

# RAR 2022

## National Conference

#connecting for change



### conference report

#### overview

The 2022 Rural Australians for Refugees (RAR) Conference was held at the Katoomba High School from Friday 16th – Sunday 18th September. It was attended by over 160 people. Over 25% were people with lived experience. 50% were from RAR groups – 24 groups were represented, dominated by the host RAR group, the Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group. The remainder were students and general admission tickets.

The program aimed to have a balance between 'whole group' speakers and panel sessions and small group workshops. People with lived experience participated in 12 out of 15 sessions. The Conference was enriched by having the active participation of so many refugees and people seeking asylum. In total, there were 55 speakers, presenters and moderators of workshops.





*Aunty Carol*

## The program

### Friday evening

**Welcome to Country: Aunty Carol Cooper** gave a very warm welcome to the traditional lands of the Darug and Gundungurra peoples.

**Local State member, Trish Doyle**, welcomed delegates and encouraged us to continue our work seeking justice and fairness for refugees and people seeking asylum

**RAR Patron, Gillian Triggs** gave a recorded welcome from Geneva, reiterating the ongoing need for resettlement and generosity to the millions of displaced people around the globe. She commended RAR for its ongoing advocacy and practical support.

**Panel session: Tamara Domicelj** (Jesuit Refugee Service Country Director) led a conversation with **Craig Foster, Angela Fredericks, Muzafar Ali** and **Julie Macken**.



*Louise Redmond and Trish Doyle*



**Tamara** opened the conversation with her reflection on how we need to move forward and make changes as a nation. **Craig** spoke strongly about the need for united messaging, for the sector to work together cohesively. We need to bring in more people, people who have the opportunity to speak to the broader Australian community. We have a political campaign here, we need to be highly organised and on message, for the next 2 - 5 -10 years. We also need to resource people with





Angela Fredericks,  
Julie Macken,  
Tamara Domicelj  
and Muzafar Ali

a high public profile, so they are ready to 'push back' whenever there is negative spin in the media or politics. Clearly the dominant discourse over the past 20 years has been fear / negative messaging.

Craig also drew attention to anti-racism and justice for First Nations peoples as integrally linked to our campaign for refugee rights and justice.

**Muzafar** spoke about the dire situation of refugees in Indonesia and how we need to be taking action to bring these to safety in Australia.

**Angela** opened by paying tribute to Nades and Priya for telling their story. The #HomeToBilo campaign focussed on shared values – fairness, a hard-working family – that others could relate to, to build connections. We need to lead with kindness, to convert the 'convertibles'. We also need to have compassion for one another, and for ourselves.

**Julie** explained how hope 'went out the door' for her years ago, when, as a journalist, she saw Australians turning their backs on horrific story after horrific story about how we treat people seeking asylum. Instead we need to talk about endurance and capacity for love. Her PhD research has led her to believe that until we accept the reality of our colonisation of this country, the violence, the taking away of children and land, we are condemned to treat vulnerable people the way we treat refugees. She concluded by saying *"we keep on going, showing endurance. We think it is for others, but we are doing it for ourselves, as it is a means to retain our own humanity."*

She is part of a group calling for a Royal Commission into Immigration Detention.

The evening closed with **Lisa Byrnes** reading a statement from Southern Highlands RAR drawing attention to the 10 year anniversary of the establishment of offshore detention

***On August 14 2012 Julia Gillard took legislation to Parliament to establish offshore processing following the 'Expert Panel' recommendations. A month later on September 14, the first asylum seekers, Sri Lankan men arrived. On November 21 the first families arrived on Manus Island.***

Southern Highlands RAR had a stall with postcards for conference participants to send to politicians calling for an end to off shore detention.



## **Saturday 17th September**

**Welcome:** **Mark Greenhill**, Mayor of Blue Mountains City Council, gave a warm welcome to the conference participants, drawing attention to the Blue Mountains as a Refugee Welcome Zone since 2004. Blue Mountains City Council was a sponsor of the conference and an active supporter on refugee matters.

**Kathie Herbert**, Chair of the Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group, added her words of welcome. As a member of the Conference Planning Group since 2019, she has been involved in getting this conference happening for some years!



