigration detention, particularly for children. Several doctors told Fairfax Media that there may be a vote to boycott immigration detention work at the meeting after John-Paul Sanggaran, a former immigration detention doctor, urged his colleagues to take a more collective stand.

Writing in Fairfax Media publications on Friday, Dr Sanggaran said the AMA's code of ethics said doctors must not "condone or participate in the practice of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading procedures, whatever the offence of which the victim of such procedures is suspected, accused or convicted".

"The code could not speak more clearly or directly. By continuing to work within immigration detention we merely provide legitimacy to those that would lie and mislead the public into believing healthcare of a respectable standard is being delivered. By continuing we maintain and perpetuate suffering and injustice," he wrote.

Dr Sanggaran said a boycott would have little impact on medical treatment in detention centres because the government now uses mainly non-Australian personnel, but remove "the loaning of respectability and legitimacy".

"Where a boycott would effect services, it would do so in a positive way. There should be an insistence that asylum seekers are seen in the community where appropriate standards of medical care can be maintained."

David Berger, a GP who specialises in emergency medicine, said a boycott was likely to be discussed at the AMA meeting in Sydney on Sunday. In a piece published in the British Medical Journal on Friday night, Dr Berger argued that Australian doctors were in an impossible situation when caring for asylum seekers because they face legal and regulatory risks whatever they do.

On the one hand, he said doctors who sent people back to unsafe environments could be held responsible for harm done to them in that unsafe environment. And on the other hand, he said the Border Force Act compels health professionals to follow government instructions, even if they believe it might be detrimental to their patients. Furthermore, he said doctors can be imprisoned for disclosing information about those patients.

Dr Berger, a member of Doctors4Refugees, said doctors who allowed their patients to go back into unsafe detention centres could face investigations by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency which has the power to censure them.

"If you don't do your utmost to protect your patient and to make the welfare of your patient your first concern, you break your ethical code... AHPRA can't put you in prison but they can take your medical registration away," he said.

He cited the case of "Baby P" in Britain - a grossly neglected child who was seen by several doctors. When the baby was discharged back to an unsafe environment and died, those doctors were struck off the medical register.

"Simply the act of discharging a child to an unsafe environment can land you in front of AHPRA," he said.

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/health/doctors-urged-to-boycott-work-in-torturous-immigration-detention-centres-20160219-gmyq4m.html>

7. AMA: Prolonged detention is 'state-sanctioned child abuse', says head of doctors' group

Brian Owler's address to Australian Medical Association forum on asylum seekers says immigration policy is 'pulling apart the moral fabric of the country'

The Guardian
Helen Davidson in Sydney
Sunday 21 February 2016 00.36 EST

The Australian immigration and border protection department is "pulling apart the moral fabric of the country", and prolonged detention is "state-sanctioned child abuse", the head of the Australia's peak medical body has told a forum in Sydney.

Prof Brian Owler, the national president of the Australian Medical Association (AMA), delivered the closing address at the AMA forum on the health of asylum seekers on Sunday, and while his forthright speech was harsh on the Australian government and its treatment of asylum seekers, he rejected calls for a boycott of the system by Australian medical professionals.

Owler also gave the organisation's support to the health professionals standing against the Australian government in Brisbane by refusing to discharge a baby who had been treated for burns back into the care of the immigration detention system.

A number of doctors and health professionals at the forum added to recent calls for a boycott. A former IHMS health officer said workers were faced with the choice of being complicit in a system which tortured people, or of maintaining ethical conduct and risking punishment including under the Border Force Act.

Owler said change must come through public opinion and that "provision of medical treatment is not condoning the system". He noted IHMS was already attempting to bypass Australian professionals and hire foreign medical workers.

Owler said a boycott would draw good services away from asylum seekers, and that he believed doctors and nurses would go anyway. "That's what doctors and nurses do, they put their patient first."

He added that it was "perfectly acceptable" for people not to participate in the system if they felt they couldn't, but a boycott was not the way to achieve change.

Dr David Isaacs, a paediatrician who has frequently spoken out about detention and how it amounts to torture, did not agree with a boycott either.

Isaacs said medical professionals were in an "impossible position", torn between providing healthcare to those who needed it, and not participating in torture. He said the only answer was for the government to stop putting them in that position and close the detention centres.

However he told Guardian Australia outside the forum that he was “conflicted”, having written publicly in the past that a boycott should be considered.

“But when you think about what it would actually involve, you have to say, well why would we do a boycott?” he said.

Isaacs said a boycott wouldn’t actually be effective, and if it was held for moral or ethical reasons then everyone would have to agree.

“I don’t think everyone does agree with the morality of boycott. A lot of people, I think, do agree that it is implicitly condoning torture to work within the system, but some people would say that it’s justified by helping people,” he said.

“The AMA will not stand up and say we should boycott, but they will say that it’s torture and they don’t condone torture.”

Dr Peter Young, the former IHMS chief psychiatrist, said there should be more transparency and first-rate care.

Currently the system did not allow for that, so “a logical consequence of that was people shouldn’t be doing it,” he told Guardian Australia outside the forum.

Young suggested that instead “we can put forward another model that provides for those services, that can provided freely and not under this restricted context”.

The AMA officially called for a moratorium on asylum seeker children being returned to detention; the immediate release of all children from onshore and offshore detention into the community, the establishment of an independent statutory body of experts with the power to investigate and report on the health and welfare of asylum seekers; and for the government and opposition to revisit their policies if they could not provide satisfactory healthcare.

Speaking after the forum, Oowler told media the immigration department displayed “zealot like behaviour” and that he had “never encountered the sort of attitude that doesn’t seem to understand an alternative point of view”.

“That is so determined to keep a level of secrecy and lack of transparency, that wants to shut people away, that has been intimidating our own doctors. This is a ridiculous situation where you have ... immigration going to Senate estimates and saying the doctors don’t decide who gets transferred if they have a medical condition, we decide.”

Attendees of the forum also heard from Prof Elizabeth Elliott, who has inspected the Christmas Island and recently Darwin’s Wickham Point detention centres.

Elliott said processing has been “purposefully slow” resulting in prolonged arbitrary detention explicitly at odds with the UN convention on the rights of the child. “As a result of our policy hundreds of children have been denied human rights,” she said.

She spoke of the midnight transfers of people, and quoted one female detainee who said they wake up in the morning and “our friends have gone”.

Elliot described a number of people who had committed acts of self harm or attempted suicide, and were severely mentally ill. “Compassion, it appears, had gone missing on Christmas Island,” she said.

Elliot also said the 69 children she assessed at Wickham Point were “amongst the most traumatised children we had ever seen.”

Over 95% of children over the age of eight were at high risk of PTSD, and more than 95% received highest score for “hopelessness”. She said all children assessed were in the top two categories of risk for developmental problems, and the findings suggested the Human Rights Commission’s Forgotten Children report had “fallen on deaf ears.”

She predicted the recent and any further push from medical professionals for change would prompt accusations that doctors and nurses were advocates, “as if this is a pejorative term.” Elliot questioned why Australians had not been so vocal in protest, suggesting the deliberate hiding of faces and identities by the government led to a situation of “out of sight, out of mind.”

