

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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*I was a stranger and you made
me welcome ...*

Newsletter 88 May2018

The Project aims to:

- * provide hospitality and practical support for people seeking asylum
- * actively network with like-minded individuals and groups who are working for justice for asylum seekers
- * promote advocacy for the rights of asylum seekers
- * raise awareness of asylum seeker issues and concerns through a range of activities

Championing justice

As we move to an election—governments seem to like to tantalise us as to when—we need to re-energise our efforts to achieve justice and humanity for the thousands of people who are suffering in Australia. Often people say to us that there is not much in the media about asylum seekers, that it is hard to know what is happening and that the ordinary person can't do much. It seems to us that we must do all we can to both inform the community and to urge all those who want change to actually speak out.

Silence is usually interpreted as acquiescence. What is currently happening in Australia to asylum seekers and refugees is the result of politicians feeling emboldened and justified by a public who has not held them to account on this issue and by the normalisation of cruelty.



Arundhati Roy is an Indian activist and she wrote:

The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it.

And once you've seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out.

There's no innocence. Either way, you're accountable."

We have had hundreds of investigations, inquiries, testimonies, photos and videos which clearly show that Australia has contributed to the illness and death of thousands of people who have done nothing more than seek protection here. But the only thing that has resulted is that our policies and practices have become crueler.

Can we change this?

We can

- Talk to our friends, family and community members about the policies and practices that Australian governments have used to destroy the hopes and rights of people seeking protection here.
- **Ring, write to, alert our own Members of Parliament (who have a duty to represent us) that we are opposed to the cruelty meted out to innocent people.**
- Demonstrate by our own compassion and assistance that there are better ways to respond to the needs of these vulnerable people.

Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

The US re-settlement from Nauru and Manus

So far, 165 refugees from Nauru and 84 from Manus Island have resettled in the US. There are currently about 940 refugees still in Nauru, 750 in PNG and 400 in detention in Australia. Even if the US accepts the full 1250 quota, up to 500 others will miss out and remain in offshore detention limbo.

Most of the Iranian and Somali detainees are now being rejected and they account for half the people in these two off-shore centres. The US has said that there is no ban on certain nationalities but it is highly improbable that so many of those rejected were from Iran and Somalia by chance. Especially as both these countries are on President Trump's travel ban list.

At the end of this process it is unlikely any other country is going to be willing to take those rejected because they would not even know the basis for their being rejected by the US. 75% of those on the island have been deemed to be in need of protection. The Government's plan appears to be to just let the US process run through and then determine what is going to happen to everyone else. After 5 years in detention in these remote places it is hard to imagine how these folk are going to survive what could be a long time yet.



AAP photo

It is bizarre that our Minister for Home affairs, Peter Dutton, says that the decisions on resettlement are ones for the US to make and that further decisions by the US are expected in due course. Mr Dutton's office is saying that if the US will not take these people and they have been judged to have refugee status, they will either stay in PNG or Nauru or resettle in Cambodia. What a choice!

And in the meantime, here in Australia ...

Families who had been on Nauru and sent to Australia for medical reasons are now receiving what is called a final departure Bridging E Visa. This is the same thing that happened to single men and women about seven months ago.

The Australian Government has just extended this ruling to families. This means that they are no longer entitled to government welfare support including accommodation and income support. Technically, a final departure BVE allows people to reside in the Australian community temporarily while they finalise their arrangements to leave Australia. They will be given work rights (after five years in detention) but with no assistance provided to get work. They cannot apply for any other visa to stay in Australia. Their income support finishes three to six weeks after they are notified. From that date they are responsible for rent, utilities and all other living costs like food, clothing and transport.

We know a lot of these families and we suspect there are about thirty in Melbourne. BASP housed most of the group of single people who were in Melbourne as well as a couple of women in Brisbane. The Victorian Government provided rental assistance and some living allowance to this initial group. However, it will be more difficult for the families to manage this transition as, in most cases, they have children at school—or children who have serious medical conditions.

Some families have been given their new Visas and are now trying to work out what to do. Others are still waiting—assuming they are on the list but with no certainty about the time line. One of the fathers in this group said to us, “My wife can't sleep for worry—even after taking two sleeping tablets”.

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project

Lunch and Discussion

Refugee Week: Tuesday June 19th, 2018

Food will be cooked by people currently seeking asylum.

We will have lunch and some discussion.