**Keynote speaker:** **Arif Hussein**, Senior Solicitor, Refugee Advice and Casework Service

Arif referred to the notes he made when he was preparing for his speech at the planned 2020 conference. Then he planned to talk about the need for permanency for people on TPVs and SHEVs. Now two years later, we face the same issues. Yes, it's wonderful that the Nadesalingam family have returned to Biloela and have permanent residence. Yes, it's good that the ALP policy states that it will convert TPVs and SHEVs to permanent residence. But when? Nothing has changed since 2020, or since the May election.

The current Australian government continues with cruel off-shore processing and detention; has a continued ban on refugees registered with the UNHCR in Indonesia coming to Australia; continues to deny work and study rights to many asylum seekers, leaving them in poverty, despondency and dependent on the goodwill of community groups like RAR; ignores the oppression of the Rohingya people in Burma.

### ***Why is there no change?***

One significant reason is the dominant discourse about refugees as illegal, queue jumpers, criminals, a threat to our way of life. This has been largely unchallenged by the political opposition and key media outlets.

We can challenge this by shaping a new narrative, about refugees as people who contribute to this country. A narrative that places values of respect, compassion and dignity at the core. We have a template for what works – Kids Off Nauru, the Medevac legislation. The Home To Bilo campaign showed how community connections and a town behind this family undermined the Government's narrative.

RAR's work with Afghan sponsorships is another great example of how grassroots people work together for change.





## Breakout sessions 1

### 1. Hazara Women for Change

**Moderator: Saajeda Samaa**, (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre)

**Lida Hazara Nayed, Zakia Hazan, Nasima Kakae and Zakia Baig** from the Women for Change group spoke about their work to support women and children in Afghanistan. They had a WhatsApp Chat direct link to girls in a school they support in Afghanistan.

#### From Afghanistan to Australia

- Women for Change (WfC) established in 2019 by a group of women from Afghanistan residing in Australia
- Run by a small group of women from home who also take care of their children, families and also working in different jobs
- WfC are running schools in Afghanistan, mainly in Bamyan and Kabul
- However these schools are run in hiding as Taliban have banned education for girls
- WfC also help women in Afghanistan with various capacity building projects to help women be financially independent
- WfC currently has 600 students besides other projects besides other projects, funded by (as they call) 'great RAR' and sometimes their own pockets i.e. selling their jewellery pieces

#### CALL TO ACTION

- WfC is for everyone. Please connect and work in partnership with us.
- We are people like you. If we can do it, you can do it too – contribute in whatever way you can
- We are looking for capacity building and partnership
- Come join us and help us. In 2022 girls don't have to study in hiding.







Muzafar Ali



## 2. Refugees in Indonesia

**Moderator:** Mary Waterford, (BMRSG)

**Muzafar Ali** and **Esmat Noori** both spent years in detention in Indonesia and both were involved in education initiatives there. Muzafar is co-founder of Cisarua Learning. This workshop involved a Zoom link with Atifa, Zabihullah, Sayed –refugee leaders currently living in Batam & Surabaya hoping for asylum.

### Action coming from this workshop:

- Zoom recording of Sayad speaking on his experience with UNHCR to be edited and send to G. Triggs re the dysfunction of UNHCR (and other groups supposed to support refugees (IOM / Australia and Indonesia governments) demonstrating lack of accountability and trauma created from lack of attention.
- RAR Conference to endorse People Just Like Us policy statement calling for 2020 - 2021 unused humanitarian visas in the Oct 22 budget, with priority to the 14,000 people in Indonesia.
- Create more opportunities for connection between people in Australia and refugees in Indonesia (currently connections are more individual) – we need a more focussed, united and stronger focus.
- Promote community sponsorship program to include groups rather than just individuals.



The Zoom session was recorded and can be accessed here (Passcode: yjm4?\*hr)

[https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/54ZaIY7JwjS52-mKiUDaBvdBMCYldUiXv4\\_zneaiNt5T4CUs9Zp9axhHdKTGkaEA.lum-UNQoSbRLvxg8?startTi me=1663376570000](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/54ZaIY7JwjS52-mKiUDaBvdBMCYldUiXv4_zneaiNt5T4CUs9Zp9axhHdKTGkaEA.lum-UNQoSbRLvxg8?startTi me=1663376570000)



### 3. Charter of Human Rights

**Moderator: Marie Sellstrom** (Mansfield RAR and RAR National Committee)

**Daney Faddoul**, Charter of Human Rights Campaign Manager, Human Rights Law Centre, spoke about progress with this campaign.



