



RAR ANNUAL REPORT

2023

“Think good ideas, take better action”

Since 2001, RAR has developed into a network of member group that is recognized and respected in regional and rural communities for:

- Commitment to supporting people seeking our protection
- Determination in pursuing justice
- Advocacy for human rights.

1. The year that was

A year ago, we were holding our conference in Katoomba. That conference buoyed us all up. Reflecting that, the final discussion conceived the Katoomba Declaration, reflecting what we had achieved.

In the Declaration I feel we managed to encapsulate what is missing from barely half-measure offering on human rights of the Albanese government. For the refugee movement, we pointed to five key campaign areas and articulated its end goal beyond the daily hurley burley.

After delays that government begun to raise the number of people admitted under the humanitarian program, but not to promised level. It has also provided for a Resolution of Status visa that after about two years would complete its coverage of two-thirds of the 30,000-strong, 10-year-old, “legacy caseload” and might eventually cover up to 80% of these refugees.

But those left out are still waiting on refugee determinations, or need reversals of the previous withdrawals or refusals of temporary visas. They also often lack study or work rights, or rights to use Medicare.

Those who were detained offshore are not covered either. Medical evacuation has now emptied the Nauru camp, but it is kept open through expensive, often demonstrably corrupt, funding to maintain the whole regimes. Some refugees are managing to leave PNG, thanks to New Zealand’s efforts, but 65-70 are still there supported by our movement and the work of the Catholic Church and others there.

The 14,000 refugees in Indonesia are still there. Those who get Australian government financial support there continue to see the value of that drop.

Community sponsorship is still in a pilot phase.

People, on boats, are being turned back again, even as they arrive directly from their home country.

Australia fails to be a place that provide a right to asylum to all who arrive here seeking it. A great deal must change before this is otherwise.

2. Membership

Our membership continues to hover at around 70 groups. Not all are very active. But I think we've seen our membership come through a period when, with the election of a Labor government, we have seen a collapse in refugee advocacy in the past. RAR members are answering the call for action, such as in our support for the actions of the Hazara diaspora and Neil Para's walk.

We continue to develop partnerships. We are delighted to have the Hazara Women for Change as an affiliate group. Many RAR groups are raising funds to support the work they are doing in Afghanistan with women and girls, through education and employment.

3. Campaign action

We supported, through national organising and participation, refugee-led actions in Canberra throughout much of the year. This culminated with the Hazara marking of the second anniversary of the bombing of the Sayed al-Shuhada school in Taliban-occupied Kabul last week. For Tuesday, we'd played a leading role alongside Muzafar Ali and other Afghan diaspora members, with NC member Marie Sellstrom becoming one of the speakers.

I won't steal Marie's thunder about our Afghanistan work. But this has been our most important area of work in the last year. The funds raised from the time of the Taliban takeover until now has been vital for its success. And that success was clearly demonstrated when RAR hosted a Zoom meeting involving members of the Afghan diaspora across much of Australia on August 15, as the Taliban takeover reached the two-year mark, which reflected on both the situation in Afghanistan and their refugee experience.

We can see the important role being part of refugee-led actions can play in bringing us into contact with the communities in our midst. They revealed to us the Fijian and Vanuatu communities in Griffith, which have been present there for up to 16 years with no permanency. Our relationship with the Hazara community in Shepparton is growing, even without a RAR group based there.

Annual activities, such as the Palm Sunday rallies, Refugee Week (this year including the Macedon Ranges public meeting, which I think helped inspire their 2024 conference bid), and the July 19 #Xyearstoolong, are important as frames for RAR members' work. The NC has promoted them to members. Members can also get help for work on them from our website, which now has prominent links and pages for such campaign mobilisations, as well as the Updates.

Around the Budget, we posed to the government that the humanitarian program intake should increase, while maintaining offshore detention comes at an extraordinary financial cost, and that community sponsorship should be funded as a separate program.

We also made a submission to the Human Rights Inquiry, drafted by Marie.

Many RAR members have also been able to use film screenings for their work. There's a range of films available, but in the last year probably *Behrouz* and *Watandar My Countryman*, made by our patron Muzafar Ali together with Jolyon Hoff, have been the key ones.

NC member Louise Redmond has participated in workshops organised by the Settlement Council of Australia around their work to achieve a dignified community life for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

The RAR NC has stated its support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart, including the Voice.

I have saved some good campaign news for last. Some months ago, Neil Para, a Tamil refugee who has been living in Ballarat without a visa and significantly aided by Ballarat RAR, decided he was going to do a 1000km walk from there to Albanese's Sydney inner-west electorate.

A walk across much of the country will be largely through regional and rural Australia. Our members along the route rose to the challenge of supporting this action. They, including Ballarat, Yass, Southern Highlands, Albury-Wodonga, Wangaratta, Yackandandah, Mansfield, Trentham, and Strathbogie Ranges and helped by community members in Shepparton and Wagga Wagga, deserve recognition from the whole refugee rights movement. We'll start with a special Update write-up, which I encourage the members to submit.

Providing the logistics for the walk was a big ask for our members, but they also took on taking its message of permanent visas for all refugees into our communities. The walk has captured many people's imagination and inspired our members.

And as the walk came to close at the beginning of this week, Neil and his family got their permanent visas. That's another victory for our movement, for refugees and their supporters, won in a decade-long fight.