**For catering purposes please let us know if you can come. Ring 96962107 or email queries@basp.org.au
There is no charge as Port Phillip Council is generously supporting this event.**

Time: 12.30—2.30 pm

**Venue:
Brigidine Ministry centre
54 Beaconsfield Pde
Albert Park**



Tsema has already made dumplings for us at the offices in Albert Park. They were simply delicious!



A crisis that shames Australia ... meagre income support being withdrawn

We need housing and jobs—probably more than we have ever needed them before.

The Government has issued new regulations about the small income most asylum seekers have been receiving while their application for refugee status is being processed. The income that was given was the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program and the amount was usually 89% of Newstart and, where applicable, some rent allowance. The people affected will be many of those who arrived in Australia in 2012-2013, before the cut-off date where all arrivals were sent off-shore. These have been called the Legacy caseload people. These have

- Waited up to four years to be granted permission by the Government to apply for protection.
- Never been allowed to apply for permanent residency
- Had no free legal assistance (with only limited exceptions)
- Then only allowed an accelerated (fast track) determination process without adequate procedural safeguards
- No ability to reunite with immediate family members.

There are about 30,000 of these people currently in Australia. There are over 13,000 of these on the SRSS program, and it is estimated that these changes could mean a large percentage of these people will lose all support. This will result in thousands of highly vulnerable people becoming homeless and destitute. Groups like BASP will do what they can to assist with housing and food but we believe there are not enough resources in the not-for-profit space to help everyone.

When will this happen?

From 4 June 2018, people on SRSS who have the right to work and do not meet a high threshold of vulnerability will be exited from the program, losing all financial support within three weeks. This will happen even if they are unemployed, and they will not be given further assistance to become employed. BASP is already overwhelmed by the number of people who come to them for assistance. Our efforts are helping people to barely scrape by: people are truly living in the margins of society.

The number of people eligible for support has already reduced dramatically since August 2017, when changes were made to the SRSS program without consulting either service providers or peak bodies. These changes have removed people from SRSS who are studying full-time, have transferred more than \$1000 between bank accounts over a 12-month period, and those who came by plane and have another valid visa, such as a spouse or student visa.

Why people still need SRSS

SRSS is designed to be made available for the shortest practicable time to help people “resolve their immigration status”. Most of those on the SRSS program are still waiting for the government to make a decision on their refugee claims. They have been waiting for years to get the right to work, the right to apply for protection, and now continue to wait to have their claims assessed. The Department of Home Affairs has indicated that many people will continue to wait until 2020 to have their initial claims processed. Few of them can consider returning to their home country. These people are doing everything they can to resolve their status, but the current system is delaying them from “resolving their status”.

A significant number of people currently in the SRSS program are likely to be refugees who will remain in

Australia for years to come. It defies sense to force people into destitution at a time of great vulnerability, particularly when many are likely to become long-term residents of Australia.

Why they will struggle to find work

Supporting people seeking asylum to find sustainable employment is a goal that we share. Steady employment helps people to support themselves and can also improve their well-being and assist social cohesion. However, the new criteria for SRSS eligibility only asks if people are extremely vulnerable. Anyone that does not meet these very high thresholds will be expected to find work. There is clearly a very big difference between able to work physically, and being able to get work.

We believe that many people who will lose access to SRSS will struggle to find adequate employment. People seeking asylum already face significant barriers. They have been barred from working for many years, have been given minimal support to learn English or to learn new skills, do not have a secure visa status, and lack local Australian work experience.

Finding employment will be even more difficult without a basic income. People on SRSS already get only 89% of Newstart, or less than \$35 a day. People cannot be expected to pay for the costs of looking for work, such as transport and childcare, when they cannot afford the basic necessities.