Daney Faddoul

He referred to the Amnesty 2022 survey which showed that 73% of people supported this, with 3% opposed. 51% thought we already had a Charter.

He spoke about messaging re the Charter. For example, using 'freedoms' rather than 'rights'; values of equality and fairness.

Here are links to resources that Daney referred to in his presentation:

101 cases report: <https://charterofrights.org.au/101-cases>

Messaging Guide: <https://charterofrights.org.au/resources/2020/2/7/messaging-guide>

The workshop moved a resolution of support for a Charter of Human Rights. This is included in the Conference Declaration.

### 4. Resettlement – what helps, what can RAR groups do?

**Moderator: Yamamah Agha**, (Settlement Services International)

Three refugees spoke of their experience of resettlement – **Yousif Faisal**, (Blue Mountains) and **Abdul Rasuli** and **Yaqoob Kazan**, who are leaders in the Ballarat Afghan Action Group. **Alison Pitt** from the Huon Refugee Support Group gave examples of how her group supports refugees and people seeking asylum.

Australia has one of the best resettlement programs in the world. For the first 18 months after arrivals, humanitarian entrants receive support ranging from sourcing accommodation, providing initial orientation, enrolments in schools, linking with health services and other immediate needs to live an independent life in Australia.







*Dr Eileen Pittaway*



*Entisar Hamid*



*Tamara Domicelj*



*Kathie Herbert*

But there are gaps in the support available from government-funded resources –gaps that non-profit, community groups and individuals step into.

Settlement is a two-way exchange between new arrivals and host communities, and successful settlement is about more than just meeting the basic human needs of food and shelter. It also hinges on new arrivals building a sense of belonging, orienting oneself in a new community and culture, and ultimately, laying roots that will help individuals build a safe and secure future in a new country.

Key themes panellists highlighted included the importance of feeling welcome, cultural understanding, settlement support and community connections feeling home and feeling valued.

### **Panel: Voices for Change**

**Moderator: Dr Eileen Pittaway**, (Adjunct Professor, UNSW)

**Entisar Hamid** (ASRC), **Tamara Domicelj** (Jesuit Refugee Service), **Kathie Herbert** (BMRSG)

**Entisar** spoke about the importance of advocacy. She noted how the actions of people advocating for the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum is very powerful in giving hope to these vulnerable groups. We need a combination of activists and people with lived experience telling their stories, and speaking out for themselves. The ASRC has developed the [Community, Advocacy and Power Program \(CAPP\)](#), to build the leadership skills of people with lived experience of seeking asylum, to become powerful advocates for the refugee community. It runs in Sydney and Melbourne.

**Kathie** set out the aims of RAR, now operating for 21 years, and with around 75 groups across the country. These are autonomous but supported and guided by the National Committee and various sub-committees. RAR has a very important space in the refugee advocacy landscape, it is well respected nationally and as a grass roots organisation, is embedded in local rural and regional communities.

The power that we hold as visible, respected and active members of our rural communities is great. We have small media operators who are often willing (as is certainly the case here in the Blue Mountains) to publicise a press release, events and actions and letters. We have much easier access to local members of parliament and local councils. We are visible in our main





streets and in our communities. We are well connected to many who live around us, we have often worked together, volunteered

together and raised our children together. Many of our groups have invited refugees and those with lived experience into their communities to share their stories with locals, and indeed to live and work where possible. This is the most powerful advocacy tool in changing hearts and minds and it is such a powerful antidote to the hardship inflicted on so many.

We all have a huge task, despite the change of government, ahead of us to advocate and agitate for change to honour Australia's commitment to the UN Refugee Convention and ensure justice for the many thousands of refugees and seekers of asylum who have suffered so much because of Australia's policies.

**Tamara:** noted that on World Refugee Day (June 2022) we learned that the world had surpassed 100 million people displaced by persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations. That is about one in 80 people.

