



African Think Tank Inc.

WORKING WITH VICTORIA'S AFRICAN COMMUNITY

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ATT media release: Immigration Minister's allegations on African refugees are unfounded and unsubstantiated?

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African Think Tank is concerned that statements on African refugee matters by Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews are not consistent with facts and/or with the reality experienced by the refugees, and therefore do not present a complete, fair and/or reasonable account in the public domain.

- In his media release of 4/10/07, Minister Andrews states:

The Government has been aware that many refugees from parts of Africa have had difficulties settling in Australia. Many are young men in their teens and early twenties, most of these have low levels of education. Most have come from war and conflict including torture. Many have lived in refugee camps for up to and over a decade and all have come from a vastly different culture. The unique challenges of this group have long been recognised and acknowledged. It is not surprising that some young men, without adequate English, and with low levels of education who drop out of school without a job, pose more challenges for us?

The facts are:

- A refugee, by definition, has experienced strife in their homeland. This applied to European Jews, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Latvians, Bosnians and many others, all of whom have settled successfully in Australia.
- Africans have not come from a vastly different culture. Africa was colonised by the English and Europeans. Sudan was a British colony. The exposure of Africans to English and European cultures and languages pre-dates the transplanting of those cultures and languages to most other areas of the globe, including Australia.

- Africans value education very highly. If young Africans drop out, it is contrary to their most cherished dreams, and indicative of demoralisation and attrition of high levels of motivation.
- Contrary to all principles of effective learning and sound educational practice, African children have consistently been placed into classes according to their age, despite a lack of curriculum preparedness. We wouldn't expect Australian-born children to cope with all later year school subjects in China after a short language course. This sets refugee children up for stress, anxiety, loss of confidence, school avoidance, and, ultimately, failure and dropping out. Dropping out is not the fault of the children. It is a logical consequence of an impossible situation for any child, and it has done untold damage to African children and their families, whose long-standing, valid complaints and concerns have been consistently ignored.
- The State Governments blame the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth says schooling is a state responsibility. As politics are played out at the expense of refugee children, and while the African communities' concerns are ignored, these children continue to be set up for failure, underachievement, and the waste of their potential and abilities. Blame is then inappropriately and publicly deflected to their young shoulders by the Government.
- The adult English program (AMEP) has also been strongly criticised for unworkable and ineffective educational practices, including lack of curriculum or textbook, outdated and/or irrelevant photocopied teaching materials, and continuous enrolment that places new students in classes underway throughout the term or semester. Such conditions are contrary to sound educational practice and would never be tolerated by mainstream students. Reports indicate that qualified, experienced teachers respected within African communities for their commitment and teaching expertise have been undermined and criticised by management. The input of African students was not sought. Service providers have disregarded educational research that has consistently shown the quality of teaching to be the most important single factor in creating positive educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. African adults have paid the price for this in terms of language acquisition and employment access.
- Anecdotal evidence indicates bureaucracy and non-teaching functions have soaked up substantial funding appropriated to the AMEP, with no public accountability for amounts expended on administration, salaries, salary add-ons; and no public accountability for educational effectiveness or learning retention. The AMES Report 2006 states that 88.8% of students were satisfied but this data appears not to include students who discontinued, and could be significantly skewed.
- Complaints have been received by African community leaders that teachers and other staff of a prominent Melbourne English language provider encouraged family breakdown by advising spouses to separate. Complaints have also been received about rude, abusive, hostile and/or racist attitudes by staff to African students, with this resulting in their withdrawal from courses.

- Around \$285 million in funding for English language has reportedly resulted in 90% of students leaving without functional English, as is consistent with the documented educational shortcomings of the English program

Refer also the English Language Forum 2007 at:

<http://www.union.unimelb.edu.au/conferences/att/img/pdf/Report%20English%20language%20forum%20310107.pdf>

- The comparative data situation the USA and Australia does not support Minister Andrews's assertions. It indicates the source problem has originated with the Australian Government's negative attitude to refugees.

America took in the majority of young unaccompanied men termed the Lost Boys of Sudan, with the characteristics referred to in Minister Andrews's statement. Respected American author, Dave Eggers, spoke at the Melbourne Writers Festival 2007 of the enormous pride and affection Americans feel for these young Sudanese whose triumph is celebrated as America's triumph.