Registered nurse Alanna Maycock told of her visit with Isaacs to Nauru, where she witnessed a man being assaulted, and spoke to a woman who had been menstruating for two months but had not been referred for medical care.

She also noted the shower blocks were shielded only by flimsy curtains and were in full view of guards. “We had no agenda when we went to Nauru. but when you’re working with a system ... that prevents you from carrying out your duty of care ... you need to question what system you’re working with,” she said.

“We gave our recommendations to IHMS ... but those recommendations go to the government,” she said. “That’s not a chain of command I can trust.”

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/feb/21/prolonged-detention-is-state-sanctioned-child-abuse-says-head-of-doctors-group>

8. Malcolm Turnbull plays down chances of New Zealand taking refugees who tried to reach Australia

ABC News Online

First posted Fri 19 Feb 2016, 10:51am

Updated Fri 19 Feb 2016, 11:18am

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has played down the chances of New Zealand taking refugees who tried to reach Australia.

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key said a 2013 offer to take 150 refugees a year from Australia had not been accepted but still stands.

The issue has re-emerged over recent weeks with Australia set to return up to 267 asylum seekers to Nauru following a High Court decision.

At the annual Australia-New Zealand Leaders' Meeting in Sydney, Mr Key said it was "potentially possible" for New Zealand to take refugees.

Mr Turnbull said Australia appreciated the offer, but that Australia remained "utterly committed" to not giving encouragement or "marketing opportunities" to people smugglers.

"The election of the Labor government here in 2007 resulted in over 150,000 unauthorised arrivals, over 1,000 deaths at sea," Mr Turnbull said.

"It was a catastrophic failure of policy."

He said immigration officials were working with the asylum seekers on a case-by-case basis to determine their fate.

"We take into account what John has proposed, what John has offered, but we do so very thoughtfully, recognising that the one thing we must not do is give an inch to the people smugglers," he said.

"Because believe me, we are not talking about theories here. The alternative approach has been tried by Labor and we know what the consequences are."

The talks between the leaders meanwhile resulted in a new pathway for New Zealanders to become Australian citizens.

Mr Turnbull said it would apply to New Zealanders who had been working in Australia for five years and had earned about \$54,000 a year.

"That is an important step and I have to say it's in recognition of the advocacy that John Key has made on behalf of the many New Zealand citizens who are in Australia who are working here and part of our community," he said.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-19/malcolm-turnbull-plays-down-chances-of-nz-taking-refugees/7183486>

9. Malcolm Turnbull's new push to resettle refugees on Nauru and Manus Island in third countries

The Age

February 19, 2016 - 7:15PM

Peter Hartcher

Australia is now in negotiations with three countries about taking some of the asylum seekers who are now in detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island.

Negotiations are under way with Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, officials said, to allow the resettlement of asylum seekers.

And less advanced discussions are taking place with three other countries as the Turnbull government seeks third countries for people who can neither be admitted to Australia nor returned home.

Officials said the aim of "whittling away" the "legacy caseload" of asylum seekers who arrived under the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard was unchanged, but Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull had brought "new energy and focus" to the quest.

"I want this settled," Mr Turnbull instructed a senior official soon after taking the prime ministership.

A total of 1459 people were in detention in Australia's facilities in Nauru and Manus Island last month, according to the Immigration Department.

The government, like Labor, says no one who seeks to enter Australia by boat will ever be permitted to resettle in Australia.

But, in cases where asylum seekers are found to be legitimate refugees, they cannot be sent back to their home countries, either.

The resettlement deals that Australia has made so far have proved to be failures, with no asylum seekers prepared to resettle in PNG and only five opting to move to Cambodia.

Officials said negotiations were afoot with Malaysia and the Philippines for resettlement of asylum seekers now in offshore detention.

With Indonesia, the question is whether Jakarta will agree to take back people who boarded boats to Australia, who will never be permitted to settle in Australia but who still have family or other connections in Indonesia.

Officials said there was a prospect of agreement with one or more "in months, not weeks".

Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop, while not confirming the names of the countries now engaged in negotiations with Australia, cautioned that "it's early days for most of the discussions".

"Some of them have domestic issues, like elections."

The Philippines has presidential elections in May. Malaysia is in the grip of a corruption scandal that has embroiled Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Australia has had fruitless discussions with both countries in earlier years.

Malaysia had agreed to take asylum seekers from Australia under Labor's so-called "Malaysia solution" as part of a swap, but the deal was struck down by the High Court.

And Australia approached the Philippines last year on the matter, but was rebuffed last October by President Benigno Aquino, who said at the time that his government was "challenged to meet the needs of its own people right now".

Fresh negotiations were now under way, officials said.

Mr Turnbull on Friday ruled out accepting New Zealand's offer to take 150 asylum seekers from Australia's offshore detention centres.

In a joint appearance with his NZ counterpart, John Key, he said: "We are utterly committed to ensuring that we give no encouragement, no marketing opportunities to the people smugglers."

While Cambodia and PNG are too poor and unattractive as resettlement options, Australia considers NZ to be too wealthy and attractive, a potential draw for a new wave of people smugglers carrying asylum seekers.

Australian officialdom believes that democratic, middle income countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia are the ideal resettlement option.

Labor's immigration spokesman, Richard Marles, responding to revelations of the new negotiations, said: "Offshore processing remains a critical deterrent to people smuggling. However, the long-term viability of this policy rests on Australia securing a viable third country resettlement plan. "We simply must find a durable resettlement solution. A failure to do so will result in tremendous harm being done to this group of men, women and children."

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/malcolm-turnbulls-new-push-to-resettle-refugees-on-nauru-and-manus-island-in-third-countries-20160219-gmyysq.html>

10. Authorities preparing to remove asylum seeker baby from Lady Cilento Hospital, refugee advocates say

ABC News Online

First posted Sat 20 Feb 2016, 4:22pm

Updated Sat 20 Feb 2016, 5:46pm

Protesters have surrounded exit points at the Lady Cilento Children's Hospital in Brisbane, hoping to stop immigration officials from transferring an asylum seeker baby.

Baby Asha was being treated in Brisbane for injuries after the one-year-old was accidentally burnt by boiling water in a tent on Nauru in January.

Doctors at the hospital have refused to release her until a suitable home environment is found.

Demonstrators have been camping outside the hospital in support of doctors and the child, who faces the possibility of being returned to the Nauru immigration processing centre with her parents.

At least 200 protesters are at the scene and some have blocked vehicles on roads leading to the hospital in Brisbane's inner south, to check the child was not inside.

Refugee advocates said it appeared security guards employed by the Department of Immigration were gearing up to move an asylum seeker baby and her mother from the hospital.

However, Queensland Health said the child will remain in the hospital overnight at least and have asked protestors to respect visitors to the hospital.

Natasha Blucher, who is an advocate for the family and the baby, said the mother was told by immigration officials she would be leaving the hospital today.

"We are a bit concerned about the baby and her mum she had a bit of a fright this morning because immigration officers came to her room to speak to her and told her that she would be leaving the hospital today," she said.

"She was told that the hospital is not discharging her and now I have been trying to get in touch with her and she is not able to take phone calls."

