

**UN refugee agency appeals for a sense of perspective**

The UN Refugee Agency today appealed for a sense of perspective in the wake of small numbers of boats of asylum-seekers over the past two months.

UNHCR Regional Representative Mr Richard Towle said while there had now been five boats with a total of about 85 people over the past two months, the numbers were extremely small in the global context.

“There are very few asylum seekers coming to Australia compared to other parts of the world, so we would urge all commentators on the issue to keep it in perspective,” said Towle.

“The 85 or so people who arrived on five boats in Australian waters this year represent a tiny fraction of the numbers arriving in other parts of the world.”

“More than 500 times that number crossed the Gulf of Aden into Yemen so far this year, with 43,500 people making the perilous journey in over 850 smuggling boats in 2008. At least another 380 people have died crossing the Gulf of Aden and a further 360 people are missing,” he said.

In addition, tens of thousands of people put out in small boats from the North African coast every year in a bid to reach European territory. In 2007, a total of 19,900 people arrived in Italy’s islands or the mainland by boat from North Africa, compared with 22,000 in 2006.

“The reality is that a great many people around the world are fleeing persecution and conflict, and many of those are moving further afield to find the protection they need,” said Towle.

Asylum seeker numbers are up in all industrialised countries, according to UNHCR’s latest statistical report. In the first half of 2008, there was a 3 percent rise in asylum claims lodged in 44 industrialised countries compared to the same period last year. In 2007, new claims rose by 9 percent compared to 2006.

“This year, the Government has put in place fair and robust procedures to process asylum claims, and these should be allowed to run their course,” said Towle.

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