Why these policies will cost the Government more

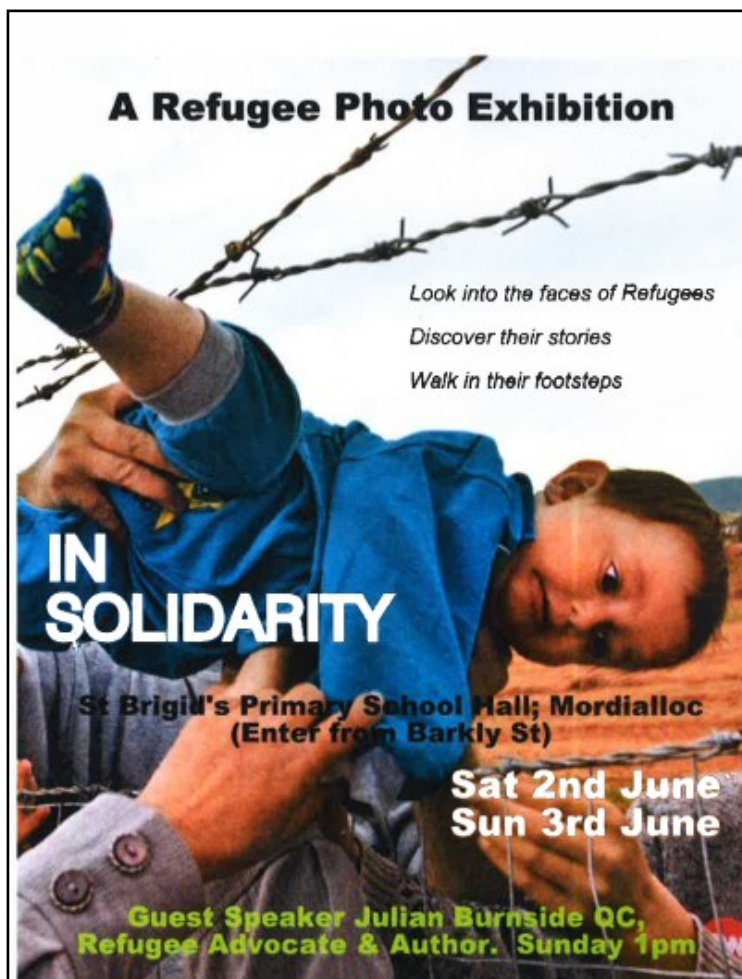
Making people destitute at a vulnerable time is likely to lead to a crisis. In the short term, removing people from income support will lead to higher costs to governments and the community, as the effects will be borne by hospitals, police, mental health and emergency services. In the longer term, there will be flow-on effects for the health of refugees and their children.

Return to a fair-minded approach

Reversing these changes is entirely within the Government's discretion. We see first-hand the negative impacts of the previous detrimental policies. Further punitive and ill-advised changes will have devastating consequences for people seeking asylum, the voluntary sector and the broader Australian community.

So many cases are incomprehensible

- A father was told by an Immigration decision maker, "You are not Afghani we know you are Iranian"; his daughter was told (by same official) "No we know you are not Iranian you are Afghani".
- Reports for one claimant has had paragraphs about another claimant in the decision and then this has been said to be an understandable mistake and did not alter the validity of the decision.
- One primary decision maker (at first stage) rejects virtually all cases—the majority of which are accepted on review.
- A person who claimed he would be targeted by a known terrorist group (there are lots of evidence many have been killed in the same circumstances) was told by the reviewer his claim was "fabricated" because he "would be regarded as "a person of no significance" by the terrorist group.
- Some have been asked questions about specific verses in the Bible that those of us who have been Christian all our lives would not be able to answer (Interestingly, in a couple of cases, the asylum seeker has been able to correctly answer!).



This exhibition is a display of award winning images, accompanied by visuals from students at St Brigid's Mordialloc and St Louise de Montefort's in Aspendale.

You are all invited to this event—in particular to the 1pm session on Sunday 2nd June when Julian Burnside will speak.

Entry is by donation and the proceeds will go to BASP.

Refreshments will be prepared by local refugee families.

The address is 129 Albert Street, Mordialloc (enter from Barkley Street)

People have transferable skills

A man came to the office recently looking for help to get a job. He said he made shoes in his own country. We were trying to think what skills he would have to be able to do this. He then produced out of his bag shoes he had made in detention. He had had to unpick an object he had to get material, cut out a pattern with very rudimentary cutting tools, and sew all by hand. Unfortunately we don't make shoes much in Australia! But we do need ingenuity, perseverance and an eye for detail.

Don is a man still in a detention centre, and he sent us evidence of his proficiency in teaching himself to type. This man is a qualified chef and it seems such a shame that he cannot use his knowledge and skills in some meaningful way—he has been in detention for nearly three years. And he is still patient!

Bernie and his family have been amazingly supported by the Catholic parishes at Mordialloc and Aspendale, and he has now graduated as a chef. He has since got a job at Peter Rowlands Catering. Bernie makes delicious sweets!!



Hard to get in, hard to get out

In the last newsletter we described how 'Ali' had been trying to return to Iran, too tired and desperate about the time taken and the difficulty endured in getting his visa processed. Ali is still in Australia, still waiting for the necessary paper work needed to depart. He has been in this situation since he made the decision in September last year! We will keep you updated.