The vast majority of displaced people awaiting a lasting solution are in developing countries. But sometimes refugees await a future in wealthier countries such as Australia. We need to find a way forward where there is more sharing of the responsibility in our interconnected world.

[The Global Compact on Refugees](#) (widely adopted in 2018) and its operational infrastructure offer a very helpful blueprint and highlight the importance of adopting a "whole of society approach", with refugees at the centre. The Global Compact on Refugees emerged from the foundational New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants, unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2016.

Tamara paid tribute to Dr Eileen Pittaway as *"one of our luminaries ... in the effective engagement of global systems to achieve systemic changes (in legal instruments and in the hearts and minds of global decision-makers and influencers) ... She works with others to get important language into legal texts, ownership of that language by adopters, then engages those 'hook words' to formulate realisable actions, ensures the meaningful participation of those affected in the design, delivery and monitoring of corresponding projects"*.

In this tribute, Tamara gave a glimpse of the painstaking and powerful work being done at a global level.





## 5. Young people and racism

**Moderator: Naomi Steinborner** (Blue Sky Community Services)

**Dianne Jacobus** and young people from the project – **Mikal, Rataj, Marko, Nadia, Roger MC.**

'All One Under the Sun' (AOUTS)

<https://www.alloneunderthesun.com.au>

is a youth-led, anti-racism project promoting social inclusion, connection, belonging and education; it is based on Gumbaynggirr Country in Coffs Harbour. During this session the young people showed the 25 min documentary AOUTS and talked about the experience of making the film and how it has been used in schools and in community programs.



## 6. Kaldor Centre – Principles of Good Refugee Policy

**Moderator: Christine Mifsud** (BMRSG)

**Madeline Gleeson**, Senior Research Fellow, Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, UNSW

Madeline set out the Principles and how these have been developed.

**The principles include:**

- Comply with international legal obligations
- Provide fair reception conditions
- Fair, efficient and transparent system for processing asylum claims.

Full details of these principles can be found at <https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/principles-australian-refugee-policy>

The workshop called on the Conference to endorse the Principles and a Charter of Human Rights. This is included in the Conference Declaration.





Angela Fredericks

## 7. Using social media effectively

**Moderator: Geoff Lattimore** (BMMSG)

**Angela Fredericks** (#HometoBilo) and **Kat Vella** (RAR Griffith and RAR Communications Convenor) gave a presentation on social media, drawing on their collective experiences.

### Key points:

- Keep the message positive and consistently tell people what you want e.g. HomeToBilo = Bring the family back to Biloela
- Focus on the human story - They focused on the story of a father, mother and their children, not their story of asylum or the traumas they had faced in Sri Lanka.
- Know how to get the best out of the platform you are using. HomeToBilo used Facebook.
- Moderate comments and know when NOT to respond. Don't engage with antagonistic comments.

They shared a flyer with Top Tips, which is a good summary of the workshop.

<b>BE GENUINE:</b>	Show who you are. Don't worry about being perfect and polished
<b>HAVE YOUR SAY:</b>	Your community wants to hear what you think about issues
<b>INTERACT:</b>	Engage with other posts, engage with comments on your posts
<b>SUBTITLES:</b>	People mostly view video without sound so add subtitles where you can
<b>ALGORITHM:</b>	FORGET IT! Instead, focus on quality, authentic content
<b>RELEVANCE:</b>	Make your content relevant to your community
<b>EDUCATE:</b>	Don't miss an opportunity to break down an issue into simple terms
<b>INSPIRE:</b>	Be critical of bad policy, but always leave your community with a way forward
<b>VIDEO:</b>	Video is KING! It will always perform better than any other content
<b>VARIETY:</b>	Sharing other's content is great, but mix things up when you can
<b>PLAN:</b>	Have a rough plan of what you want to focus on for the week / month
<b>TAG:</b>	Use hashtags, tag people in images, tag MPs, tag accounts whose content you share.



## 8. Networking – changing hearts and minds

**Moderator: Alison Pitt,** (Hunon Refugee Support Group)

**Robert Kann,** (Welcome to Maleny Advocacy Group), **Bern Fraser,** (Wangaratta RAR), **Arad Nik,** (refugee activist, Tasmania).