Ms Blucher said it was not clear where the child and her family may be taken.

"There were a number of plain-clothes security officers downstairs that would be taking her. She told me she didn't know where she would be going because they wouldn't tell her and she was quite afraid," she said.

Asha is one of a group of 267 people, including more than 30 babies, who could be sent back to Nauru after the High Court threw out a challenge to the Government's offshore detention network earlier this month.

Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk and Health Minister Cameron Dick have voiced support for hospital staff.

A spokeswoman for Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said nothing has changed and the Department was still negotiating with the hospital about baby Asha.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-20/refugee-advocates-gather-at-hospital-to-stop-baby's-removal/7186906>

11. Baby Asha: protest swells at hospital amid fears of imminent removal

Hundreds converge on Lady Cilento hospital in Brisbane where one-year-old has been treated for burns sustained at Nauru offshore processing centre

The Guardian

Joshua Robertson in Brisbane, Ben Doherty, Helen Davidson and Warren Murray

Saturday 20 February 2016 05.05 EST

Asylum protester numbers swelled into the hundreds at the Lady Cilento children's hospital in Brisbane on Saturday night amid signs that immigration authorities were moving to deport Baby Asha back to the Nauru detention centre.

Demonstrators on Saturday afternoon began mobilising after receiving reports of an increase in the presence of guards from Serco, the security company contracted by Australian immigration authorities.

Doctors at the hospital apparently stood firm on their refusal to discharge one-year-old Asha – who is being treated for burns sustained at the Nauru offshore processing centre.

As night fell, Queensland Health tweeted that Asha would remain in the hospital "overnight at least".

The government has given lawyers representing Asha and her family an undertaking that they would not be removed to Nauru without 72 hours' notice. However, there is no restriction on moving the family within Australia, without any forewarning.

Into the evening, protesters were at times seen blocking exits around the hospital precinct and seeking to check whether Asha was inside departing cars. A candlelit vigil began and pizza arrived.

Natasha Blucher, a former Save the Children worker who is now advocacy coordinator for the Darwin Asylum Seeker Advocacy and Support Network, said she had been told by Asha's mother at 9.30am on Saturday that two immigration officers had come to her room and told her she would be leaving that day. Asha's mother also said there were plainclothes Serco guards downstairs.

When asked by Asha's mother where they were to be taken, the officers replied: "Not Nauru, not Bitá [the immigration holding centre at Pinkenba, Brisbane], not community detention but we can't tell you."

They told her that she could not tell her husband where they were going but "maybe he could visit them tomorrow [Sunday]", Blucher said. It is understood Asha's father is still being held at Bitá.

An hour later, said Blucher, a doctor told Asha's mother "not to worry, that she was not being discharged, and she could stay there in the hospital until the minister made a decision about a safe place where she could go".

Blucher said she and other advocates became concerned after being told that Serco had been ordered by Border Force to stop Asha's mother from receiving calls.

"Holding people incommunicado is standard operating procedure when moving somebody," Blucher told the Guardian on Saturday night. "She's already that terrified, she's told me she has memorised my phone number."

Blucher earlier in the week told Guardian Australia how she had applied to visit Asha and the mother at the hospital. She had been granted permission by the Department of Immigration but it was later revoked without explanation.

Australian doctors on Sunday will discuss a boycott of the immigration detention system and whether they should flout the legal restrictions on speaking out about conditions.

Dr John-Paul Sanggaran, who worked at the Christmas Island detention centre, has argued in the Fairfax press the current detention system is "a form of systematic child abuse ... a form of torture".

"The only course left to us is to refuse to participate ... The AMA's own code of ethics states: 'regardless of society's attitudes, ensure that you do not countenance, condone or participate in the practice of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading procedures, whatever the offence of which the victim of such procedures is suspected, accused or convicted'.

"The code of conduct could not speak more clearly or directly. By continuing to work within immigration detention we merely provide legitimacy to those that would lie and mislead the public into believing healthcare of a respectable standard is being delivered."

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/feb/20/baby-asha-protest-swells-at-hospital-amid-fears-of-imminent-removal>

12. Call for Prime Minister to intervene to keep asylum seeker baby in Australia

ABC News Online

By Francis Tapim and Emma Blackwood

First posted Sun 21 Feb 2016, 7:28am

Updated Sun 21 Feb 2016, 8:06am

As protesters continue to rally outside a hospital in support of baby Asha, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has been urged to step in and prevent the one-year-old from being deported to the Nauru detention centre.

Baby Asha has been receiving treatment at Brisbane's Lady Cilento Children's Hospital after she was injured in immigration detention on Nauru last month.

Asha's injuries have since healed, but doctors are refusing to discharge her until a safe home is found.

The child's fate has been the centrepiece of a week-long protest at the hospital, with protesters continuing to rally outside the building's entrance today.

Last night, hundreds of protesters surrounded exit points at the hospital amid reports there were plans to move Asha and her family to immigration detention.

Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young said Mr Turnbull was out of touch with the Australian public on the issue.

"We have the mother and the father of a small baby not being able to speak to their lawyers, let alone answer the phone," she said.

"The Prime Minister really needs to step in now.

"What is Malcolm Turnbull doing? A one-year-old baby born here in Australia, he should simply give up the game and let her stay."

Officials say no plan to move Asha

A media report today suggested immigration officials were ready to move Asha and her family into community detention.

A Lady Cilento Children's Hospital spokesman said this morning Asha remained a patient and that staff were unaware of any immediate plans to move her.

An Immigration Department spokesman said nothing has changed and negotiations are continuing with doctors over the baby's future.

Natasha Blucher, who is an advocate for the family and the baby, said the mother told her two immigration officers visited her Saturday morning and told her she would be leaving later in the day.

She said the mother told her she would be taken by plain-clothed security officers, who were waiting at the hospital.

"She told me she didn't know where she would be going because they wouldn't tell her," Ms Blucher said.

"I think that's quite a scary thing for somebody with a little baby to know that people have the power to take you somewhere and that you have no right to know where that is."

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-21/malcolm-turnbull-urged-to-intervene-in-baby-asha-case/7187278>

13. More time needed to resettle Manus, Nauru asylum seekers, Julie Bishop says

ABC News Online

By political reporter Francis Keany

Posted Sat 20 Feb 2016, 7:06am

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has downplayed fresh negotiations to resettle asylum seekers living in Manus Island and Nauru.

According to Fairfax Media, officials have recommenced discussions with Malaysia, Indonesia and The Philippines.

It follows a number of failed attempts under previous Labor and Coalition governments.

Ms Bishop has indicated more time will be needed to strike a deal.

In a statement, she said it was "early days" for most of the discussions, and that the countries involved might also have to consider internal factors before coming to an agreement.

"Some of them have domestic issues, like elections," Ms Bishop said, without confirming the countries Australia is in discussions with.

Federal Industry Minister Christopher Pyne has also downplayed the reports, but stressed the Government remained committed to its border protection policies.

"It's a very speculative story, but I guess it leads me to say that at least we are in a position now where we have strong, secure borders," Mr Pyne told Sky.

