

Australian clergy critical of government approach to asylum seekers

by [David Crampton](#)

August 5, 2011

Sydney, August 5 (ENInews)--Australian church leaders are criticizing a government solution to deport hundreds of asylum seekers to Malaysia as a "swap" to settle 4000 refugees from Malaysian detention centers.

The government is funding the \$292 million plan, and has said force may be used to ensure asylum seekers board planes. The first 55 of 800 mostly-Malaysian boat people, nearly a third of whom were children, were flown to Malaysia on 4 August.

This is "not the action of a civilized, progressive democracy," said Rod Benson, public affairs director for the New South Wales Council of Churches. "It's abhorrent. We are now responsible for sending 19 children, 14 of them unaccompanied, to Malaysia--not to a detention facility, but apparently out in the community where an uncertain fate awaits them."

Rev. Elenie Poulos, national justice director of the Uniting Church, Australia's third-largest church, will continue to "kick up a stink" over the "shocking and morally repugnant" solution. "We're not going to stop now this is happening," she said. "Boat people should be treated like the asylum seekers who come by air, and released into the community."

But Adelaide's Anglican archbishop, Jeffrey Driver, suggested this week they should be detained, though for a limited time and only on Australian soil. "Detention for management of health, identity and security risks should be limited to a period of one month and should never be punitive," he said.

Of 148 signatories to the United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, only Australia mandatorily detains asylum seekers without visas. Malaysia is not a signatory, and does not offer legal domestic rights to asylum seekers.

The Catholic church maintains the Australian government is in breach of international obligations, calling the plan "nothing less than brutal people trafficking."

"The core purpose of this deal is to outsource our human rights violations to one of South East Asia's most infamous rights abusers at a cost of \$95,000 per asylum seeker," said Fr. Jim Carty, a Catholic priest in Sydney.