This session tried to get to the variety of ways we can get the refugee message outside our 'bubble' where we are preaching to the converted! It is very easy to keep circulating through a variety of methods to the same people whether it is social media or any other form of media. Each panel member was asked to give a short presentation from their perspective. The Maleny Group Community Arts project was a standout as it extended to so many community groups who participated in the final creations. Many of those groups who would not have been familiar with the issues have continued to work alongside RAR to extend the advocacy beyond the usual boundaries. This project has been happily shared to other RAR groups around Australia.

The Wangaratta RAR Group have a variety of strategies including the Grandmothers who hold the 'honk for refugees' on a weekly basis with great success – determined by recording the number of honks! The main message was that a variety of activities is necessary to attract a diversity of supporters.

Finally, Arad Nik spoke about the need for refugees themselves to become more active in explaining their plight. Arad spent many months once a week at the same time with placards outside the Department of Home Affairs in Hobart. He highlighted the importance of talking to people directly. He has also been responsible for organising mass rallies, including the most recent rally outside Parliament House in Canberra (Sept 22). It was noted that not all refugees feel sufficiently empowered to take this sort of stand but that they demonstrate their plight in different ways. Many refugees, particularly those with temporary visa status, feel they may jeopardise their chances of permanency by being too vocal.

*Alison Pitt*





**Sunday 18th September**

## **9. Building alliances – how we work with refugee-led groups and other advocate**



**Moderator: Zaki Haidari** (Amnesty Refugee Rights Campaigner)

**Danijel Malbasa** (NRAAG), **Gaby Judd** (Grandmothers for Refugees NSW), **Jonathan Strauss** (Cairns for Refugees), **Arif Hussein** (Action for Afghanistan).

The main point was meaningful involvement of refugees / refugee-led groups from the beginning – not just bringing in people to speak at key meetings in a tokenistic way. Sometime organising groups assume that individual refugees / refugee leaders are too busy but best to let them make the decision themselves.

There was another point made about the need to encompass LGBTQI refugees in future Conferences like this – they are one of the most marginalised groups.



## **10. Story-telling as activism**

**Moderator: Zac Quinn**, author *Sanlundia*

[The Hope Cooperative](#)– **Hossein Ganje, Sohrab Hussaini, Ghanieh Dagbagheleh, Dilini Abedheera Liyan**, with **Jill Parris**.

We had the privilege to meet four young asylum seekers from

Melbourne, all involved in running the HOPE Cooperative (Home of Partnership & Empowerment). Hossein told us his story fighting bushfires in Australia and how important it was to stay determined. Sohrab told us his story about how staying positive allowed him to get a job with the Premier's Department in Victoria. Ghanieh's story was about the importance of family and community, as she builds new relationships in Australia, training to be a doctor whilst being denied the right to visit her family back home due to visa restrictions. And Dilini spoke about her story of recently joining the HOPE Cooperative and how it helped her to see that there was still hope for herself and others like her, despite all the obstacles placed in their way by the government.

We summarised the discussion at the end into four key terms for storytelling as activism: **Determination, Positivity, Community, Hope.**

### We need to:

- stay determined to allow people with lived experience to have their stories heard.
- tell a positive story about asylum seekers, not just the negative consequences of these policies.
- engage with local communities, our friends and our family, to tell the stories of people seeking safety in our land
- have hope that things will change, so long as we keep telling these stories and supporting people with lived experience to have their voices heard.

## 11. Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia

**Moderator: Chris Shanley** (BMMSG)

**Nicole Watkins, Blaise Itabelo, Romy Vitalien** (CRSA)

Participants learnt first-hand about where Community sponsorship is up to, and the CRISP program specifically ([Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot](#)).

Through small groups discussion the following points were made:

- To get ready for sponsorship, read the [Application Guidebook](#) prepared by CRSA
- We need a national campaign through RAR to promote community sponsorship, reaching out to our local communities, employers, business groups, faith groups
- CRSA is keen to work with RAR on an information pack we can use
- We need to find the most trusted and respected organisations in our local areas to help promote the program.