"Labor is essentially supporting that policy, and we've got the number of children in detention down to less than 80, it was 2,000 when you [Labor] were in government."

Philippines President Benigno Aquino last year warned his country did not have the "capacity" to offer permanent residency.

Malaysia, meanwhile, struck a deal with the former Gillard government before it was blocked by the High Court in 2011.

The reports on negotiations followed comments by the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, downplaying the chances of sending any asylum seekers to New Zealand, under an agreement struck by the former Gillard government.

The New Zealand Prime Minister John Key said it was "potentially possible" to take in a group of asylum seekers who were due to be sent to Nauru, but Mr Turnbull said it would be unlikely to happen.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-20/more-time-needed-to-resettle-manus,-nauru-asylum-seekers:-bishop/7186182>

14. Baby Asha may go to community detention, not Nauru – reports

Demonstrators gather outside Brisbane's Lady Cilento hospital well into the night amid reports one-year-old is at risk of imminent removal to Nauru

The Guardian
Calla Wahlquist
Saturday 20 February 2016 19.30 EST

Negotiations were reportedly under way on Sunday morning to see if Baby Asha and her family could be transferred to community detention, rather than sent back to Nauru.

Doctors at Lady Cilento children's hospital in Brisbane have refused to release the one-year-old, known as Baby Asha, to detention centre guards, lest she be returned to an offshore detention centre.

Hundreds of protesters surrounded the exits of the hospital on Saturday night and checked cars that were leaving to make sure Asha, who was born in Australia to Nepalese Christian asylum seeker parents, was not being smuggled out.

The Sunday Mail reported that the Department of Border Protection had reached a deal with doctors to transfer Asha and her family to community detention, the outcome sought by Asha's family.

However Queensland Health was yet to confirm the deal on Sunday.

On Sunday morning a spokeswoman for immigration minister Peter Dutton said she could not comment on what had been classified as an operational matter, but said: "as the situation remains, Baby Asha and her mother are still at the hospital".

Guardian Australia understands further negotiations were taking place on Sunday morning.

Prof Brian Owler, president of the Australian Medical Association (AMA), told Guardian Australia he was concerned at reports that security guards would be sent to forcibly remove Asha from the hospital, saying it would be a violation of Australia's duty of care for Asha to be returned to Nauru.

"I spoke to a number of people last night including Bill Shorten, who then called the prime minister to seek reassurance that this would not happen," Owler told Guardian Australia. "While it wasn't confirmed that that wouldn't happen ... the issue was at least raised with him."

Concern Asha and would be moved was heightened on Saturday when her mother was placed in a communication blackout and was unable to be contacted by her lawyers or her advocate, Natasha Blucher. Transfers are commonly preceded by communication blackouts.

Blucher told Guardian Australia on Sunday that she had still not been able to get in touch with Asha's mother.

Owler said doctors at the hospital had an "absolute ethical obligation" not to release Asha until they were certain she had a safe place to go saying: "you are not allowed to release a child into any situation where they might be exposed to harm. It is absolutely shown that offshore detention is harmful to children.

He said the AMA fully supported the Brisbane hospital staff.

"Of course there's an ethical and moral obligation on them to keep that child in hospital. You wouldn't expect them to release any child back into that situation so why would you expect them to do it to an asylum seeker?"

"This is not a grey area, it's very clear what your obligations are."

However Owler said he did not support a boycott of the offshore processing system, which is being pushed by some in the medical profession, saying that it would not stop Australian doctors from going to treat people, and would just encourage the centres to hire more doctors from overseas.

Asha was born in Australia but transferred to Nauru with her family at the age of five months. She returned to Australia and was taken to hospital several weeks ago after being burned with boiling water on Nauru.

She and her family are among the 267 asylum seekers subject to a recent high court decision, which upheld the legality of the offshore processing system.

At a forum in Sydney on Sunday, the AMA planned to call for a moratorium on children being sent back to detention centres, the immediate release of all children in both offshore and onshore detention centres, the establishment of a transparent and independent national statutory body of clinical experts to investigate the health and welfare of asylum seekers, and a revision of government policies.

In his speech to the forum, a copy of which has been seen by Guardian Australia, Owler described the centres as “state sanctioned child abuse” and said the Department of Immigration and Border Protection was “pulling apart the moral fabric of this country.”

“There are times, in any nation, where the medical profession must act in the interests not only of our patients as individuals, or for patients in a health system, but it must act in the national interest,” Owler said.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/feb/21/baby-asha-community-detention-negotiations-follow-hospital-protests>

15. AMA President Brian Owler says Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten have spoken over Baby Asha case

Sydney Morning Herald
February 21, 2016 - 12:08PM
Deborah Snow

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten have become embroiled in the stand-off over the fate of asylum-seeker child Baby Asha, currently in a Brisbane hospital, the head of the Australian Medical Association President Brian Owler says.

Addressing an AMA forum in Sydney on Sunday, Professor Owler said he had learned on Saturday night that the child's mother had been refused access to lawyers, suggesting that her transfer might be imminent.

"I was shocked. I made a number of calls. Bill Shorten did call Prime Minister Turnbull [on Saturday night] to seek reassurance that this would not happen," he said.

"Security guards entering a hospital to forcibly remove a patient would be unprecedented in this country. It is a line that cannot be crossed."

He said that although there had been reassurance that nothing would happen over the weekend, "it seems that the reprieve may be temporary."

"You have to ask why the Department of Immigration and Border Protection is pulling apart the moral fabric of this country."

Professor Owler issued a passionate call to the medical profession to resist government plans to return asylum-seeker children to Nauru, saying "there are times, in any nation, where the medical profession must act in the interests not only of our patients ... but act in the national interest".

He said there should be an immediate release of all children from both offshore and onshore detention centres and a moratorium on such children being sent back to the centres.

He has also called for the immediate establishment of a national body of clinical experts, independent of government, to investigate and report back to parliament on the health and welfare of asylum-seekers, saying the Abbott government had disbanded an advisory body of independent doctors fulfilling this role in December 2013.

"Doctors, along with nurses, lawyers and others, must lead debate on an issue of national importance" he said.

He said medical staff at two hospitals, the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne and the Lady Cilento Hospital in Brisbane, were refusing to discharge children (including Baby Asha) from hospital because of the fear they would be returned to detention.

This was not a form of political protest, he said.

"I know that there is no reasonable other option for these doctors and nurses to take," Professor Owler said.

"There is an absolute ethical, not to mention moral, obligation to that patient who is in their care [not to] release a child back into a situation where they have reason to believe that there is a risk of harm."

Twelve-month-old Asha was transferred to hospital in Brisbane suffering burns she received from boiling water while in detention on Nauru.

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/ama-president-brian-owler-says-turnbull-and-shorten-have-spoken-over-baby-asha-case-20160220-gmzf4k.html>

16. Baby Asha: immigration minister confirms community detention in Australia

Peter Dutton makes announcement after doctors and campaigners united to stop authorities returning one-year-old to Nauru

The Guardian

Calla Wahlquist, Warren Murray and Guardian Australia staff

Saturday 20 February 2016 19.30 EST

Australia's immigration minister has confirmed Baby Asha will be allowed to stay in the country under community detention arrangements after doctors and campaigners fought to prevent her return to the asylum seeker detention centre on Nauru.

