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OCEANIA/AUSTRALIA - Catholic bishops discuss modifications proposed by government coalition for migration policies

Sydney (Agenzia Fides) - The Australian Catholic Bishops are questioning the coalition's proposed policy changes on immigration and say that a return to the Pacific Solution would show a lack of appreciation of the ethical issues related to migration. The "Pacific Solution" was the name given to the Australian government policy (2001–2007) of transporting asylum seekers to detention camps on small island nations in the Pacific Ocean, rather than allowing them to land on the Australian mainland. Recently, the coalition announced changes which could require asylum seekers to be processed overseas if the coalition was to win government. A touted return to the temporary protection visa (TPV) policy would be included in these changes. As it was under the Howard government (established in 1999 and abolished in 2008), the TPV holders would be able to work and have access to Medicare. They would be required to attend English language classes after a year and would have access to limited income support. Bishop Joe Grech, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference spokesperson for refugee and asylum seeker issues is concerned about these changes. "It has always been the view of the Catholic Church that human beings such as asylum seekers should be treated as human beings, not as political footballs. This policy sounds as though it could be quite punitive toward asylum seekers who have left their countries of origin because of dire and dangerous situations", said Bishop Grech. "It is important to focus on the problem of people smuggling while not holding asylum seekers responsible for this phenomenon", he said. Director of the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office Fr. Maurizio Pettena said that many also do not realise the wealth that we enjoy in Australia as a result of migration. "It has been demonstrated time and time again that refugees and asylum seekers work extremely hard in the Australian community, contributing much to the fabric of this country", commented Fr. Pettena. (AP) (Agenzia Fides 1/6/2010)

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