*Blaise Itabelo*



## 12. RAR and Afghan sponsorship

**Moderator: Muzafar Ali** (member of the RAR Afghanistan Sub-committee)

**Marie Sellstrom** (Mansfield RAR and convenor of the RAR Afghanistan Sub-committee), **Joan Henderson** (Uki Refugee Project), **Ann Koenig** (Welcome to Maleny Advocacy Group).



Marie, Joan and Ann each outlined how their groups, and other RAR members, are sponsoring families and individuals in danger in Afghanistan. A small number come to Australia before the fall of Kabul in August 2021. Some have managed to get out of Afghanistan but the majority are still in country. We hold grave fears for their safety, because of their work with Australian military and the UN over two decades.

### **This motion emerged from the workshop:**

This RAR Conference calls on RAR to:

1. Continue its support for the people of Afghanistan.
2. Ask Government to grant humanitarian visas as a matter of urgency to people from Afghanistan.
3. Support members of the Afghan diaspora to provide education and other services to the people of Afghanistan.
4. Explore alternative pathways to humanitarian visas (similar to 449 visas) where government takes responsibility for visa, travel and associated costs to Australia and communities take responsibility for settlement including those issues under the safety net (e.g. housing, employment, registration for tax file number, Centrelink, education, Medicare).

### **Panel: Political Insiders**

**Moderator: Jonathan Strauss** (Cairns for Refugees, RAR National President)

**Susan Templeman**, MP, Member for Macquarie; **Dr Mehreen Faruqi**, Deputy Leader of the Australian Greens, Senator for NSW; **Shane Prince**, Labor for Refugees.

The panel members were asked their views about the best way to engage with politicians.



**Susan Templeman:** It doesn't matter if you come as an individual, or a group. What matters is that you are prepared. Decide on your issues, do your research before you meet with a politician, read their maiden speech, find out what matters to them. If your MP is in a marginal seat, they will focus on very local issues. If the seat is not marginal, they will have more scope for issues that aren't directly related to their electorate.

Have very clear points that you want to get across. If it's a group, have each person prepared with one point to make. Have a specific ask for the politician that they can deliver on, even if it just suggesting who else you should approach about the issue you have raised.





**Dr Mehreen Faruqi:** Mehreen noted she is not a 'political insider' and doesn't want to be one! Her pathway to politics is different to many who have worked in the political system for some years. If we want to change politics in Australia, we need more people who come into it from outside the system.

She emphasised that it's time now to push for more radical change, to use the tools we have available to us. It's fine to use a megaphone! She called for action on justice for First Nations people, saying we cannot move forward against racism without acknowledging the hurt and damage done to First Nations people. Without this, we will continue to have oppressive policies towards vulnerable people such as those seeking asylum here.



**Shane Prince:** The point of advocacy is persuasion. There's no utility in persuading someone who already agrees with you. So your job is to persuade someone who doesn't agree with you. We do that through communication. This has to be done one on one. That can be done in a group or as an individual, but you need to talk to the person you are trying to change. You can only do that with very clear and focussed messaging.

Shane spoke of the inhumanity of Bridging Visa E where asylum seekers have no work or study rights or access to Medicare – the Government could solve this with the stroke of a pen.

There were questions about why Australia doesn't stick to the international conventions and agreements it has signed.

Shane responded by noting there is no such thing as international law, only a range of treaties, conventions and agreements. So unless these are turned into domestic law, there is no obligation to comply with them. He believes that it is more persuasive with politicians to focus on stories about the experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum, rather than arguing about breaches of human rights and international conventions.

### **Multicultural / Interfaith celebration**

**Facilitator:** Leona Kieran (BMRSG)

**Reverend Myung Hwa Park:** Minister of Leura Uniting Church; **Rinchen Dorje:** Tibetan musician and refugee; **Bita Heggie:** Iranian refugee of the Bahai faith; **Heathens choir:** inclusive local choir

The first peoples of this land have a deep and profound spirituality which we all acknowledged at this conference. The first settlers brought their Christianity and now many more have brought their numerous cultures and are free to practice their faith. We invited you to hear a few words from Blue Mountains residents who embody this and listen to some local inspiring music - all embracing our common humanity and connection.





