

# JUSTACT

NEWS & RESOURCES FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

JULY 2018



## AUS GOV'T PROVIDES MORE ASSISTANCE TO ROHINGYA REFUGEES

**In the last JustAct mailing we included a letter-writing action inviting you to write letters to the Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, to ask the Australian Government to ensure Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are protected from further human rights abuses and are not returned to Myanmar until their safety can be guaranteed.**

At the end of April, Minister Bishop said publicly that the Myanmar Government should allow an independent investigation into human rights abuses against Rohingya

before they can be repatriated from Bangladesh, where they fled.

"As much as I would like to encourage the Rohingyas to return home, they must have a safe and secure place to which they can return and I don't believe Myanmar has yet been able to provide credible evidence that that would be available to them," Minister Julie Bishop told the ABC.

"We've called for an end to the violence, for full and unhindered humanitarian access ... and a full and transparent accountability of the human rights abuses which we understand have occurred," Ms Bishop said.

The Australia Government also announced it would give an extra \$15

million in aid to the Rohingya crisis.

"It will be for food, shelter and health services in the lead-up to the monsoon season," Ms Bishop said. "Rice for 700,000 people, high-nutrient porridge for children — there are about 100,000 children under the ages of 5 — and also women who are breast-feeding."

The money will also support child protection, and counselling services for women and girls who have survived gender-based violence.

Ms Bishop said the aid money would be given to organisations including the World Food Program, International Organisation for

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Migration and the UN refugee agency.

On 4 May, Minister Bishop announced that the Australian Government would be providing further assistance to help the people affected by humanitarian crises in Myanmar, including in Rakhine and Kachin States.

The UN estimates that more than 830,000 people in Myanmar need humanitarian assistance, including approximately 500,000 Rohingya in Rakhine State. The Rohingya community continues to depend on humanitarian assistance to survive because severe restrictions imposed by the government and army of Myanmar obstruct their access to income and essential services.

The Australian Government also expressed concern about intensified fighting in Kachin State, which has forced more than 5,000 people to flee their homes since early April. The conflict is raising serious concerns about the safety and wellbeing of more than 100,000 people already displaced in Kachin and Shan States.

The Australian Government called on all parties to end the fighting, protect civilian populations, and allow humanitarian assistance to be delivered to affected communities.

The Australian Government will provide \$13 million through trusted humanitarian agencies including the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and Save the Children Australia to help meet urgent needs across Myanmar. In Rakhine State, Australian Government support will provide access to basic health care for 50,000 people, help 18,000 children attend school, improve shelter for 17,600 people in advance of the monsoon and cyclone season, and help to reunite

with their families separated and unaccompanied. In Kachin and Shan, the Australian Government financial support will provide assistance and protection to families fleeing ongoing violence.

The Australian Government's total humanitarian response to the Rohingya crisis has been \$51.5 million since September 2017.

However, the Australian Government has not followed the UK Government's lead to suspend military cooperation with Myanmar's army, which has orchestrated the ethnic cleansing.

On 6 June the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) signed a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Government of Myanmar.

This tripartite MOU will establish a framework for cooperation aimed at creating the conditions conducive to the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya refugees to their places of origin or places of their choosing. Since the conditions are not yet conducive for voluntary return, the MoU is the first and necessary step to support the Government's efforts to change that situation and is also intended to support recovery and resilience-based development for the benefit of all communities living in Rakhine State.

The agreement provides a framework for UNHCR and UNDP to be given access to Rakhine State, including to refugees' places of origin and areas of potential return that have not been permitted since violence broke out in August 2017. The access, once effective, will allow UNHCR to assess the conditions on the ground and carry out protection activities. This will

also enable UNHCR to eventually provide independent information to refugees about the conditions in their places of origin, which will help them make informed decisions about whether the conditions are right for them to return in safety and dignity. The MoU will also allow the two UN agencies to carry out needs assessments in affected communities and strengthen the capacity of local authorities to support the voluntary repatriation process.

On 13 April 2018, the Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR also signed a MoU relating to the voluntary return of Rohingya refugees once conditions in Myanmar are deemed conducive.

The UNHCR told the media the immediate challenge was to relocate 200,000 of the Rohingya refugees camped along the Bangladesh border with Myanmar who are threatened by seasonal monsoon flooding and landslides.