Peter Dutton, speaking in Brisbane on Sunday, said one-year-old Asha – who has been treated at the city's Lady Cilento hospital for accidental burns – and her family would join 83 other people living in community detention.

"The situation is, as it has been for other families, that once the medical assistance has been provided to the particular patient, in this case a young baby, then the doctors allow the baby to be released or the patient to be released, then arrangements are made for accommodation either in a detention facility here in Australia or out in the community.

"That is exactly what we are proposing to do for baby Asha and her family."

Reports had emerged earlier on Sunday that negotiations were under way to transfer Asha into community detention after protests erupted outside the hospital on Saturday night.

Doctors had refused to release Asha to detention centre guards lest she be returned to offshore detention centre.

Amid signs on Saturday that border officers and their private security contractor Serco were preparing to act, hundreds of protesters surrounded the exits of the hospital on Saturday night and checked cars that were leaving to make sure Asha, who was born in Australia to Nepalese Christian asylum seeker parents, was not being smuggled out.

Professor Brian Owler, president of the Australian Medical Association (AMA), told Guardian Australia he had been concerned at reports that security guards would be sent to forcibly remove Asha from the hospital, saying it would be a violation of Australia's duty of care for Asha to be returned to Nauru.

"I spoke to a number of people last night including Bill Shorten, who then called the prime minister to seek reassurance that this would not happen," Owler told Guardian Australia. "While it wasn't confirmed that that wouldn't happen ... the issue was at least raised with him."

Concern Asha and would be moved was heightened on Saturday when her mother was placed in a communication blackout and was unable to be contacted by her lawyers or her advocate, Natasha Blucher. Transfers are commonly preceded by communication blackouts.

Blucher told Guardian Australia on Sunday that she had still not been able to get in touch with Asha's mother.

Owler said doctors at the hospital had an "absolute ethical obligation" not to release Asha until they were certain she had a safe place to go saying: "you are not allowed to release a child into any situation where they might be exposed to harm. It is absolutely shown that offshore detention is harmful to children.

He said the AMA fully supported the Brisbane hospital staff.

"Of course there's an ethical and moral obligation on them to keep that child in hospital. You wouldn't expect them to release any child back into that situation so why would you expect them to do it to an asylum seeker?"

"This is not a grey area, it's very clear what your obligations are."

However Owler said he did not support a boycott of the offshore processing system, which is being pushed by some in the medical profession, saying that it would not stop Australian doctors from going to treat people, and would just encourage the centres to hire more doctors from overseas.

Dutton, speaking on Sunday, defended the government's border protection policy and appeared to suggest Baby Asha had always been bound for community detention rather than a return to the offshore processing system.

"We are going to provide exactly the same approach as we provided for the 83 others, including some that I have released since they've been in Australia ... That's been the approach I have taken when I've looked at these individual cases.

"The advice I have received is the doctors from the hospital have said the baby's treatment has concluded and they would be happy for the baby to go out into community detention."

Asha was born in Australia but transferred to Nauru with her family at the age of five months. She returned to Australia and was taken to hospital several weeks ago after being burned with boiling water on Nauru.

She and her family are among the 267 asylum seekers subject to a recent high court decision, which upheld the legality of the offshore processing system.

At a forum in Sydney on Sunday, the AMA planned to call for a moratorium on children being sent back to detention centres, the immediate release of all children in both offshore and onshore detention centres, the establishment of a transparent and independent national statutory body of clinical experts to investigate the health and welfare of asylum seekers, and a revision of government policies.

In his speech to the forum, a copy of which has been seen by Guardian Australia, Owler described the centres as “state sanctioned child abuse” and said the Department of Immigration and Border Protection was “pulling apart the moral fabric of this country.”

“There are times, in any nation, where the medical profession must act in the interests not only of our patients as individuals, or for patients in a health system, but it must act in the national interest,” Owler said.

In a statement on Sunday, Labor’s immigration and border protection spokesman, Richard Marles, said Asha’s care “must be in accordance with treating doctors’ advice” and called on the government to handle the case “with sensitivity” and in accordance with its international obligations.

“The government must give an assurance to the Australian community that it is caring for Baby Asha in this way,” Marles said.

He did not comment on the possibility of her return to Nauru.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/feb/21/baby-asha-community-detention-negotiations-follow-hospital-protests>

17. Baby Asha will be transferred to Brisbane detention: Peter Dutton

ABC News Online

First posted Sun 21 Feb 2016, 11:57am

Updated Sun 21 Feb 2016, 12:01pm

An asylum seeker baby currently staying at a hospital in Brisbane will be moved to community detention, but could still end up being returned to Nauru, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton says.

One-year-old Asha remains at Brisbane's Lady Cilento Children's Hospital after doctors refused to release her until a safe home was found.

Mr Dutton said immigration officials had reached an agreement with doctors that Asha and her family would be transferred to community detention in Brisbane, but that they would receive no special treatment and may end up back in Nauru if they were not deemed to be legitimate refugees.

The child's fate has been the focal point of a 10-day protest outside the hospital, with dozens of protesters continuing to rally outside the building's entrance today.

"The advice I have received is the doctors from the hospital have said the baby's treatment has concluded and they would be happy for the baby to go out into community detention," Mr Dutton said.

"That's what we have proposed all along but at some point, if people have matters finalised in Australia, they will be returning to Nauru."

Mr Dutton said the Asha case had been "hijacked" by refugee advocates and that the Government's position was unchanged.

"I'm not sure if they are interested in the best interests of the child. I am. I want to look at each case, people can go into community detention - I have said to you before I want to get the number of children in detention down to zero."

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-21/baby-asha-brisbane-doctors-agree-to-community-detention-plan/7187716>

18. Asylum seeker row: Baby Asha can stay in Australia, for now

Sydney Morning Herald
February 22, 2016 - 7:24AM

Judith Ireland
- with Deborah Snow and Jorge Branco

The asylum seeker baby who inspired protesters to stage a hospital vigil to stop her from being sent back to Nauru has been released into community detention in Australia.

On Monday morning, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton confirmed the child had been released from Brisbane's Lady Cilento Hospital.

But in a sign of the uncertainty over her fate, Mr Dutton confirmed that once the baby girl and her family's refugee claims were finalised, they would be sent back to Nauru, their home country or to a third country such as Cambodia.

Earlier this month, doctors in Brisbane said they would refuse to release the one-year-old, known as Asha, to immigration authorities unless a "suitable home environment is identified", prompting protesters to camp outside the Lady Cilento Children's Hospital and block exits in support.

But Mr Dutton told reporters on Sunday that Asha and her family were always going to be moved into community detention, accusing refugee advocates of "hijacking" the debate for their own purposes. When asked why this community plan had not been made clear a week ago, Mr Dutton said that "it has been made very clear", adding some activists were more interested in "their own media profile".

The young child and her parents had been flown from Nauru in January, after Asha suffered burns in an accident in the island's detention centre.

On Saturday, there was speculation that Asha was about to be sent back to Nauru, with the Human Rights Law Centre saying it had been "refused access" to its client, Asha's mother.