**Myung Hwa Park**, born in Korea to a Buddhist family, married an Irish Catholic missionary and has lived and worked in many counties with different religions and cultures. She introduced us to concepts of identity and diversity through her own experiences.

**Rinchen**, a member of the local Tibetan community, arrived in Australia with his family on a humanitarian visa. He spoke of his escape from Tibet and what his Tibetan Buddhist culture means to him. Rinchen played his classical mandolin and sang *Son of Snowland*, expressing his longing for and the beauty of his homeland.

**Bitā**, a valuable member of the Blue Mountains Interfaith group, spoke of her long journey to Australia from Iran and the freedom to practice the Bahai faith here. Bahai's believe in the oneness of God and religion, the oneness of humanity and freedom from prejudice.



The Heathens choir, led by Christine Wheeler, performs at events and concerts raising funds for local charities, particularly BMRSG. They sang a Sufi version of *Asaalaam Aleikum – Peace be With You*, Anthem by Leonard Cohen, and *You'll Never Walk Alone* where the audience was invited to join in.

### Closing remarks

**Louise Redmond**, on behalf of the Conference Planning Group and Jonathan Strauss, RAR National President made closing remarks, and thanked all participants for what was regarded as a wonderful gathering.

### There were two special awards at this stage:

1. RAR announced that **Muzafar Ali** has accepted our invitation to be a Patron of RAR. We are delighted to have Muzafar in this role. Muzafar is a Hazara photographer and human rights activist from Afghanistan. He is a director of Cisarua Learning, a refugee-led education program in Indonesia and Thailand. Currently based in South Australia, Muzafar is studying at University of South Australia and is an advocate for refugee rights and agency and speaks on behalf of refugees 'stuck in limbo'.
2. **Marie Sellstrom** was given an appreciation award for her "overall awesomeness" in working tirelessly for RAR since its inception as a national organisation in 2017. Marie has provided leadership, strength, determination and persistence in developing RAR as a national organisation and in the past year, in leading RAR's work in sponsoring vulnerable people in Afghanistan to come to safety in Australia. Marie is a member of Mansfield RAR and convenes the Indi group of RAR branches.

Deep thanks were given to the Conference Planning Group: **Louise Redmond, Mary Waterford, Rosemary Bishop, Christine Mifsud** and **Kathie Herbert** who did a brilliant job in pulling the conference detail together.

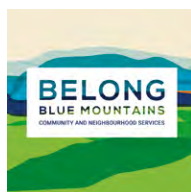
Thanks to the volunteers from **Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group** who stepped up to provide registration, catering support, 'beauty and order' (keeping everything clean and tidy) and the packing up at the end.

None of this would be possible without the presenters and moderators for the session – 55 in total. Their input was warmly received at the conference.

Thanks too to **Carolyn Brooks**, Queanbeyan RAR for her work in design of the Conference program and this report. Thanks to **Trish Doyle**, State Member for the Blue Mountains, for her support with photocopying for the conference.

Thanks to **Danish Ravi** for the photographs taken at the conference.

Finally, we thank our generous sponsors:



After the formal closing of the conference, a group met to prepare a Declaration from the Conference. This work was then left to a working group to finalise.

The following page is the final Conference Declaration for the 2022 RAR Conference.



# The Katoomba Declaration

**Declaration from the Rural Australians for Refugees Conference,  
16-18 September 2022, in Katoomba**

The Rural Australians for Refugees 2022 Conference declares that there is still much work to do to win the compassion and rights to which refugees are entitled.

Conference honours the leadership shown by refugees and people with lived experience seeking asylum.

Conference considers a systemic and permanent change is needed in this country's refugee story, so that anti-racism and human rights are upheld.

Conference confirmed the call in RAR's 2018 Wodonga Declaration for a Charter of Human Rights which would implement international human rights provisions through national legislation.

Conference endorsed the Kaldor Centre Principles for Australian Refugee Policy.

Conference called for these steps being taken without delay:

1. #Action for Afghanistan: issue all the proposed 16,500 humanitarian visas, and a further 20,000 emergency visas, for asylum seekers from Afghanistan;
2. End all forms of inhumane detention, include offshore detention, and indefinite detention, including a resolution to purported statelessness;
3. End the ban on refugees in Indonesia re-settling in Australia;
4. Enable asylum seekers in Australia to live with dignity, including having access to Medicare and rights to study and work; and
5. Support additional community-pathways to settlement, for which the government takes responsibility for visa and travel costs.