On 7 May the International Criminal Court invited the Government of Bangladesh to submit observations on whether the court should exercise jurisdiction over the expulsion of Rohingya people from Myanmar as a possible crime against humanity carried out by the Myanmar military.

In Myanmar, the government and military continue to confine more than 120,000 internally displaced Rohingya to more than 35 internment camps in eight townships of Rakhine State, depriving many of adequate humanitarian aid and life-saving assistance.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters to Minister Bishop and the Myanmar Government about the need to protect Rohingya refugees. ●

## FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

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All of the resources in this mailing can be found on the JIM website.

If you would like to subscribe (or unsubscribe) to either this hardcopy mailing (bi-monthly) or email update (weekly), contact the JIM Cluster on the details above.

# GOVERNMENT MOVES ON MODERN SLAVERY



**In our April mailing we included a postcard action on the Commonwealth Government's moves to introduce a modern slavery law in Australia.**

The Government has now revealed draft legislation. The law will require all companies and non-government organisations operating in Australia that have more than \$100 million of global income to publicly report on what they are doing to tackle the risks of human trafficking, slavery and forced labour in their supply chains. They will ask about 3,000 companies and organisations to report. There will be five or six employees to follow up with the

companies and organisations to assist them in their reporting and in developing systems to tackle the risk of modern slavery in their supply chains. This is a good outcome.

Because the Australian Government's existing system to collect data about the revenue of companies is so poor, companies and organisations that fail to meet their reporting obligations will face no penalties. The Government is unable to determine which companies have \$100 million of global revenue. The Government believes it is unfair to impose penalties for failing to report when it will not be in a position to tell which companies have a reporting obligation.

On the positive side, the new law will be reviewed after three years, which will provide an opportunity to make suggestions on how to improve the systems.

On the negative side, the Government has not followed the UK Government's lead to introduce an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner to co-ordinate the government's efforts to tackle slavery, forced labour and human trafficking.

Thanks to everyone who sent off postcards. If you did not send your card, there is still time to do so. If you need multiple cards for your congregation, family or workplace, please let us know. •

**In April 2017 we requested you write to the Commonwealth Government to take more action to tackle family violence.**

The May budget has delivered small additional commitments to address family violence; including an additional \$11.5 million over 18 months for the 48 trauma specialist counsellors to 1800 RESPECT, the national family violence and sexual assault counselling, information

and support service.

An additional \$6.7 million was committed to train about 7,400 nurses, counsellors, disability and settlement service workers to help them identify and support victims of family violence.

The Commonwealth Government

## COMMONWEALTH BUDGET DELIVERS MORE FUNDING FOR STOPPING FAMILY VIOLENCE

continues to lag a long way behind the Victorian Government in taking action to address family violence.

We aim to provide you with additional opportunities to raise the issue with the Commonwealth Government. •

# COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCES A MINOR REFORM TO THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

**In our April 2018 mailing to you we invited you to write letters to the Commonwealth Government about reforms to the programme operating in remote Australia for unemployed people, mostly from First People's groups, the Community Development Programme (CDP).**

People on this programme are penalised at 27 times the rate for people seeking work elsewhere in Australia, due to way the government designed the programme. There are currently about 34,000 people on the CDP.

CDP participants have been required to work 25 hours a week for a payment of \$280, or \$11.20 an hour. The current minimum wage is \$18.29 per hour. By comparison people on the 'Work for the Dole' scheme are paid \$280 for working 15 hours a week, an hourly rate of \$18.67.

In a small win for us, the Commonwealth Government announced in its May budget that reforms would be introduced so that the penalties that can be imposed on people seeking work

on the CDP match the regime imposed on people seeking work elsewhere in Australia. There was also a slight reduction in the number of hours people on the CDP are required to work to earn their social security payments - from 25 to 20 hours - but people in remote communities, 83% of whom are First Peoples, will still have to work about 270 hours more each year than people in cities.

On the negative side, a punitive demerit point system will be applied to people on the CDP, which cuts and suspends social security payments if they do not meet numerous obligations proving they are worthy of having such support.

The Aboriginal Peak Organisation Northern Territory (APO NT) welcomed the announcement that the budget included the creation of 6,000 subsidised jobs over four years with proper work entitlements for people on the CDP. APO NT also welcomed the announcement that the way people's work capacity would be assessed will be improved.

