

PARLIAMENTARY
LIBRARY

INFORMATION ANALYSIS ADVICE

QUICK GUIDE

RESEARCH PAPER SERIES, 2015–16

12 OCTOBER 2015

Australia's offshore processing of asylum seekers in Nauru and PNG: a quick guide to the statistics

Elibritt Karlsen

Law and Bills Digest Section

On 8 February 2008, some seven months after Kevin Rudd was sworn in as Prime Minister, the former Labor Government [announced](#) that the last remaining asylum seekers on Nauru had been transferred to Australia ending the Howard Government's controversial so-called 'Pacific Solution', which had begun in 2001 in response to rising numbers of asylum seekers arriving by boat.

However, by July 2010, then Prime Minister, Julia Gillard [announced](#) in her first major policy speech that the Government had begun having discussions with regional neighbours about the possibility of establishing a regional processing centre for the purpose of receiving and processing irregular entrants to the region. Whilst only 25 asylum seekers had travelled by boat to Australia to seek asylum in the 2007–08 financial year by the time Gillard made her announcement in July 2010, more than 5,000 people had [travelled](#) by boat to Australia to seek asylum.

Whilst Gillard [acknowledged](#) that the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat to Australia was 'very, very minor' and that at the current rate of arrival it would take about 20 years to fill the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) with asylum seekers, she identified a number of reasons why the processing of asylum seekers in other countries was again considered necessary:

- to ensure that people smugglers have no product to sell
- to remove the financial incentive for the people smugglers to send boats to Australia
- to ensure that those arriving by boat do not get an unfair advantage over others
- to secure Australia's borders and create a fair and orderly migration
- to prevent people embarking on a voyage across dangerous seas with the ever present risk of death
- to ensure that everyone is subject to a consistent, fair assessment process
- to improve the protection outcomes for refugees by establishing a framework for orderly migration within the region
- to prevent the piling up of unauthorised arrivals in detention in Australia
- in response to increased numbers of unauthorised people movements in the region and around the world and
- in acknowledgment that irregular migration is a global challenge that can only be tackled by nations working together.

Though it took another two years for her Government to secure the statutory and practical arrangements for asylum seekers to be sent to third countries, people began to be transferred to [Nauru](#) on 14 September 2012 and to [PNG](#) on 21 November 2012.

It was not until two months before the 2013 federal election and in the wake of growing support for the Opposition's tougher border protection policies, newly appointed Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd made a surprise [announcement](#) on 19 July 2013 that Australia had entered into a Regional Resettlement Arrangement with Papua New Guinea (PNG). Under the Arrangement, *all* (not just some) asylum seekers that arrive by boat would be transferred to PNG for processing and resettlement in PNG and in any other participating regional State. He subsequently [made](#) a similar Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Nauru.

Notwithstanding Prime Minister Rudd's announcement, the Australian Labor Party was unable to secure another term in office and on 7 September 2013, the Liberal and National parties were voted in to form a Coalition Government, led by Tony Abbott. The current Coalition Government continues to [implement](#) the former Government's offshore processing arrangements. However, the offshore processing of asylum seekers in Nauru and PNG has in due course proved contentious for a number of reasons, including:

- the financial cost (see statistics below)
- ongoing concerns about the safety and security of asylum seekers in the Processing Centres and in the broader community
- ongoing concerns about the sustainability of involuntary settlement (currently in Nauru, PNG and Cambodia)
- prolonged duration of detention and harsh living conditions are seen by some as punitive which is said to be causing or exacerbating psychological harm and
- inadequate independent oversight of the Processing Centres to ensure relevant international standards are being met (see Annex for further information about these concerns).

This publication contains statistics provided by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection from commencement in 2012 (where available) until September 2015.