This came as Australian Medical Association president Brian Owler strongly criticised the federal government's treatment of asylum seekers,

calling on the medical profession to resist the sending of children back to Nauru.

"There are times, in any nation, where the medical profession must act in the interests not only of our patients ... but act in the national interest," he told an AMA forum in Sydney.

On Sunday afternoon, the Immigration Minister stressed that there was no special treatment for Asha and her family. He said that as part of the government's plan to get children out of immigration detention, there were already "many" families living in community detention in Australia.

"Already in Australia we have 83 people that are here from Nauru, including women and children, who are living out in the community," he said.

Mr Dutton said people who were the subjects of the recent High Court case that ruled Australia's offshore detention regime was lawful, were also in community detention. "We will work with ... families to remain in Australia whilst their medical and legal matters are finalised, and then they will go back to their country of origin," he said.

"If people don't want to go back to their country of origin, they go back to Nauru and then there's a possibility of going to Cambodia or other third country options."

After Mr Dutton's press conference, Professor Owler welcomed the decision on baby Asha but said it was not enough. "It's just extraordinary that the minister has to be dragged kicking and screaming to a point to allow a baby to stay in Australia, to not be taken out of a hospital.

"You can blame everyone else, the AMA and other people for raising the issues but clearly anyone can see that that was the right thing to do in the first place" he told Fairfax Media.

The Human Rights Law Centre's director of legal advocacy Daniel Webb hailed the news on Sunday as a "massive turn-around" but called on the government to allow Asha and her family to "rebuild their lives in Australia with certainty".

"The politics may be complex but the morality is simple. Detention is no place for innocent, vulnerable people – neither is a tent on a tiny island," he said.

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/asylum-seeker-row-baby-asha-can-stay-in-australia-for-now-20160221-gmznbe.html>

19. MEDIA RELEASE: People power wins Asha's community detention: now free all the 267

Sunday February 21, 2016
Refugee Action Coalition
Ian Rintoul
mobile 0417 275 713

The Refugee Action Coalition welcomes the agreement to place baby Asha in community detention as a victory for people power and the "Let Them Stay" campaign on behalf of the 267 asylum seekers from Nauru and Manus Island presently in Australia.

"This is one small step for one family. We want to applaud the hospital and its staff for the stand they took to defend the safety and welfare of baby Asha," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition.

"Their stand and the support from other hospitals and medical staff will make it easier for other workers and staff to take a similar stand in support of the 267 threatened with return to Nauru.

"If Peter Dutton can grant community detention for Asha and her family, then it is possible to agree that all those threatened with return to Nauru can be freed into the community.

"However, we note that Peter Dutton insists they are still under threat of being returned to Nauru. We still need an ironclad guarantee that Asha and her family will not be returned to Nauru.

While there is a 72 hour undertaking of notice before any attempt to remove Asha to Nauru, a future decision about whether she would be moved would be entirely up to IHMS and the Immigration department.

"We remain determined to ensure that Asha and the 267 get an ironclad guarantee of no return to Nauru," said Rintoul.

"There is still a question mark over the fate of all of the 267 men, women, and children who need to know that they will not be returned to Nauru or Manus Island. Until there is a positive decision about the 267, the campaign to Let Them Stay will continue.

"The response in Brisbane has been tremendous, and is a very strong indication that movement to 'Let Them Stay' is gaining increasing community and worker support.

"People power has won a small step for Asha - now we need to step up the Let Them Stay campaign.

NO THIRD COUNTRIES - BRING THEM ALL TO AUSTRALIA

"The efforts of the Australian government to find third countries willing to take refugees from Nauru and Manus is doomed," said Ian Rintoul, "It is more shabby politicking by the government to involve relatively poor neighbouring countries in undermining the refugee convention.

"The international community rightly regards the refugees on Manus and Nauru as being Australia's responsibility. The government is just delaying the inevitable. Offshore detention is collapsing under the weight of the cruelty and its own contradictions.

The Australian government must bring all those on Manus and Nauru to Australia."

For more information contact Ian Rintoul 0417 275 713

20. Peter Dutton vows Baby Asha will be returned to Nauru

The Age
February 22, 2016 - 9:03AM
Adam Gartrell

Asylum seeker baby Asha and her family will be returned to Nauru once medical and legal processes are complete, the Turnbull government has vowed.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton has also ruled out taking up New Zealand's offer to resettle some refugees, saying it would offer a "back door" into Australia.

The one-year-old known as Asha came to Australia with her family last month after suffering burns on Nauru. Doctors said they would refuse to release her unless a suitable home was found, prompting protesters to camp outside her Brisbane hospital in support.

Asha was released into community detention on Monday morning but Mr Dutton insists her stay in Australia will be temporary.

"I couldn't be any clearer - once the medical assistance has been provided and the legal issues resolved, people will go back to Nauru," he said.

"We are not going to allow people smugglers to get out a message that if you seek assistance in an Australian hospital, that somehow that is your formula to becoming an Australian citizen."

Mr Dutton declined to put a time frame on the family's return but said arrangements would be made "at the right time".

Alternatively, the family could choose to return to their country of origin or accept resettlement in a third country such as Cambodia.

Mr Dutton said Asha and her family were being treated the same as any other family in similar circumstances.

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key at the weekend reiterated his offer to take up to 150 refugees from Australia's detention centres.

But Mr Dutton said that won't be happening.

"The New Zealand proposal as brokered by Julia Gillard with Prime Minister Key basically provided people smugglers with a back door into Australia. And we're not going to abide that," he told reporters in Canberra.

Mr Dutton accused advocates of using baby Asha's case to raise their media profile. "I think that is absolutely disgraceful," he said.

Australian Medical Association president Brian Owler has strongly criticised the government's treatment of asylum seekers, calling on the medical profession to resist the sending of children back to Nauru.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/peter-dutton-vows-baby-asha-will-be-returned-to-nauru-20160221-gmzuwo.html>

21. Water shortages, toilet restrictions and constant fear: details about life on Nauru revealed

Sydney Morning Herald
February 10, 2016
Nicole Hasham

A former employee at the Nauru detention centre has lifted the lid on conditions within the compound, including limited access to toilets and poor welfare for bullied men, as pressure mounts on the Turnbull government not to return asylum seekers to the isolated island.

The rare disclosure from within the ranks of Transfield, recently renamed Broadspectrum, follows the government's decision to extend by a year the company's contract to provide welfare and security in Australian-funded detention centres at Nauru and Manus Island.

The claims came as Nationals senator Barry O'Sullivan suggested at a Senate estimates hearing on Tuesday that the exacerbation of trauma asylum seekers experience at Nauru is no different to that caused by living in the Australian suburbs. The fiery hearing deteriorated into a slanging match in which Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young called Senator O'Sullivan a "pig" after he interrupted her questioning.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is weathering sustained calls to back down from plans to return 267 asylum seekers and refugees, including about 90 children, to Nauru.

In written evidence presented to a Senate inquiry into the Nauru centre, the former Transfield case manager, who filled the role until February last year, said medical facilities were "inadequate" and living conditions poor.

