

**A statement from the Bishops' Committee for Migrants and Refugees on the
plight of asylum seekers on the Tampa**

Chairman of the Catholic Bishops' Committee for Migrants and Refugees, Bishop Patrick Dougherty, today expressed great distress that the Norwegian ship Tampa has been refused entry to Australia.

At the same time, Bishop Dougherty was relieved to know that Australia was ready to provide considerable humanitarian aid to the stranded ship. "Among the people who have been rescued by the Tampa's captain, in generous accordance with international rules and, it appears, at the request of the Australian coastguard, many almost certainly are fleeing persecution in their countries, and have valid claims on Australia's protection", Bishop Dougherty said. He sympathises with the difficulties faced by the Australian Government, but asks it to reconsider whether the lives of people, particularly those fleeing persecution, should be put at risk in order to send a message of deterrence to future asylum seekers.

"I note that many Australians who have expressed their views are in favour of the decision to refuse entry to the Tampa", Bishop Dougherty said. "But would they feel the same if they accepted that many of those on board were almost certainly fleeing persecution and seeking Australia's protection? Truth, justice and compassion do not permit an unproven presumption that those on board the Tampa are people who are simply seeking an easy entry to Australia".

Bishop Dougherty continued: "Last year, the Year of the Great Jubilee, a charter of rights of displaced people was prepared in Rome. The first of those rights is 'that displaced people not be turned back at the borders of the country where they seek protection'. Until Monday last, that right had been observed by Australia. Now there is grave danger that it will be overturned."

"In his message for Refugee and Migrant Sunday 2001, Pope John Paul stated that highly developed countries (like Australia) are not always able to accept all those who emigrate. Nonetheless, he said, 'it should be pointed out that the criterion for determining the level that can be sustained cannot be based solely on protecting their own prosperity, while failing to take into consideration the needs of persons who are tragically forced to ask for hospitality'", said Bishop Dougherty. "In the light of the Holy Father's words, the Australian Catholic Bishops in May 2001 proposed that Australia could receive a more generous number of refugees each year. If we had that spirit of increased generosity, we may not be facing the present situation."

To arrange an interview please contact Father John Murphy on 02) 6201 9848 or 0418) 224 524

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