The statistics contained in this quick guide include:

- [Total number of asylum seekers at Offshore Processing Centres \(2012—2015\)](#)
- [Number of asylum seekers at each Processing Centre \(2012—2015\)](#)
- [Nationalities of asylum seekers at each Processing Centre \(2014—15\)](#)
- [Number of children accommodated at the Processing Centres \(2012—2015\)](#)
- [Number of arrivals and departures from Processing Centres and their destinations \(2014—2015\)](#)
- [Refugee determinations per month at each Processing Centre \(July 2014 to September 2015\)](#)
- [Percentage of asylum seekers found to be refugees in Nauru](#)
- [Percentage of asylum seekers found to be refugees in PNG](#)
- [Cost of operating the offshore processing centres in PNG and Nauru](#)

Annex: [List of reports and inquiries into Australia's Offshore Processing in Nauru and PNG](#)

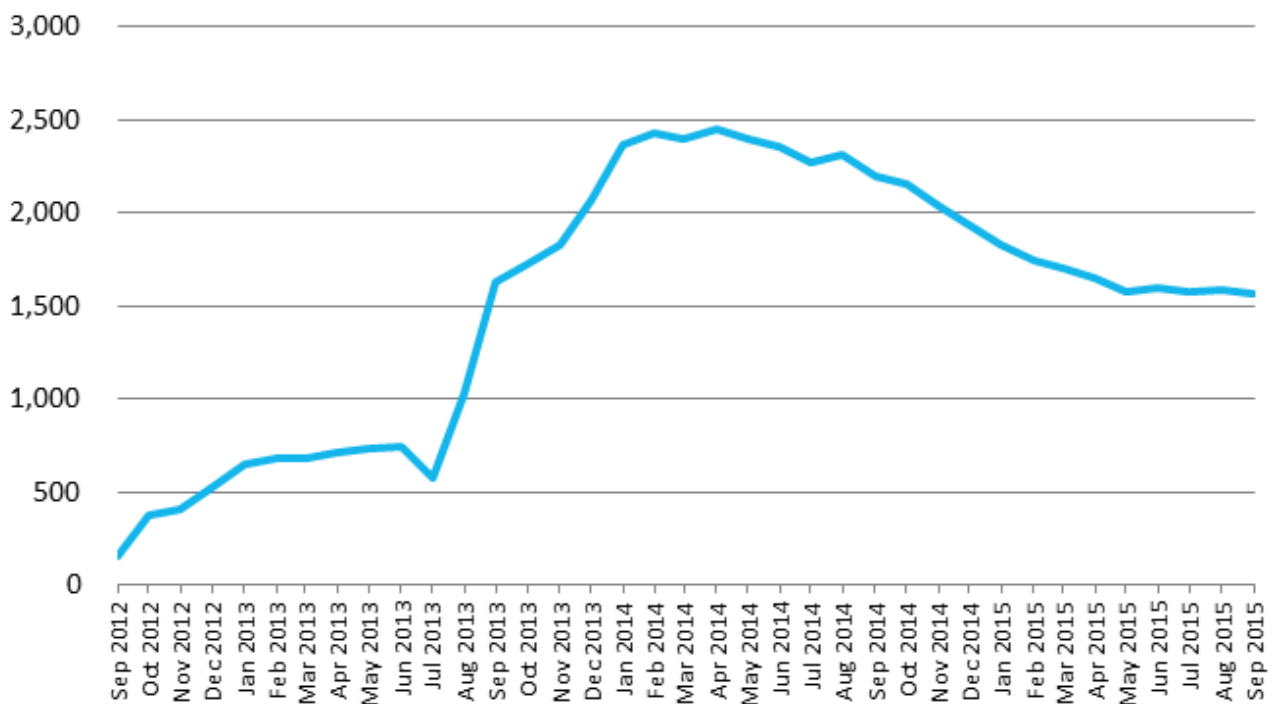
Total number of asylum seekers at Offshore Processing Centres

The first asylum seekers arrived in Nauru on 15 September 2012 and in Papua New Guinea on 21 November 2012. The following graph illustrates the combined total number of asylum seekers at the processing centres in PNG and Nauru from commencement to September 2015.

It shows that the numbers of people being accommodated at the centres rose sharply from July 2013 (when the previous Government announced that *all* maritime asylum seekers would be transferred to an offshore processing centre) to April 2014. The numbers of people at the centres have been steadily declining for the last year, with numbers plateauing over the last five months.

Female asylum seekers were only transferred to PNG during the period 21 November 2012 to 4 July 2013. Since then, all female maritime asylum seekers (and children) have been transferred to Nauru for processing.

