



## Afghans sent home to die

Cynthia Banham Diplomatic Editor  
October 27, 2008

Advertisement

THE Immigration Minister, Chris Evans, has demanded answers to allegations up to 20 Afghan asylum seekers rejected by Australia under the Howard government's so-called Pacific solution were killed after returning to Afghanistan, and others remain in hiding from the Taliban.

The claims are contained in a documentary to be aired on SBS on November 19. The film, *A Well-Founded Fear*, produced by Anne Delaney, is based on the efforts of Phil Glendenning, the director of social justice agency the Edmund Rice Centre, who has spent the past six years tracing many of these rejected asylum seekers.

About 400 Afghans detained on Nauru were returned to Afghanistan after having their asylum claims rejected. They were told by Immigration officials it was safe to go home, and that if they refused, they would remain in detention forever, according to accounts given to Mr Glendenning.

Another 400 who refused to go voluntarily were eventually found to be refugees and were resettled in Australia or other countries including New Zealand.

Mr Glendenning says he has documented the deaths of nine of the rejected Afghans at the hands of the Taliban, but he believes the figure is actually 20.

Of the other Afghans who returned home, many are hiding in Pakistan, or are forced to move between Pakistan and Afghanistan to evade the Taliban. They include a man whose two daughters were killed in a Taliban attack on his family's home near Kabul, after his asylum claim was rejected by Australia in 2002.

Senator Evans told the *Herald* he had asked his department to give him a "full briefing" on the matters raised by the Edmund Rice Centre.

He said the department's initial response, "and I am conscious this is the department's response - is that they don't agree with a lot of the claims made".

But he said he was "taking the claims very seriously" and had "asked for further information about the processes that occurred on Nauru and the robustness and integrity of those processes".

Much of the information Mr Glendenning used to locate the rejected asylum seekers was provided to him by sympathetic Immigration officials, concerned at what had occurred under the Howard government.

He believes the Afghans who left Nauru were "lied to" by Australian officials, and he wants the Government to reopen their cases.

"We now have the opportunity with the new Government to put the mistakes of the past to rest," Mr Glendenning said.

Senator Evans said he had an open mind about reopening some of the cases. It would be a big step, he said. "You would want to be convinced there was something very wrong that occurred.

"What some advocates are saying is you ought put them [the rejected Afghans] as a priority in the humanitarian intake over the claims of others. The reason for that priority is that they once came to Australia, were rejected as refugees, and returned to

their country of origin," he said.

This would "fundamentally overturn" the basis on which such decisions were normally made, which was on priority of need.

Philip Ruddock was immigration minister until October 2003. Asked for his comments on the rejected Afghans, he said, "I would never say mistakes are impossible." But he added that Australia's asylum system was "robust and credible". He also said the Afghans left Nauru "voluntarily".

"It is the case that Afghanistan is a dangerous place but the [United Nations] Refugee Convention does not say you cannot be returned to a dangerous place," Mr Ruddock said. "The fact that somebody might tragically die [in Afghanistan] may well be as tragic as a road accident in Sydney."

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/10/26/1224955853319.html>*