



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

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UNHCR welcomes residency permits for refugees from Papua Province, Indonesia

UNHCR today welcomed the PNG Government's granting of residency permits to 184 refugees from Indonesia's Papua Province, as an important step towards their integration in PNG.

Almost a year to the day since the group arrived from Vanimo in the remote refugee settlement area of East Awin, Western Province, all adults (men and women) have now received a Permissive Residency Permit (PRP).

UNHCR's PNG Representative Mr Johann Siffointe said the PRP gives the refugees important rights including the right to move freely around the country, engage in business activities, and work with similar conditions as PNG nationals. The permits also provide for freedom of worship and marriage and give better access to the courts and health and education services.

Mr Siffointe thanked the PNG Government for issuing the PRPs, thereby helping the refugees to integrate into PNG and get on with their lives.

"Local integration is currently the most viable way refugees from the Papua Province of Indonesia can find a solution to their plight as refugees and rebuild their lives anew.

"By providing these refugees with residency permits, the PNG Government is clearly showing its commitment to comply with international obligations and help refugees settle into their new home," Mr Siffointe said.

Chris Kati, Director of PNG Border Affairs and Special Projects, said the PRP regularises the refugees stay in PNG and gives them an important opportunity to become self-sufficient.

"Importantly, the PRPs are also now issued to all adults (and not just 'heads of households'), recognising the importance of equal rights for women and our commitment to gender equity," Mr Kati said.

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Renewable every three years, the PRP is available to all adult refugees who have moved to the government-sanctioned East Awin settlement for a minimum of six months. After eight years, PRP holders become eligible for naturalisation as PNG citizens.

In remote East Awin last week, Mr Siffointe took part in day-long celebrations to mark the one year anniversary of the 'Vanimo Group's' arrival in East Awin which also coincided with the distribution of the PRPs with the assistance of UNHCR.

Recalling the complex relocation exercise that took place over several days -- via plane, boat and tractor -- a year ago, Mr Siffointe commended the group's achievements to date in building their new community.

"Many houses are now complete and all the households have established gardens growing kau kau (sweet potato) and peanuts, which are also being sold at the markets in Kiunga and Tabubil."

"The settlement administrator assures me that the gardens of the 'Vanimo group' -- now known as the Wamena Group after their homeland across the Indonesian border - are the best to be found in East Awin," Siffointe said.

Twenty-nine year old refugee Ms Delly Jikwa, helped prepare the anniversary celebrations. "I am happy to celebrate today. We have been here for one year and we are safe. It is good to have the PRPs; we can now move freely in PNG," she said.

For the moment however, the Jikwa family plans to stay put in East Awin, where the eldest son attends the local elementary school and learns English.

Others among the Wamena group are keen to take full advantage of their new found freedoms and move further afield to seek work.

"Today is a big day. Now that I have my Permissive Residency Permit, I will be able to move to another place in PNG. ...I haven't decided yet where to go but I hope to find a job working in a garden or as a chicken farmer", said Mr Constant Pabuni -- one of the leaders among the group, who sought refuge in PNG in 2000 when targeted by authorities in his homeland for political activities.

About 1,000 PRPs have been issued since they were introduced in 1999. It is estimated about 30 percent of PRP holders have moved away from the refugee resettlement area of East Awin, settling elsewhere in PNG.

Photos of the remote celebrations are available free of charge to media.

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