Total number of asylum seekers at Offshore Processing Centres (2012—2015)



Source: Data from October 2013 to September 2015 extracted from Department of Immigration and Border Protection [Operation Sovereign Borders updates](#); Data from September 2012 to September 2013 provided by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection on 17 September 2015.

Number of asylum seekers at each Processing Centre

The following table provides a snap-shot of the number of asylum seekers that have been accommodated at each of the processing centres at the end of each month from commencement to September 2015. The highest numbers of people accommodated at the PNG processing centre peaked at 1,273 (in April 2014), while the highest numbers of people accommodated at the Nauru processing centre peaked four months later at 1,233 (in August 2014). The highest numbers of people accommodated offshore was 2,450 (in April 2014). As at 30 September 2015, there are 1,565 people accommodated at the centres, which indicates that close to a thousand people have left since the peak in April 2014. Of these, it would appear that about 600 people have left the processing centres but remain within PNG and Nauru while approximately 300 people have returned to their countries of origin.

Number of asylum seekers at each Processing Centre (2012—2015)

Month	Numbers at PNG Processing Centre	Numbers at Nauru Processing Centre	TOTAL at Processing Centres
27 Sept 2012	0	150	150
Oct 2012	0	377	377
29 Nov 2012	19	386	405
30 Dec 2012	155	366	521
Jan 2013	235	415	650
Feb 2013	274	412	686
Mar 2013	254	424	678
Apr 2013	294	420	714
May 2013	302	428	730
Jun 2013	253	490	743
Jul 2013	27	544	571
Aug 2013	538	486	1024
Sep 2013	858	769	1627
Oct 2013	1137	591	1728
Nov 2013	1139	686	1825
Dec 2013	1229	838	2067
Jan 2014	1353	1012	2365
Feb 2014	1325	1107	2432
Mar 2014	1225	1170	2395
Apr 2014	1273	1177	2450
May 2014	1225	1170	2395
Jun 2014	1189	1169	2358
Jul 2014	1127	1146	2273
Aug 2014	1084	1233	2317
Sep 2014	1060	1140	2200
Oct 2014	1056	1095	2151
Nov 2014	1044	996	2040
Dec 2014	1035	895	1930
Jan 2015	1023	802	1825
Feb 2015	1004	742	1746
Mar 2015	989	718	1707
Apr 2015	971	677	1648
May 2015	943	634	1577
Jun 2015	945	655	1600
Jul 2015	942	637	1579
Aug 2015	936	653	1589
Sep 2015	934	631	1565

Source: Department of Immigration and Border Protection [Operation Sovereign Borders updates](#); Additional data provided by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection on 17 September 2015. Figures are as at the end of the month unless otherwise stated.