Conference resolved RAR will work with supporters of refugees and refugee rights on a campaign for a Royal Commission into offshore and onshore immigration detention.

Conference supported the Ending Indefinite and Arbitrary Immigration Detention Bill 2022

Conference emphasised seeking common aims and the intersection of aims, and work towards a coordinated approach, among refugees and their supporters.



## Conference evaluation

**There are four parts to the evaluation:**

- 1) This Conference Report
- 2) A report on the process of preparing for the Conference, to be passed to the next organising group
- 3) An on-line survey of participants
- 4) Follow-up with the 24 RAR groups who attended, after 6 months, to assess the impact of attendance the conference on their group.

These assist us in applications for sponsorship support for future conferences.

### **Results of the on-line survey:**

77 people completed the survey – around 50% of those who attended.

Overall, there was a very high level of satisfaction with the conference with 79% saying it exceeded their expectations and a further 18% saying it met their expectations. 3% had expectations not met.

With very few exceptions, every session was rated as 'excellent' or 'good'.

When asked what people liked best there were some consistent themes:

- Hearing from people with lived experiences
- The quality of the speakers and workshop presenters
- Being able to move into small group discussions
- Networking, meeting other RAR members
- The positive atmosphere

*"Hard to pick one thing. The speakers, the panel discussions, the sessions, meeting other advocates. It was all really excellent"*

There was a question on the overall program and the response was very positive: 'excellent / good / great / fantastic'.

### **Some reservations:**

- No international speakers giving an international perspective
- Hard to choose between workshops – perhaps repeat some?
- Was it too full?
- The interfaith service was not well-placed in the program.





*"Excellent. It had a lovely balance of informing, networking, personal growth and how to move forward. Very good."*

*"It was an excellent program, well thought out with good speakers and small group sessions. There was a good amount of time for networking and the dinner on Saturday night was excellent for this purpose also"*

We asked what could be done differently for the next conference and these comments will be useful for the next planning group.

Key takeaways from the conference were many and varied – but themes were:

- Ideas for action, new insights
- Awareness of the variety of refugee groups advocating for the same goals
- New connections
- Change policy to get people out of Indonesia
- Encouragement – don't give up!

*"The joy of singing and dancing Saturday afternoon. That was brilliant"*

Feedback on the work of volunteers was very positive, more mixed on the venue and the catering, especially the space in the hall and opportunities for tables for displays. There certainly were limitations there which need to be considered in the next venue.

When asked if they were likely to attend the next conference, 53% were very likely, 36% were likely, depending on location and the balance not sure.

Full details of the Conference Evaluation are available on request and will be passed to the next Conference planning group.



### **Some email feedback from presenters and moderators:**

*Thank you so much for hosting the RAR Conference and for the invitation.*

*I absolutely loved it. It was so immersive. It was so great to connect with everyone.*

*Congratulations to you on all that you have done for RAR and for the refugee community.*

*Looking forward to working with RAR in the future.*

*Thank you very much for the opportunity of bringing our group to Katoomba.*

*We all enjoyed the experience and our members very much enjoyed hearing from the politicians and meeting so many supporters. They loved their accommodation and this offered us a unique opportunity to speak more intimately as a group.*

*Congratulations particularly for the work you are doing with people fleeing Afghanistan.*

*Thank you for such an amazing conference.*

*It was my first time at this kind of thing. I made lots of really good connections, that we can use to improve our service to Afghans.*

*Thank you so very much for a wonderful conference. All the sessions were just superb as well as the small group sessions. The informal networking was just terrific.*

*When you are trying to help people in detention or community detention and nothing happens, you don't give up but it's hard going personally knowing how hard it is for these people, so the conference was very motivating and in a strange sort of way, uplifting if you know what I mean.*

*So **THANK YOU** so very much.*

**Louise Redmond**, on behalf of the 2022 RAR Conference Planning Group



*Christine Mifsud, Rosemary Bishop, Louise Redmond, Mary Waterford, Kathie Herbert*