The whistleblower, who worked with single adult men, said they lived in tents that were hot, overcrowded, mouldy and infested with mice.

"Water shortages were common, resulting in restrictions on toilets and shower facilities," the former worker said.

The detention centre failed to provide privacy and personal space and "vulnerable men who experienced bullying or harassment by other asylum seekers" were forced to live among their antagonists after just a few days' respite. Asylum

seekers endured long waits for medical and dental treatment and waited hours for a bus to travel to the clinic. It meant some missed their appointments or lost access to an interpreter.

The Nauru hospital, which the government says is receiving a \$26 million upgrade, also lacked the facilities to treat serious medical conditions, the submission said.

"The poor living conditions and confinement of detention contributed to asylum seekers' mental health concerns," it said, citing hunger strikes and suicide attempts.

The evidence was echoed by Human Rights Commission president Gillian Triggs, who told an estimates hearing on Tuesday that Nauru detainees had access to a washing machine barely once a month during water shortages, and lived in constant fear of being physically and sexually assaulted, particularly outside the centre.

Senator O'Sullivan suggested that for traumatised asylum seekers, living in Nauru was akin to the stress of settling in the Australian community and having to adjust to a new language and culture and find work.

"Whether they go left to Nauru or right to ... a suburb of my community, I'm saying the exacerbation of their stress continues," he said. Professor Triggs rejected the assertion.

A spokesman for the the Department of Immigration and Border Protection said it would not comment on the anonymous claims, but would be making its own submission to the inquiry in due course.

"However, significant improvements have been made to accommodation and medical facilities at the Nauru RPC since February 2015," the spokesman said.

Broadspectrum had not responded to request for comment at the time of publication.

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/water-shortages-toilet-restrictions-and-constant-fear-details-about-life-on-nauru-revealed-20160209-gmpcwo.html>

22. Water, water everywhere but Nauru detainees missing out, critics say

The Age
February 12, 2016
Nicole Hasham

Images of bottled water discarded at the Nauru tip or deteriorating outdoors have emerged, following reports that water shortages on the island mean asylum seekers use a washing machine as little as once a month and have limited access to drinking water.

In one video, water bottles well within their use-by dates are abandoned in the tip alongside unopened shave sticks and other toiletries. Photographs show scores of large water containers piled outdoors among weeds, exposed to the elements.

The Department of Immigration and Border Protection would not confirm the veracity of the images.

At a Senate estimates hearing this week, Human Rights Commission president Gillian Triggs said people detained at Nauru "have to walk 100 metres to water ... if there is enough water washing machines are available to wash their clothes every two weeks. If there is little water, they might be lucky to have a washing machine or access to one every month".

Government contractor Broadspectrum, which recently changed its name from Transfield, said water was not discarded and "adequate contingency stocks of drinking water are maintained at all times".

A Senate inquiry into the Nauru detention camp last year reported receiving asylum seeker evidence of "water restrictions impacting on their health and wellbeing through restricting access to drinking water and water for showers".

Paediatrician David Isaacs and nurse Alanna Maycock told the inquiry "parents complain they have been unable to access water at night when their children have vomiting and diarrhoea", risking dehydration.

They said families can access water in the canteen but their tents had no running water and "there is no place near their tents where families can access bottled water after dark. Water is not unlimited if it cannot be accessed easily."

In the video, taken at Nauru by former Australian mining worker George Goring in May last year, he asks why "perfectly good, serviceable material, foodstuffs and drinking water is finding its way to the tip."

"We have 10-litre pure spring water from Australia that has been dumped here in the tip," he said, adding it did not expire until March 2016.

"On an island that doesn't have a reticulated [piped] water supply, the mind boggles."

He said he saw local people scavenging items at the tip that he believed were discarded by the detention centre, which is funded by Australian taxpayers.

"There were perfectly good toothbrushes, toothpaste, shave sticks, shampoo, deodorant ... why is it thrown away?"

A Broadspectrum spokesman said the photos were difficult to verify and "we are not the only persons utilising the tip" so could not draw conclusions about items found there.

"Water is not discarded even if there is an issue with the packaging ... it would be kept for [an] emergency," he said.

A department spokeswoman said potable water was "freely available from drinking fountains in multiple locations at the [detention centre]" and other water was "stored separately and used for other purposes".

Detainees could take two bottles of water from the mess at each meal. Refugees living outside the centre were not given water but could purchase it, she said.

A former worker at the Nauru centre told Fairfax Media of water containers "left in the hot sun covered with a plastic tarp. It quickly becomes toxic because the plastic containers reach extreme temperatures".

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/water-water-everywhere-but-nauru-detainees-missing-out-critics-say-20160210-gmqzdc.html>

23. Australian media 'lying and agenda-driven' over child abuse claims – Nauru

Tweets on Republic of Nauru account attack media after apology from ABC's 7.30 program over error in reporting alleged rape of five-year-old child

The Guardian
Helen Davidson
Wednesday 10 February 2016 22.45 EST

The government of Nauru has accused sections of the Australian media of lying and being driven by an agenda in reporting incidents of alleged child abuse.

In a series of tweets on Tuesday on the Republic of Nauru account, a spokesperson responded to an apology from ABC's 7.30 program over its error in reporting an alleged rape of a five-year-old child, and attacked other Australian media.

"Refugee advocate groups spread false story about 5yo boy being raped in Nauru," one tweet said. "It never happened. Almost all claims are fabrications."

The 7.30 report had conflated two cases: that of a five-year-old who was allegedly sexually assaulted, and a 15-year-old who had allegedly been raped.

Mike Pezullo, the immigration department secretary, accused the media of "essentially pamphleteering" and of presenting "advocacy labelled as journalism", in comments seized upon by Nauru authorities.

A following post added: "Agenda-driven media recently claimed 6yo refugee child assaulted. When they discovered accused was also refugee they dropped story."

The tweet was in reference to revelations by Guardian Australia last month that a young girl had allegedly been sexually assaulted, that her parents had caught the perpetrator in the act, and that police were yet to arrest or charge the man.

That the accused was also a refugee was reported prominently in the first of two stories by Guardian Australia, and repeated by other media.

Representatives of the government did not respond to questions but on Thursday released a statement which repeated the accusations and said Australian media, advocates and lawyers were "more concerned about bashing Nauru than protecting children".

Nauru's justice minister, David Adeang, said the alleged rape of the six-year-old child "received no interest ... when they discovered the accused was another refugee".

"It didn't suit their story, because they wanted to once again point the finger at a Nauruan and spread the lies that Nauru is a dangerous place," he said.

The hostile media release accused advocates and lawyers of also dropping the story due a lack of "political mileage".

It is the latest in a series of similar angry releases from the Nauru government over unfavourable reporting about the offshore processing system operating on the island.

Following publication of the allegations in January, the Nauru police force released a statement defending their record and said criticisms were "incorrect and unhelpful".

In Thursday's statement, Adeang again defended the police and said the allegation was investigated properly. He said the matter was still with the director of public prosecutions but noted "almost all allegations of assault by refugees (sic) are unsubstantiated allegations with no physical evidence, witnesses or details".