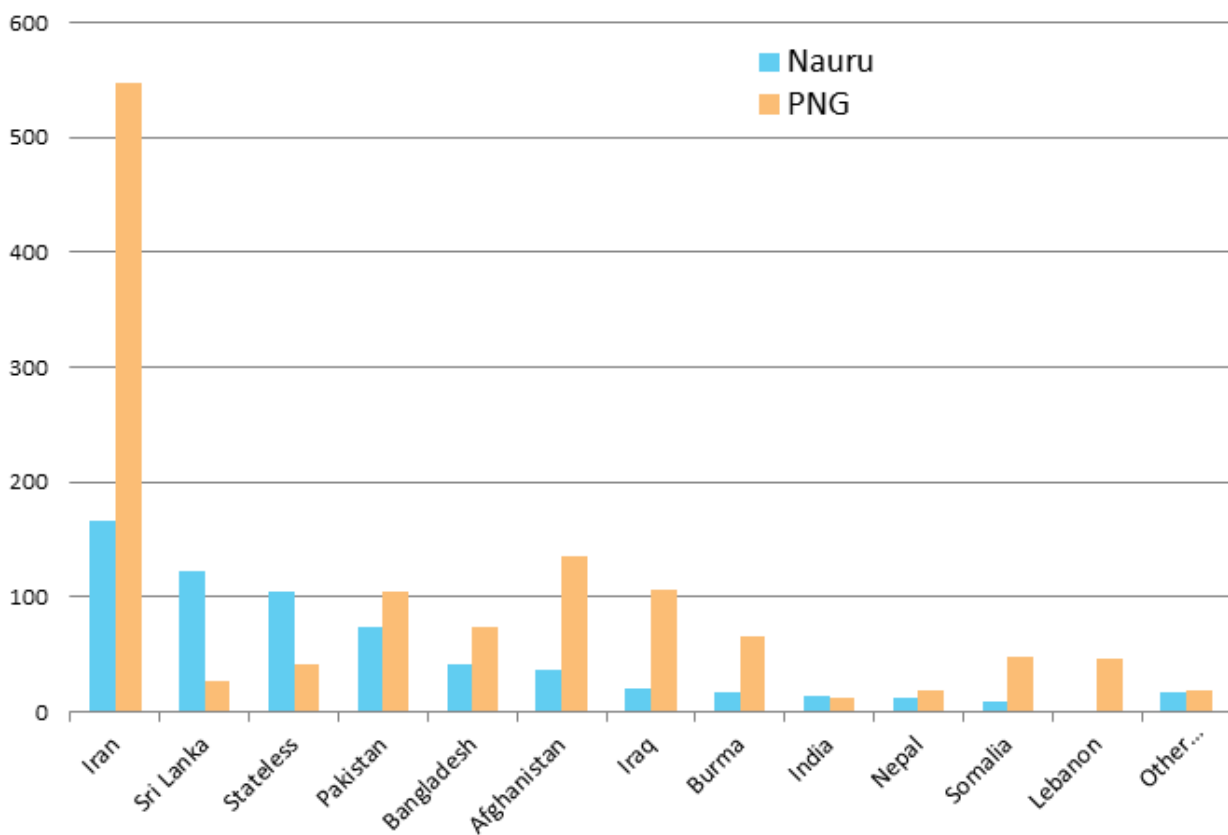
Nationalities of asylum seekers at each Processing Centre

The following graph provides a snap-shot of the composition of both Processing Centres at two different points in time. The statistics for PNG were as at mid-February 2014 (noting there has only been one asylum seeker transferred to the Processing Centre since then). The statistics for Nauru were as at 13 July 2015.

This graph illustrates that the vast majority of asylum seekers at both Processing Centres come from Iran. The PNG Processing Centre (which only accommodates men) is also largely composed of asylum seekers from the Middle East including countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan.

In contrast, the Nauru Processing Centre (which accommodates men, women and children) is also largely composed of asylum seekers from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and with people who have no country of nationality (stateless).

Nationalities of asylum seekers at each Processing Centre (2014–2015)



Source: Statistics provided by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection to the [Senate inquiry into the incident at the Manus Island Detention Centre during 16 February to 18 February 2014](#); and the [Senate inquiry into the recent allegations relating to conditions and circumstances at the Regional Processing Centre in Nauru](#).

Number of children accommodated at the Processing Centres

The following table illustrates the number of children accommodated at the processing centres each month from commencement in 2012 to August 2015.

The highest number of children accommodated at the processing centres was 222 in August 2014. Since that date, the lowest number was in May this year (81) though numbers have been slightly increasing since then to 93 as at August 2015.

Number of children at Australia's Processing Centres (2012—2015)

Month	Number of children
Sep 2012	0
Oct 2012	0
29 Nov 2012	4
30 Dec 2012	35
Jan 2013	35
Feb 2013	34
Mar 2013	29
Apr 2013	29
May 2013	26
Jun 2013	12
Jul 2013	0
Aug 2013	30
Sep 2013	87
Oct 2013	108
Nov 2013	109
Dec 2013	116
Jan 2014	132
Feb 2014	177
Mar 2014	208
Apr 2014	190
May 2014	208
Jun 2014	193
Jul 2014	183
Aug 2014	222
Sep 2014	186
Oct 2014	167
Nov 2014	155
Dec 2014	135
Jan 2015	119
Feb 2015	107
Mar 2015	103
Apr 2015	95
May 2015	81
Jun 2015	88
Jul 2015	87
Aug 2015	93

Source: Data from October 2013 to August 2015 extracted from Department of Immigration and Border Protection [Immigration Detention Statistics](#); Data from September 2012 to September 2013 provided by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection on 17 September 2015.