"We are pleased that there will be subsidies for 6,000 jobs and an improved assessment process to ensure vulnerable people are not forced to participate beyond their capabilities. However, the Government has engaged in a cherry-picking exercise rather than wholeheartedly adopting the positive Aboriginal community-driven mode developed by APO NT, which will limit the benefits possible", said John Paterson, spokesperson for the APO NT.

The APO NT model includes the following reforms, which the Commonwealth Government did not adopt:

- Flexibility and community governance structures so that jobs and community projects meet the needs of communities and remote employers;

- An approach to participation obligations that allows local organisations to tailor arrangements to their own communities, with a focus on support and incentives, rather than heavy-handed compliance and financial penalties;
- Work activity obligations that are no greater than those that apply to people in the urban Jobactive program;
- The creation of 1,500 paid jobs with training for people under 25, giving disengaged young people a reason to re-engage and a pathway to future employment;
- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led agency to manage the scheme instead of the current non Indigenous-led Canberra-based model; and
- A reduction in pointless and excessive administration requirements, which is a hallmark of the current program and consumes valuable funding.

Currently for every dollar that goes to a person on the CDP, an additional 70 cents is spent on administration costs, making the scheme incredibly expensive compared to other programs for people seeking work.

Another negative announcement in the budget is that unpaid fines will be deducted from social security payments to people. The National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Legal Services has pointed out that this will disproportionately affect First Peoples.

Thank you to everyone who wrote in April about the need to reform the CDP. If you did not get a chance to write letters then, it is not too late to do so. •

**In the February mailing we requested that you write to Bill Shorten, as Leader of the Opposition, and a number of cross-bench senators to seek their support for amendments to the *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Funding and Disclosure Reform) Bill 2017*.**

The bill as drafted threatens to treat donations to charities, churches and other civil society organisations as if they were political donations. This could mean churches would be forbidden from being able to take up collections on a Sunday without having a statutory declaration from every person present to establish if they are Australian citizens.

In mid-April Mr Shorten declared that Labor would not “support anything that punishes the charity and not-for-profit sector.”

“Charities and not-for-profits

need donations to fund their issues-based advocacy work and should be able to participate in the policy-making process without being treated as if they have a political intent,” said Mr Shorten. “The Turnbull Government must fix its poorly drafted and over-reaching legislation in response to the numerous concerns raised by the bipartisan Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.”

He went on to pledge that: “If it doesn’t, Labor will move its own amendments to protect the important work of the charities and not-for-profit sector.”

The announcement followed the handing down of a report by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in which the committee members from across the political parties agreed that the bill should only be passed subject to changes outlined in 15 recommendations made by the committee. A key recommendation was that donations for non-political issue advocacy not be

## LABOR PLEDGES TO PROTECT CHARITIES FROM BEING TREATED AS POLITICAL PARTIES

treated as political donations.

In March it was reported that former Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett also wrote to Minister Mathias Cormann, who is responsible for the passage of the bill through Parliament, to argue that the bill would stifle public advocacy and put a “bureaucratic noose around the neck” of every charitable trust in Australia. ●

## VIC GOV'T REVEALS MORE OF ITS PLANS ON LAND REGISTRY PRIVATISATION

**In our February mailing we invited you to write to the Victorian Government expressing concern about the privatisation of the Victorian land registry, with the loss of up to \$380 million in revenue to fund such things as mental health services, support for people impacted by family violence and hospitals.**

The Moderator of the Synod,

the JIM Unit and representatives of the National Union of Workers (who supported the Synod’s action) met with the Treasurer Tim Pallas on the issue. The Treasurer outlined more details and offered a number of assurances. The land registry will be leased to a private provider for 40 years and then return to government control. The leasing body will pay an upfront fee and then will be repaid by the government in payments for service over the 40 years.

This is a more modest privatisation than what state governments have done in South Australia and NSW.

The Victorian Government will retain ownership over all the land registry data. The data must be stored in Australia and the Victorian Government will have the right to take complete control of the data to protect it and to enforce compliance with data privacy and protection laws.

Land registry and valuation information now available to the public will continue to be available. The private operator will be required to continue to deliver all the existing services of the land registry.

The Victorian Government will set the prices and fees that Victorians will pay for the use of the services of the land registry.