Accommodation continues to be the greatest need—and we have had some wonderful help from the community

Bill and Deb in Castlemaine have offered housing to a Tamil family - mother with mobility issues and 2 teenage children, who are on Bridging visas but have not received any income support to date.

Bill's recent update to the local community which is supporting this venture, reads in part:

"There has been continuing progress with our Tamil family's settling into Castlemaine. The 2 teenagers have both enrolled at the Secondary College and are gradually getting used to the new routine. They catch the bus to and from school, and often ride their bikes to the library after school, mainly to make use of the internet there. The son will attend his first soccer practice this Thursday and the daughter is interested in playing badminton.

The mother is being assisted by the local Castlemaine Health physical rehabilitation services. The Church of Christ has been responsible for providing her with an electric scooter which allows her to get out from the flat and to shop at the local supermarket. They have been attending the church each Sunday and look forward to a weekly gathering.

We are continuing to work on their application for a protection visa. We have also applied for the meagre support payments available to some asylum seekers, though this program has been severely cut back by the federal government. The red tape and paperwork are significant obstacles to obtaining this support. At present, all costs and expenses are being borne by myself and those of you who have contributed to our local fund. Fortunately, we continue to receive a weekly contribution from the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project. I hope we can eventually let them put that money elsewhere, towards more desperate needs than ours."

The family are relieved and humbled by the support they have received. The son wrote to BASP- 'Uncle Bill and Auntie Deb is very friendly and helpful- thank you very much - if it not you, we don't know what would happen to us'

A woman in Melbourne has made a room in her home available for a young woman from Ethiopia, considered ineligible for Centrelink (SRSS) support and yet without enough English to secure a job, despite her keenness to work and be independent. This is working well, her English is improving and BASP is seeking work for her as this will help improve her English as well as making her self-sufficient. Cleaning or kitchen hand work if anyone has leads.

A couple has welcomed a young woman from Tibet into a self-contained unit at the rear of the house. One of the hosts sent this to BASP to let us know how well the arrangement was going.

"Last week we had those delicious dumplings. We sat around the fire and stuffed ourselves until we could barely walk. We took her to the You Yangs last weekend which is our favourite place to take visitors. She said she really loved it. Her bike riding is going really well although my heart was in my mouth when she didn't quite make a corner and came within an inch of making a very large dent in a very expensive four wheel drive. We really enjoy her company. Some days we don't see her at all and other days we are both at the library at the same time. She has made a garden of flowers and they are just starting to flower. She frowns on me using snail bait so our backyard smells like a coffee shop with used coffee everywhere trying to keep the snails away without killing them.

Another couple have taken in a young seventeen year old. They did so at short notice and have been wonderful in welcoming him into their extended family, helping familiarise him with Melbourne and connecting him with gym and possible schooling.

And most recently BASP received a request for a group of six young people in need of immediate and free accommodation. How fortunate that a unit in Moe, made available by a local in that area was vacant and Liz, the owner, agreed to take them in. English classes are number one priority for this group before they have any chance of a job.

Work and experience needed

HELP

With the increasing demand on people to get work, we are looking for all sorts of opportunities to help in this regard.

Some have not worked for years, some have never worked.

Clearly, if anyone has contacts who can provide employment we would love to hear from you.

We also need to provide people with experience in working.

A couple of our contacts have agreed to have an asylum seeker come and clean their home in order to gain the experience for future work applications. They will explain what is needed within a timeframe and give feedback to the person or us - including arriving on time, the work completed and time management and organisation.

Cleaning, painting, kitchen hand work are some of the basic roles we could consider.

We can take so much for granted about work. We recently found out that a man who has skills in a much needed area, was not getting any responses to his email requests about vacancies. This was because he was not attaching a covering letter or his CV to the email. He now understands what is needed!

Thank you to those who do give us a call when they need something done. A call for someone to clean and paint decking will help a family whose SRSS has been stopped at short notice.

Can everyone who gets this newsletter be an advocate for a day? Can we make this

Wednesday 30th May?

Please write to or ring your own Member of the Federal Government and write to the Prime Minister and Mr Dutton.

DATE

The Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

or

The Hon Peter Dutton MP
Minister for Home Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

Drastic reductions to support for people seeking asylum

We are writing to ask that your Government reverse recent changes to policy which will result in drastic reductions in the supports for people seeking asylum under the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program. These changes mean many people will no longer have access to these life-saving supports and will result in thousands of highly vulnerable people becoming homeless and destitute.