4. Our organisation

We were able to build on the strategy planning last year – with goals to mobilise, to advocate and to connect - with a 2023 strategy statement and, for the first time, an annual action plan. That plan included visits to groups, an improved online presence, ideas for Afghanistan work, and promotion of the Katoomba Declaration.

Actually, the action plan was much more ambitious. Having a plan is one thing. Implementing it is another. But I can say we have made some progress.

RAR is affiliated to the Australian Refugee Action Network, which brings together some of the refugee rights groups across the country to exchange information and to try to collaborate.

Paul and I have been involved in it. We are frustrated it is unable to co-ordinate the movement's work more either politically or organisationally. It has to be said that a good half of the problem is that for various reasons groups like Amnesty and ASRC, and the Melbourne and Sydney RACs, choose to work largely independently.

I feel our involvement was proved valuable, for example, by the way it enabled us to better debate what was involved in the internal Labor discussion of an "amnesty" call. On the other hand, we couldn't really get a discussion up and running on the value of the Katoomba Declaration.

There is now some discussion about holding an ARAN conference for the first time since 2018. We've suggested that such a conference would work if it could be part of a significant advance in combining the refugee movement's forces.

We'd started to look at how our patrons might be more involved, but this, like much else, would benefit for more people being involved in the National Committee.

Communications:

The **Updates** are the primary way we communicate with our member groups and supporters. Thanks to Mike Griffin (Bellingen-Nambucca Heads RAR) and Bernie Maxwell (Griffith RAR) for their work in the last year preparing and circulating these Updates on a rock-solid monthly basis.

Our online presence continues to need work. Last year, we developed a new and simpler **website**, and at times we have made valuable use of it. We've tried telling Community Stories, and we should revive that effort. It should serve as a posterboard and coordination point for all our campaigns, which means keeping it up to date. Finally, it can be a conduit for people who want to form new RAR groups to get information and into contact with us.

We have an active social media presence through Facebook and Twitter. But the number of followers we have on each platform (6,100 on Facebook, 1900 on Twitter) has hardly grown this year. The Instagram account has grown to 320 followers.

Thanks are owed to all those who have kept these current. But one of the discussions the National Committee had this year was about how to rebuild and re-work our social media team. Unfortunately, this largely stopped when our Communications Convenor Kat Vella moved to Canberra and decided she couldn't continue in the role. This is definitely a role we would like someone to consider taking on.

Finances:

Geoff Byrne will present a separate report. During the year uncommitted funds rose from \$8000 to more than \$21,000, which indicates a far stronger position for us.

Having said that, the voluntary membership contributions dropped back to \$2,272. These funds enable us to do campaigning work, and extend our reach. We want them to grow, so I hope that next year groups will continue to contribute.

5. National Conference 2024

Our experience at Katoomba made crystal clear that we would want a national conference again in 2024. In recent months we therefore actively sought out a host group for this.

I congratulate the Combined Refugee Action Group, which brings together groups in the Bellarine Peninsula, Geelong and the Surf Coast, and Macedon Ranges RAR, for putting themselves forward as potential hosts. We had to choose! In the end Macedon Ranges has got the nod, while we want to see what other activities we can work on with CRAG.

Macedon Ranges and the National Committee have agreed on a division of labour for the conference. MR RAR has already set up their working group and the incoming NC can be expected to do that promptly. Four incoming NC members will also have visited the region within a month, and another lives nearby.

We are set to have an exciting conference from October 11-13. So put that date in your diary!

6. Thank you to National Committee and sub-committees

I thank the members of the National Committee and sub-committees for their work. It has been a pleasure to work with this dedicated, hard-working and interesting group of people. Enough of a pleasure, indeed, that I have nominated again, although in a different role, and from the existing committee I look forward to working with Paul, who has nominated for President, Louise, who has nominated for Secretary, and Geoff, again ready to take on the Treasurer role.

On the other hand, I have already mentioned that Kat Vella (Griffith) resigned during the year. Rosemary Bishop, Katherine Stewart, who plans to focus on CRISP work, and Marie Sellstrom, a former President and committee member for at least seven years, and I think has no plans otherwise to reduce her work, have not re-nominated for the Committee.

I thank them all for their wonderful work.

That Rob Kann from Welcome to Maleny and Sandy Watson from Trentham RAR have now come forward with nominations is pleasing. It is a constant challenge to find people who are willing to work at the National Committee level. I recommend we still look at how we might run a program of leadership training.

7. The year ahead.

The Albanese Government, like others before it, needs to be held to account.

RAR's core is our member groups. I am honoured as National President to have worked with you.

Yet it's our standing as a national organisation gives us the greater part of our national impact. We have a strong and distinctive voice through speaking for so many in rural and regional communities. We bring that to our work with others in the refugee sector, which increasingly includes many refugees and people seeking asylum.

This means I still call on you now to consider what role you can play in keeping RAR firing along nationally. There is strength in numbers. New faces offer the prospect of new ideas. This can be on the National Committee, on the Afghan subcommittee, or in publishing the Update or on social media.

RAR began with a small group of women in September 2001. Those who have been here grow older, but we do not give up.

What we will need to do is keep opening up to new people.

Thus, we will not stop until this country faces up to its international and domestic responsibilities and gives a proper place to human rights and justice for all.

The resilience, determination and strength of RAR groups has been thoroughly demonstrated. In doing that, we may take quiet pride that we have shown some of the best of what people can be and of the values that we would want to define us.

Jonathan Strauss

National President

16 September 2023