Peter Browne, Australian author of *The Longest Journey: Resettling Refugees from Africa* reports this success inspired Americans to resettle another large group from the Kenyan camps. Browne describes the American government and media as providing consistently positive messages on the young Africans: They were exactly the kind of refugees who would win wide sympathy in the United States: young, innocent and, it was safe to assume, grateful? (p62) Browne concludes that, in contrast, the Australian Government's immoderate attacks on asylum seekers have tainted its entire humanitarian program in the eyes of many journalists and editors' such that the big refugee story, overwhelming all else, was the harsh and disproportionate treatment of boat arrivals. (p73)

This indicates that the negative attitude of the Australian Government to refugees has significantly impacted on the settlement experiences of African refugees, through no fault of those Africans.

A. Minister Andrews states:

Following an examination of settlement services, an additional \$210 million was allocated in this year's budget to enhance these programs. This is in addition to the \$250 million a year the Australian Government normally spends on settlement related services.

Minister Andrews has appropriated this funding in a knee-jerk way without apparent regard to the quality and performance of the programs that have effectively failed African refugees to date. ATT believes there should be a moratorium on funding until the performance to date of all providers of settlement and English language services are publicly scrutinised for accountability, transparency, quality etc. The service providers must be held

to account for their failure, without the blame being inappropriately shifted to the refugees who are dependent on the quality of those providers.

B. Minister Andrews alleges:

(i) *Concerns about the establishment of race based gangs. Concern among some community leaders as to the increase in crime among African youth?*

- Yet, at the African Settlement Conference 2007, Victoria Police stated there was not one African gang in Melbourne. Victoria Police officer, Senior Constable Joey Herrech reports an under-representation of the Sudanese in crime stats, compared to all other more common cultures within Australia, with a reported crime rate of less than 1% (The Age, 4/10/07).

(ii) Reports of altercations between African groups in nightclubs and at community functions? Reports of a developing trend of young African males congregating in parks at night, often to consume alcohol.

- The media attests to altercations between many people, including respected role model footballers and celebrities whose example young people follow. Various ethnic groups have been linked to occasional altercations but none other than the Africans have been had the door to Australia shut as a consequence.

(iii) Disagreements amongst prominent African community organisations over accusations that some are receiving favoured treatment in accessing community services. Tensions have arisen between some African families, involving conflict and assault.

- Sources of stress on African families have frequently arisen from Government policies or service provider activities.
- It is well-known in Melbourne that significant, long-term stresses on the Sudanese community emanated from a situation continued media bashing which impacted substantially on the settlement experiences of many young Sudanese. Despite approaches to the service provider, nothing was done to remediate this in a timely manner, and its residual effect on the Sudanese community is one of tension.
- Government policies which force refugees to undertake study or employment immediately after arrival do not recognise the extreme stress on families of simultaneously having to establish accommodation, settle children into schools, and myriad other demands post arrival.
- Extreme stress is caused to African families by the Department of Human Service's threats to take away their children if parents discipline them, while, simultaneously, the media publicly criticises families for the alleged failure to discipline their children. A young Sudanese refugee woman said

in a meeting, “we were united families in refugee camps but after arriving in Australia, family breakdown became a weekly event; Why?”

- African families which remained intact throughout the hardship of the war and refugee camps have found the stress of incompatible, disempowering, unsupportive and poorly co-ordinated demands from settlement and English language service providers insurmountable. This has caused family stress and breakdown.

C. Minister Andrews states:

For Australia’s immigration program to be successful, it needs the support and acceptance of the Australian community. This will only be achieved if they have confidence in the integrity of the program. Responding to issues where there are concerns about the benefits of certain aspects of the program is not only justified, it also protects and reinforces the integrity of Australia’s overall immigration program.

The integrity of the immigration program has been undermined by the failure of the Government to adequately ensure it’s the service providers it funded were competent and capable of understanding African refugees settlement needs and requirement.

Refugees have been used by service providers to gain funding, including by their publicising alleged, but potentially magnified or even non-existent, problems in the media. The Government has responded with funding, and this has rewarded a pattern of talking up problems in the public domain, to the disadvantage of the African refugees whose dignity and entitlement to equality and respect in the community have been simultaneously seriously undermined.

In this and many other ways documented in previous ATT media releases, the media has been a negative agent for the refugees, arousing hostility and suspicion in the mainstream population that has created a barrier to integration.

- All elected officials and particularly Ministers of the Australian Parliament, play a pivotal role in modelling public discourse that promotes harmony and mutual respect, and are responsible for representing the interests of all Australians, including newly arrived members of our community.

Minister Andrews’s statements demonstrate a lack of awareness of the facts surrounding the settlement of African refugees. A lack of rigour and/or lack of verifiable evidence in assertions used to justify cuts to African immigration would not satisfy tests applied in law or science; and Minister Andrews refuses to release other material he claims to be relevant for public scrutiny. This does not provide an adequate or acceptable basis for high-stakes policy decisions that life and death impact on the world’s most vulnerable people.

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