As many of the concerns the Unit had about the privatisation have been addressed and the arrangement is more of a long-term lease than a complete sale, the Unit has suspended its campaigning against the privatisation and continues to talk with the Victorian Government to make sure the lease arrangement does not leave Victorians worse off.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters on this issue. ●

# VIC ELECTRICITY BUSINESS REGULATOR ANNOUNCES NEW SAFEGUARDS



**In September 2017 we invited you to write letters to the Victorian Government about the price-gouging activities of the private electricity corporations and to protect people in hardship from being disconnected.**

On 29 May 2018 the Essential Services Commission, which is the regulator of electricity corporations, announced it would be updating how electricity companies are required to report on how they are helping people pay their bills and how to avoid racking up large debts. The changes come into effect in January 2019 and set new minimum standards for the assistance electricity companies have to provide to prevent people getting into high levels of debt. There will also be new safeguards around when people can be disconnected for being unable to pay their bill.

In the Victorian May budget an extra \$4.1 million was provided to the Essential Services Commission to resource them in protecting people from unethical behaviour by electricity and gas corporations.

The Australian Energy

Regulator (AER) also announced it would investigate suspicions that the electricity and gas companies have overcharged their customers by \$400 million a year to cover their own tax bills. Network charges have been the single biggest factor in rising household electricity bills over the past decade. The charges cover the cost of “poles and wires” used to transmit and distribute electricity.

A report by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) in September 2017 said that network charges accounted for nearly half of residential electricity bills in 2015-2016. The increase in network costs imposed by the electricity companies accounted for two-thirds of the \$347 average increase in annual residential customer bills in the nine years to mid-2016, the report found. The ACCC concluded there was “a lack of transparency around network costs, and the regulatory regime may not be suitable”.

The electricity networks and gas pipeline companies are allowed to recover the taxes they pay by passing on the cost to their customers. However, while they have charged people \$600 million a year to recover the

taxes paid, it was reported in the media that the actual taxes the companies paid was only \$200 million. The Australian Taxation Office (ATO) provided the AER with analysis for the privately owned electricity distribution corporations and found that for the years examined, 2013 to 2016, the companies overstated the tax they had actually paid to allow them to extract more from the people accessing the power they produced. The ATO reported a variety of tax avoidance techniques being used by the corporations to dodge paying their taxes in Australia.

Minister for the Environment and Energy, Josh Frydenberg, told the media “It was totally unacceptable for consumers to be charged for corporate tax liabilities that are not actually incurred”. The regulator will report by December 2018.

The Victorian Government had warned Tony Abbott’s government in 2014 about the problem, while the South Australian Government had raised it in February 2015, but it appears Mr Abbott’s government ignored the problem.

Thank you to everyone who wrote to the Victorian Government on this issue. •

**We invited you to be part of a postcard campaign asking that the Commonwealth Government stop giving our offshore natural gas deposits to multinational corporations for free.**

Instead they should be required to pay for the gas and the money used to make our society better. The Commonwealth Government failed to close any of the loopholes around the payments multinational corporations have to pay to extract and sell our gas, the Petroleum Resources Rent Tax (PRRT), in the May budget. At the same time there were cuts for the corporate regulator, ASIC, the Australian Federal Police and the Commonwealth Department of Public Prosecution, which help police corporate crimes. Also, funding hospitals, mental health services and support for people affected by family violence would be a much better use of this money

# GOVERNMENT FAILS ON NATURAL GAS TAX REFORM

than giving it to the wealthy executives and shareholders of the multinational corporations.

While we will overtake Qatar as a major gas exporter, we will not see anything like the benefits. Qatar is forecast to rake in as much as \$26.6 billion in 2020 from taxes on the natural gas, while we are set to get a paltry \$1.35 billion in 2019. This is a resource that can only be extracted once, so if we give it away now we do not get to benefit from it into the future.

Media reporting indicated that reform of the PRRT has been held back as a bargaining chip with One Nation to try to pressure them to support the give-away

of government revenue to multinationals through cutting the tax on corporate profits. One Nation has been strongly supportive of reforms to the PRRT.

The Greens asked the Parliamentary Budget Office to cost a 10% royalty payment by the multinational corporations on the offshore natural gas deposits. It would bring in an extra \$4.2 billion in government revenue over the next four years.

