

# **The Blue Mountains Support Group (BMRSG) is a project of Blue Mountains Family Support Service**

## **Annual Report 2007-8**

This past year has been most notable for the election of the Rudd Labor Government. At last some changes have been made and the conditions for refugees and asylum seekers have improved. The Pacific Solution has been abandoned, Nauru and Christmas Island have been closed and Temporary Protection visas have been abolished. However, there is still much to do to bring Australia in line with the requirements of the United Nation Human Rights Treaty. For this reason we continue to operate.

Our membership has remained constant although we have been less active than in the past. The committee has continued to meet regularly every second month and publish regular newsletters which are sent to all members.

### **Direct Help**

- The dedicated band of visitors has continued to visit Villawood Detention Centre and provide friendship and many of the necessities of life such as suitable warm clothes. It has been easier to post the clothes to the centre than to try to take them in personally. Two of our members, Leoni Hubbard and Judy Gaskin, have been given Designated Visitor status which allows them to take some detainees out of the centre for the day. These detainees have been delighted to visit the Blue Mountains, travel on the Scenic Railway and enjoy a meal outside confinement. Several of the detainees were allowed to attend our Christmas picnic.
- We have continued to support individual refugees, especially those on Bridging E visas, providing financial assistance, emotional support, medical care, fares, and legal assistance.
- We have continued provide regular financial support to the House of Welcome, Bridges for Asylum Seekers, the Asylum Seekers Centre and Mamre House.
- We held a delightful Christmas picnic which was attended by our refugee friends from The House of Welcome, refugees now living in the community and even some released from Villawood for the day. It was a children friendly, cheerful and truly multicultural event.

### **Education**

There is still a great deal of ignorance and misunderstanding among some members of the community, unfortunately even among members of the Labor Party. Committee member Liz Wong spoke to the Katoomba Branch and was very well received. We shall endeavour to speak to other Labor Party branches, and the Greens.

Presently, we are revamping our website and bringing the information up to date.

An Open Letter to the community was funded by our members and published in the BM Gazette. This letter outlined the urgent changes needed to the Immigration Laws and the needs of refugees and asylum seekers..

Chairperson Marie Standen and member Kathie Herbert met with Hon. Bob Debus, Member for Macquarie and congratulated the new government on the changes

it had already made and stressed that the following injustices also needed urgent attention.

\*Abolition of Mandatory detention.

\*Greater access to English classes.

\*Review of resettlement procedures to include housing, employment, and cultural needs.

\*Review of Bridging visas - work rights for Bridging E visa holders.

\*Review of the '45 day ruling'

They stressed the need for urgent government preparedness to cope with the not so distant future of climate change refugees from the Pacific. The present plight of the people of the Carteret Islands was highlighted to stress the need to develop practical plans and strategies which will allow smooth resettlement and the maintenance of our cultural, economic and political life.

Submission to 2020 Summit

This submission addressed TOPIC 3: Population, sustainability, climate change and water. It addressed the need to change our immigration laws and the future plight of climate change refugees.

Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Migration

Once again similar problems were addressed.

Our members have been encouraged to write individually to, and lobby politicians of all political persuasions on these matters.

Although George Winston, who had coordinated our fund-raising efforts over the past six years stepped down from this role last year he continues to do sterling service as our Secretary.

The Future

On 2 November, 2008 we propose to hold a Symposium in Wentworth Falls to which we have invited Senator Chris Evans, Minister for Immigration and Citizenship who has yet to respond.

We shall continue to function as long as our assistance is needed and finances are available.

I must thank all the members of the Committee for their hard work and support.

We sincerely thank the Blue Mountains Family Support Service for its continued support and encouragement.

Marie Standen

Chairperson

July, 2008