[Add any other points as you see fit. Mention any experience you have had, any connections with BASP or other organisations].

If you can, give a message about not voting for a party that has such cruel policies to people seeking protection.

The Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce is also encouraging people to contact the Prime Minister regarding the cuts to SRSS. See details here, including a postcard to send:

<http://www.acrt.com.au/wp-content/uploads/ACRT-DignityNotDestitution-04.pdf>



More Community generosity

BASP arranged for 26 people- individuals and families- to catch a train to a Community Picnic in Castlemaine on April 7 to attend. This is the report of one of the organisers.

“More than 60 people seeking asylum in Australia enjoyed a great “day out” at a well-attended community picnic in Castlemaine Botanical Gardens.

On a recent sunny Saturday they experienced the hospitality of the Harcourt Uniting church and Rural Australians for Refugees and the generosity of the wider community in a range of activities, especially those laid on for the 30 children, from toddlers to teens.

The visitors, who came from the Lentara Asylum Seeker Welcome Centre and the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project in Melbourne, were originally from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Lebanon, Tibet, Chile, Somalia and Ethiopia.

A welcome to country was extended and a smoke cleansing ceremony conducted by Auntie Paulette Nelson, after telling some history of the tribes in the local area. Mount Alexander Shire Mayor, Bronwen Machin, expressed concern and shame at Australia’s refugee policies.

One local participant described the picnic as “a beautiful occasion of warmth and welcome that I wish our federal politicians could have witnessed. Full hearted human hospitality as it should be.”

Banners saying “welcome” in many of the languages of the guests, made by children from St Mary’s, Winters Flat, Campbells Creek, and Maldon primary schools, decorated the



area.

While the adult guests chatted with locals and built connections, children enjoyed a farm animal petting zoo, face painting, soap bubbles, a balloon artist and, with the adults, a tug-of-peace.

A magnificent lunch of diverse foods was prepared by many people including Harcourt Uniting church and Chewton Phoenix CWA. Rohan Souter and the Peace Choir sang, followed by international dances. Families received Boomerang Bags containing surprise items, and added children’s books from the Friends of the Castlemaine Library.

During conversations, people heard of the experiences that caused people to seek asylum in Australia and of their struggles with bureaucracy, their hopes to contribute to the life of the Australian community and to build a new life for their families.

One of the organisers summed up the picnic day saying “Thanks to the enthusiasm of those who participated, the awareness of the plight of asylum seekers has increased and the experience of interacting with them, as one human being to another, has been most worthwhile.”



You have to meet someone who is actually homeless and has been, at best, sleeping in a car or, at worst, under a bridge to really appreciate homelessness. Recently, we talked to two people seeking asylum who had gone to a crisis centre having run out of other options. They were so frightened of the obvious drug related violence they left and sat under a bridge for the night.



They have since been given accommodation and care at Pallotti College in Millgrove. After quite a lot of trauma, they are certainly enjoying the peace and beauty of Pallotti. Thanks to the hosts Bill and Mary-Anne for once again helping out—you have given respite to a couple of very frightened people. The couple in return are working hard to assist in the running of this conference venue.



In March, members of the **Mariana Community** invited some asylum seekers to their retreat in



Millgrove for a country weekend away. This is the third time the group has offered this opportunity and again, it was a great success.

Marie Tierney, a volunteer working with many women asylum seekers, assisted in getting the young women

there and the change of scenery and the friendship of the hosts was greatly appreciated by all.

One of the women who was housed by BASP in September last year, was unaware she was pregnant when she fled her homeland. She then discovered she was having twins. She was in a share house until just before the twins were due when a BASP unit

became available and she could settle in before having the twins - a boy and a girl. Libby



had the privilege of attending the birth as the support person and what a special time that was. The mother of the twins has been wonderfully supported by an asylum seeker family next door to her and by BASP volunteers.

It is always a delight to hear from people who have started seeing light at the end of the tunnel.

We received this email from a couple who arrived from Nigeria a year or so ago:

"We have now started moving forward. My wife managed to get a job at an aged care facility which is about a 8-minute walk from home and I also got some casual work with a disability and youth agency.

I am also benefiting from the Train the Trainer programme, where they are training us to become employment law advocates for the people seeking Asylum and migration background who are abused by different employees and our role is to just give them advice and also recommend them to the different legal services or institution that can help them interpret the law.

