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Media Release: Bringing back a Temporary Protection Visa will deliver misery to refugees and shame to Australia

The Romero Centre has been working with refugees who arrive in Australia by boat since 2000. The soul-destroying legacy of the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) is seen by staff at the Romero Centre on a daily basis. The TPV delivered to refugees a miserly version of the protection and security to which they are morally and legally entitled. TPV's made the prospect of settling in Australia more difficult and tarnished Australia's reputation of a country that believes in a fair go for all.

There are so many reasons why the TPV system failed. The TPV system:

- Increased the costs of administering the TPV's to government is higher than processing people's application in the community (one health and security checks have been completed). It added another layer of administration and bureaucracy to the refugee system.
- Caused pain to refugees fleeing conflict. It offered "hourglass protection" that ran out after a short period creating anxiety and insecurity for the most vulnerable people. The TPV regime included limited settlement services making it more difficult for people to settle and contribute to the community.
- Failed to stem the flow of boats. Because the TPV system did not allow people to sponsor their family to come to Australia under Australia's humanitarian programme they were forced to make the dangerous journey by boat.
- Punished the most vulnerable. The anxiety and insecurity of living in limbo took its toll on people's emotional and mental health as did the separation from family.
- Divided Australia. The TPV incited racism and divided families, friends and neighbours against those who supported it and those who opposed the TPV system.
- Tarnished Australia's international human rights reputation. Australia became known as a country that jailed women and children who had fled war.

The ex-TPV holders we work with make a significant contribution to Australia's economy. They are not afraid of hard and long hours, pay taxes and contribute to community life. Their children value study and their parents sacrifice to enable them to obtain an education. Many have gone onto University and play active roles in building a better community. One young woman whose family we worked with received a prestigious Australian Youth award for her achievements and service. They are courageous people who value freedom, democracy and justice. The people we see every day make good citizens and good neighbours.

We must also remember that refugees coming by boat do so legally. The 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol is a legally binding treaty and a milestone in international refugee law which Australia ratified in 1954. Asylum seekers fleeing dangerous situations exercise a fundamental human right to seek protection, through a

*"You can't do everything, but knowing that, you can do something."
Oscar Romero*

fair assessment of their refugee status. This is not an issue that Australia deals with alone; it is a global issue.

The Romero Centre applauds the changes the Rudd government has made in respect to Refugee policy to date. We also recognise the need for a regional solution to refugees coming to Australia. We suggest that the government uses its current resources to encourage and support Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia to ratify the UN Refugee Convention as a means of developing positive relationships in the Asia Pacific region and supporting Australia to fulfil its obligations under the convention. We encourage an alignment of immigration policies with Australia's obligations to the International Refugee Convention, in the interests of the safety of asylum seekers and Australia's pursuit of Human Rights and the region in which we live. Australia needs to also address the push factors: war, conflict and deprivation. A greater investment in pre and post-war peace building, good governance and development is needed.

Re-instating the TPV regime is a bad answer to the wrong question. Refugees are people who escape war and conflict. They are people looking for safety. This is a global and regional problem that requires bi-partisan and international cooperation, not knee-jerk populist reactions.