

# Minister, throwing fuel on fire doesn't help

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IN A world flooded with refugees — about 20 million of them — there are perfectly rational arguments for Australia to limit the number of those from Africa seeking places in its humanitarian immigration program.

The fact that some Africans have not yet settled easily into Australian life is not an argument that should have been made at all, least of all by a federal minister.

Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews managed to toss kerosene on to a highly flammable race issue by traversing the matter (on the first day of the new citizenship test, yet!), and parts of the news media chose to add oxygen. Whether Andrews was whispering an unsubtle message to the hateful or whether he is merely incompetent hardly matters: it has been clear for some time he does not suit such a sensitive portfolio as immigration in this nation of immigrants.

There is nothing new in the reduction of places for Africans — Immigration Department chief Andrew Metcalfe told a Senate committee in February that Australia would continue to reduce its intake from Africa in favour of refugees from South-East Asia.

The figures already spoke for themselves: from a high of 70 per cent Africans in the humanitarian program in 2003-04 and 2005-06, they had fallen to 55 per cent, then 50 per cent in 2006-07. Now they will be 30 per cent — about 4300 people.

Despite the African humanitarian disasters of recent years, Australia has a clear first responsibility to the nations of South-East Asia, its nearest neighbours. The recent brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Burma is a reminder that no fewer than 150,000 Burmese refugees have huddled in squalid camps along the Thai border for years, the Thai Government calling with desperation for third countries to offer relief.

Australia also happens to be party to a war in Iraq that has sent up to 4 million Iraqis fleeing into neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Syria, and the United Nations has been putting increasing pressure on the international community to offer homes to these shattered people.

In the often heated debate about Australia's approach to immigration, asylum seekers and refugees, it is often overlooked that Australia's humanitarian refugee intake of 13,000 people a year is second only to the United States in absolute numbers and at the top of the world in proportion to population.

The world, in short, is not a humanitarian place, and Australia's immigration authorities have to take many agonising decisions when deciding who shall gain refuge and who shall be denied.

In the absence of the wisdom of Solomon, there has always been bipartisan support for those fearful decisions. And so it will be this time, though no thanks to Minister Andrews.

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