The young girl was allegedly attacked on 29 December while outside the cafe where her parents worked, having temporarily settled in the Nauru community after receiving refugee status. Her father claimed to have found the man with his daughter, and got into an altercation with him. There were several people in the cafe who helped in the aftermath, but did not witness the incident, he said.

The girl and her parents were interviewed twice following the alleged incident, and police confirmed an ongoing investigation in January.

The girl told the police she was approached by the man while in her father's car, and that he told her to follow him. He then pulled down his pants and abused her, she said in her police statement.

"Then he took me there, he started pulling my trousers down first and then his trousers and I told him that is not the right thing to do to a child," she said.

The girl's father has since told Guardian Australia the accused man remains free, and has not been questioned. He said he was told to wait for a court date.

Meanwhile, his daughter is receiving treatment with IHMS for severe mental health issues, exacerbated by the attack, her father said.

There have been a number of incidents of assault in Nauru involving refugees and asylum seekers. No one – either refugee or local Nauruan – has ever been charged.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/11/australian-media-lying-and-agenda-driven-over-child-abuse-claims-nauru>

24. Nauru cancels visitor visas for Australian and New Zealand citizens

ABC News Online

By Simon Cullen

First posted Fri 19 Feb 2016, 10:11am

Updated Fri 19 Feb 2016, 11:00am

Nauru has abruptly cancelled all visitor visas for Australian and New Zealand passport holders, according to the country's airline.

The decision took effect late yesterday, meaning some passengers were unable to board last night's 1:00am flight from Brisbane to Nauru via Honiara.

An airline spokeswoman said the ban would remain in place until further notice, and passengers would be given full refunds.

The Nauru Government said it made the decision after a member of the media entered the country on a tourist visa without properly declaring who they worked for.

"Changes in visa policy implemented after ABC dishonestly entered country as tourist and failed to declare they were media," the Government said on its Twitter account before deleting the tweet.

A later tweet said the Government stood by its claims about "journalists entering illegally".

The Government said it would issue a statement soon.

"Those with visitors visas only should contact Nauru consulate in Brisbane for further information," another tweet said, adding that worker visas remained valid.

The ABC has contacted the Nauru Government for further comment.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-19/nauru-cancels-visitor-visas-for-australian-nz-citizens/7183684>

25. Nauru bans entry for Australians and New Zealanders without a visa

Country's Twitter account calls move a change in procedure after an ABC journalist allegedly travelled there without declaring media status

The Guardian
Helen Davidson
Thursday 18 February 2016 22.12 EST

Nauru has revoked visitor entry for Australian and New Zealand passport holders, allegedly after an Australian journalist entered the country without declaring he or she worked in the media.

The decision to change visa entry requirements appears to have been made at extremely short notice. SBS reported that travellers waiting for a flight in Brisbane early on Friday morning were told at the airport shortly after midnight their passports were no longer valid for travel to the country.

Nauru Airlines confirmed to Guardian Australia citizens of the two countries could no longer enter the republic without a visa, but referred all questions to the Nauru consulate in Brisbane.

The Nauru consulate said it had been told to refer all calls to the Nauru immigration department. The immigration department did not answer questions, but on its Twitter account the country described the move as a change in procedure and denied visas had been "revoked".

"Previously Aust & NZ citizens have not needed visa to visit as tourist. Now they do," the Republic of Nauru account said.

It alleged an ABC journalist had entered the country as a tourist and did not declare his or her media status. Journalists have been required to pay an \$8,000 non-refundable application fee to visit Nauru on a media visa since January 2013. Only one media representative, the Australian's Chris Kenny, has been approved to visit.

"Every nation has requirements that those entering must do so honestly. Sadly deceptive behaviour from ABC disadvantages others," the tweets continued.

"Citizens of Aust & NZ entering honestly for genuine reasons still welcome in Nauru. Those with existing visas should reapply if unsure."

The tweets were deleted shortly afterwards "for more accurate information". The account said the government would release a statement later.

The ABC has been contacted for comment.

Geoff Bowmaker, the chief executive of Nauru Airlines, told Guardian Australia the company "understands the likely inconvenience that the Nauru government's decision to cancel tourist visas has caused to our passengers".

"Whilst refunds are not generally available for visa issue the airline will in this situation refund the tickets of affected passengers," he said.

Nauru said Australian and New Zealand workers in Nauru were not affected by the visa changes.

The Twitter account is increasingly the only official comment to come from the country. In recent weeks it has been used to criticise Australian media, including accusing outlets of fabrication, but has not responded to questions or requests for clarification.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/19/nauru-bans-entry-australians-new-zealanders-without-visa>

26. Refugee homestay agency AHN shuts down program over lack of 'progress'

ABC News Online
By Pablo Vinales
Posted Fri 12 Feb 2016, 4:22am

The Australian Homestay Network (AHN) has announced it will shut down a program that was to help resettle some of the promised national intake of 12,000 Syrian refugees in Tasmania.

AHN executive director David Bycroft said he was forced to make the decision because "no progress" had been made with the Federal Government, despite initial discussions last year.

"Australia is now sitting there with empty rooms, people who want to host in regional areas and also in cities, and we're just letting people struggle without support," he said.

The agency was successful in settling almost 600 refugees in 2012 and 2013.

Mr Bycroft said initial consultations with state governments stalled in October last year because the Federal Government did not appear to consider AHN as an option.

More than 4,000 people registered their interest in the house-sharing program.

Hobart resident Matt Sargent registered his home and said he believed the agency's previous success should be proof that the programs worked.

"I'm ashamed really that I've not been afforded the opportunity, just like so many others on the register, to show that we care about people who are fleeing war-torn regions just to protect their families," he said.

The Tasmanian Government was one of the first state governments to approach AHN.

The state has committed to house 500 additional Syrian refugees.

"We're disappointed but more importantly we've got more than 4,000 Australians who were wanting to be a part of the solution, sitting with empty rooms and wondering why they weren't considered," Mr Bycroft said.

The Federal Government has been contacted for comment.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-12/refugee-homestay-agency-ahn-quits-program-australian-government/7161902>

27. Alleged organiser of people smuggling boat at centre of paid turn-back claims arrested in Indonesia

ABC News Online

By Indonesia correspondent Adam Harvey

Posted Thu 18 Feb 2016, 4:04am

One of the alleged organisers of an asylum boat journey at the centre of a political scandal has been arrested in Indonesia.

Indonesian police said they found a Bangladeshi man wanted as part of a controversial people smuggling operation last May.

Police from Bogor, just outside Jakarta, said they arrested the man who they believe helped coordinate a boat of 65 asylum seekers that was eventually intercepted by an Australian vessel.

The asylum seekers said the Australians paid the boat crew to return to Indonesia.

The crew and captain were arrested on Indonesia's Rote Island and convicted of maritime and people smuggling offences in January and sentenced to five years jail.

The Bangladeshi man is expected to face similar charges.

In June 2015, then prime minister Tony Abbott refused to deny claims Australian officials paid asylum seeker crews to turn back boats to Indonesia, saying the Government would stop the boats "by hook or by crook".

Indonesia said it was still pursuing others involved in organising the trip.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-18/alleged-people-smuggling-organiser-arrested-in-indonesia/7178928>