

Australia's Neighbourhood – the Blue Pacific

Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) represents over 150 congregations across Australia comprising approximately 7000 religious women and men of whom a number work in the Pacific or support a range of activities and projects across the Pacific Islands.

Our Members are seriously concerned that the Prime Minister will not attend this week's Pacific Islands Forum. As the largest and wealthiest member of this Forum it is of the utmost importance that Australia is a committed and engaged Pacific partner. The recent visit of the Prime Minister to Indonesia and his proposed absence from the Forum could be seen as an indication that the Pacific is not a priority for Australia.

In recent times the Pacific has become an arena for competing world powers who are, in the words of Samoa's Prime Minister, "doggedly pursuing strategies to widen and extend their reach and inculcating a far reaching sense of insecurity." Australia as the biggest investor of overseas aid, around \$261 million 2018-19, is in a unique position to support the Pacific Island States in their efforts to achieve peace, stability and security, although Australia's recent stringent cuts to overseas aid must contribute to their feelings of insecurity.

Of prime concern to the Leaders of Pacific Islands is climate change as, on an almost daily basis, they deal with the results of climate change – water shortages, increasingly damaging cyclones and storms, rising sea temperatures and the effects on fishing and crops. Australia's recent attempts to water down, or eliminate altogether, our commitment to the Paris Agreement and ignore the absolute necessity of reducing carbon emissions must leave these leaders in despair.

The members of Catholic Religious Australia ask that:

- the Prime Minister will re-consider his decision not to attend the Pacific Islands Forum
- Australia will commit to a stable and on-going policy of carbon reduction by at least 30% by 2030
- Australia will continue, through increased aid, engagement and dialogue, to support and enhance the lives of Pacific islanders.

CRA President, Sr Monica Cavanagh sj, stated that members are very conscious of the fact that this Forum is being held on Nauru, a place where over 100 asylum seekers, and children, have been incarcerated indefinitely. The situation of Australia's asylum seekers detained on Pacific islands has contributed nothing to peace and stability in the Pacific. In the light of this CRA urgently requests Prime Minister Morrison to immediately remove all asylum seekers from Nauru and Manus Island and cease the on-going damage to the human beings who did nothing more than ask for a place of safety. The next group of asylum seekers may well be from Pacific nations overwhelmed by climate change – how will we respond?

The Forum on "Building a strong Pacific: Our Islands, Our People, Our Will" requires Australia's engagement at the highest level.

For immediate release

Further comment

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