Please continue to send postcards to the Commonwealth Government asking for the PRRT to be reformed and encourage others to sign and send in postcards. ●

## REFORMS AIMED AT TAX JUSTICE PAYING OFF AND MORE ON THE WAY

**Since 2007 the JIM cluster has worked with you to campaign against wealthy tax cheats and multinational corporations who avoid paying what they should in tax towards making our society and communities across the globe better places by funding health clinics, hospitals, schools, aged care, mental health services and police.**

We have worked as part of the

global Tax Justice Network (TJN). One of the goals of TJN has been to increase cooperation between governments to make it harder for tax cheats to shift income across borders to evade paying tax.

At the start of May the Commonwealth Government announced that as a result of this global sharing of information between governments, 106 Australians are under investigation due to links to Swiss banking relationship managers alleged to have actively promoted and facilitated tax evasion schemes. These 106 people have been involved in about 5,000 cross-border transactions worth more than \$900 million in the past 10 years. The transactions have ranged from as little as \$25 and up to \$24 million.

In April Michael Issakidis was sentenced to more than 10 years in

prison for his role in the largest tax fraud case in Australia's history. His co-conspirator, Anthony Dickson, is also in prison for 14 years for his part in the same crime.

In the 2018-2019 Commonwealth budget the government announced that as of 1 July 2019 businesses that seek Commonwealth government contracts over \$4 million in value will be required to provide evidence that they have a satisfactory tax record in order to be able to win the contract.

The Treasurer also announced that the government would release a discussion paper on measures "to ensure big multinational digital and tech companies pay their fair share of tax."

Thanks to everyone who has supported this campaign for global tax justice. ●

## NEW JUSTICE AND INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

**Justice and International Mission is now part of the Priorities, Focus and Advocacy group within the equipping Leadership for Ministry (eLM) Unit.**

As a result of a Synod meeting resolution implementing the major strategic review, the Commission for Mission no longer exists. Much of the work undertaken by the former Commission for Mission now comes under the auspices of the eLM unit, which now includes Synod work such as Pilgrim Theological College and leadership formation, relationships and connections with Uniting and AgeWell, intergenerational ministries, the arts, disability inclusion, and interfaith and intercultural communities.

The work on social justice and international mission continues as before, but with a greater focus on wider collaboration across the Synod, and engagement with presbyteries and congregations. Staff across the eLM Unit will also contribute to the social justice and international mission work of the Synod. The JIM staff are no longer a separate unit, and have become the JIM cluster.

Over the coming months we will work to transition from CFM to eLM in all forms of communication, including e-mails, letterheads, and websites. ●

## SUPPORTER PROFILE

**This month the JIM unit interviewed one of our supporters from the Port Phillip West Presbytery.**

Neil Tolliday is a retired Uniting Church minister who is now a member of the Crossroads Uniting Church in Werribee. He is active in the Justice Task Group at the church and enjoys staying up to date on issues, writing letters to the newspapers which get published from time to time. He has experience working in Canada, the UK, and China. Neil has worked as a minister in Western Victoria and Heathmont and as a locum minister around the surf coast, Bellarine Peninsula and Geelong, and in the western suburbs of Williamstown, Sunshine and Altona, so he knows the west very well.

He is particularly interested in justice for indigenous Australians.

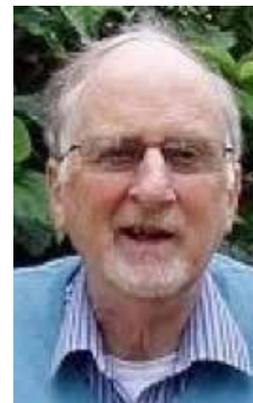
The congregation at Crossroads is multicultural with people from Argentina, India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and South Sudan, with about 100 people attending worship together on a Sunday. It is also intergenerational, with lots of children and their families.

Neil said that “the Uniting Church has an important role in the life of this country as a church which is committed to inclusiveness”. He sees the church as “a place where I can

best share with other like-minded folk in a discipleship that is free from limitations found in fundamentalist or authoritarian churches”. He says he has found a supportive community that he deeply values.

Neil and his family have been members of the Werribee congregation for about five years. The Justice Task group at his church is committed to reconciliation, covenanting with the UAICC, and helping asylum seeker families and individuals. The group has good relationships with the Hobson Bay Refugee network. They also offer practical support to the local community to help people find jobs to get out of the poverty cycle. They meet monthly and have about 10 regular contributors to the group.

If you would like help setting up a social justice group at your congregation, contact us for support and resources. We can either help you create a group at your church or put you in touch with another congregation that has an active group. ●



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