We really appreciate for all the time, physical and financial support that BASP gave us to settle in mostly in the tough times when the world had turned dark and we had nowhere to turn to.."

Wilfred studied really hard as soon as the possibility opened up for him in Australia.



He already had a degree in his own country but needed an Australian qualification. He did hard manual work to get enough money to study and was then offered a three month internship with a large company. He has

now been offered a job with that company.

Probably everyone has seen the news that a number of athletes who came to Australia for the recent Commonwealth Games stayed here and have sought protection. The numbers given vary but there are maybe one hundred of these. We are bemused by the fact that Mr Dutton made such dire threats to these people. They were, after all, only using the right they have to apply for asylum here. And they made their application before their other visa expired. Their cases will be processed like every one else who makes such an application.

Mr Dutton's comments about their overstaying their visas sounds odd when at any one time there are over sixty thousand 'over-stayers' in Australia and most are British and Americans!



Echuca

On May 5 and 6, another group- of 41 individuals and families, met at Southern Cross and went by Bendigo bus to **Echuca for the weekend.**

The RAR group in the area had organised home host stays for them all as well as activities, sightseeing and communal meals. Those who attended had a wonderful time, enjoying the country atmosphere and friendship and the break from the day to day routine of life in the city, focused for so many on just surviving. This is the feedback from the organisers:

“On Saturday 5th May a group of host families from the Echuca Moama region eagerly awaited the arrival of their guests.

It was very exciting to see the men, women and children from so many countries alight from the bus to be warmly greeted and allocated to the family with whom they would spend the next 24 hours. That time was crammed with activities including Paddle



steamer rides, trips to the Fauna Park in nearby Kyabram, watching the local Aussie Rules match, visiting a dairy farm and watching - and sometimes assisting with – the milking of hundreds of cows. Most enjoyable though was the time spent over meals or a card game, chatting and realizing that although we come from such diverse backgrounds so much is shared in common. Echuca RAR members thank Libby and Brigid for encouraging our visitors to take the journey into the unknown. We are always enriched by these visits.”

Inspiration aplenty from speaker at Rotary breakfast (From local paper)



Many of the BASP people know about (if they don't know) the family from Chad who are in Mooroolbark. Fatima with her eight children in Australia is an inspiration.

Pictured here is Nadjoua doing her proud. She spoke at the Wandin Rotary breakfast on Australia Day. Nadjoua is in Year 11 at the Mooroolbark High School—as are all the four girls in the family. The four boys are actually young men now and all working to establish themselves in Australia.

Charifa, the oldest of Fatima's children is still in Chad. Fatima will never rest easy until she has managed to get Charifa here.

**Food is being distributed very quickly at present. We have a lot of calls.
The things people need are**



Sugar , flour , cooking oil

Cans of tomatoes, fruit, tuna (large and small), red kidney beans, corn, peas

Long life milk, tea and coffee, cheese, biscuits, honey, noodles, basmati rice, dates

Gladwrap, tinfoil, pegs for hanging out washing,

Sweet and Savoury Biscuits, Snacks for school lunches, Salt and pepper, Spices: coriander, cinnamon, ginger, Shampoo and Conditioner, Shaving Cream and shavers, Toothpaste.

We seemingly never have enough washing powder, dish washing detergents and household cleaning products. A very generous person is keeping us supplied with toilet paper.



Quite a number of families have small children, so disposable nappies and wipes are an ongoing need.

Vouchers are really appreciated eg. for Coles, Big W, Kmart or similar stores; this allows individuals and families the independence to buy something they really want and need.

For anyone wishing to make a donation, the Project Bank details are: Brigidine Asylum Seekers Trust Account: bsb: 083-004; a/c: 56-924-6603; NAB.

Please put your name on the entry and if possible send us a message so that we can send you a receipt. This could be a text message on 0438 001 515 or an email to jcaldwell@basp.org.au.



Again thank you for your support, in whatever way you have been giving it to us. There are many people in our community who have received help from BASP only because of you.



We appreciate the many different ways people are advocating for change and supporting very vulnerable people in the meantime. We urge you to keep talking to people about the current inequities and cruelty so that members of Parliament of all persuasions might talk in their party rooms about alternatives.

Remind all those who appear indifferent that as a nation we are being seen across the world as a country with little heart for those fleeing persecution. The flip side of this unenviable reputation is the generosity of people like our BASP supporters.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)