Note: Figures are as at the end of the month unless otherwise stated.

Number of arrivals and departures from Processing Centres and their destinations

The transfer of asylum seekers to Nauru began on 14 September 2012 and to PNG on 21 November 2012. The following table indicates the number of arrivals and departures including countries of destination from the Processing Centres since January 2014.

With respect to **arrivals**, the table indicates that only one asylum seeker has been transferred to a Processing Centre since October last year and none have been transferred in 2015. The Processing Centre in PNG has had only one new asylum seeker transferred there since February 2014.

With respect to **departures**, the table indicates that only 65 asylum seekers have returned to their home countries so far this year (down from 303 in 2014) and the majority are returning to countries in the Middle East such as Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. Four refugees agreed to depart Nauru in June 2015 to be settled in Cambodia. There have also been very few involuntary returns of persons found not to be refugees. The countries of destination to which such people are being forcibly returned are not publicly known at present.

Number of arrivals and departures from Processing Centres and their destinations (2014–2015)

Month	Number of arrivals	Number of departures	Country of destination following departure from a processing centre
Jan 2014	132 (PNG) 188 (Nauru)	8	Iran (3) Bangladesh (2) Pakistan (2) Sri Lanka (1)
Feb 2014	133 (Nauru)	30	unknown (1) Iran (15) Iraq (11) India (3)
Mar 2014	52 (Nauru)	14	Lebanon (9) Iran (4) Sudan (1)
Apr 2014	41 (Nauru)	29	Iran (26) India (3)
May 2014	47 (Nauru)	37	Iran (32) Iraq (3) Lebanon (2)
Jun 2014	60 (Nauru)	19	Iran (17) Bangladesh (1) Sudan (1)
Jul 2014	41 (Nauru)	62	Iran (55) Lebanon (3) Bangladesh (1) Iraq (1) Pakistan (1) Sri Lanka (1)
Aug 2014	189 (Nauru)	48	Iran (36) Iraq (3) Egypt (2) Somalia (2) Albania (1) Lebanon (1) Sudan (1) Syria (1) India (1)
Sep 2014	5 (Nauru)	26	Iran (11) Iraq (7) Lebanon (6) Jordan (1) Pakistan (1)
Oct 2014	0	7	Iraq (3) Iran (2) India (2)
Nov 2014	0	14	Iraq (10) Iran (3) Sri Lanka (1)
Dec 2014	1 (PNG)	9	Iran (6) Afghanistan (1) Lebanon (1) Sri Lanka (1)
2014 TOTAL	889	303	Iran (210) Iraq (38) Lebanon (22) India (9) Bangladesh (4) Pakistan (4) Sri Lanka (4) Sudan (3) Somalia (2) Egypt (2) Albania (1) Afghanistan (1) Syria (1) Jordan (1) unknown(1)
Jan 2015	0	1	Iran (1)
Feb 2015	0	15	Iran (6) Iraq (8) Lebanon (1)
Mar 2015	0	9	Iran (8) Afghanistan (1)
Apr 2015	0	12	Iran (9) Sri Lanka (1) Afghanistan (1) Lebanon (1)
May 2015	0	8	Iran (5) Somalia (1) Lebanon (1) Iraq (1)
Jun 2015	0	12	Cambodia (4) Iran (5) Lebanon (1) Iraq (1) Sri Lanka (1)
Jul 2015	0	0	0
Aug 2015	0	4 voluntary 2 involuntary	unknown (6)
Sep 2015	0	2 voluntary	Unknown (2)
2015 TOTAL	0	65	Iran (34) Iraq (10) unknown (8) Lebanon (4) Afghanistan (2) Somalia (1) Sri Lanka (2) Cambodia (4)

Source: Department of Immigration and Border Protection: [Operation Sovereign Borders Updates](#).

Note: These statistics also indicate that 137 people returned to their countries of origin in 2013 (including 84 to Iran and Iraq) though publicly available statistics for 2013 are incomplete and thus have been omitted from the above table.

Refugee determinations at each Processing Centre

In the context of Australia’s offshore processing, determination of refugee status is the process by which the Nauruan and PNG governments determine whether a person seeking asylum is considered to be a refugee under their respective national laws.

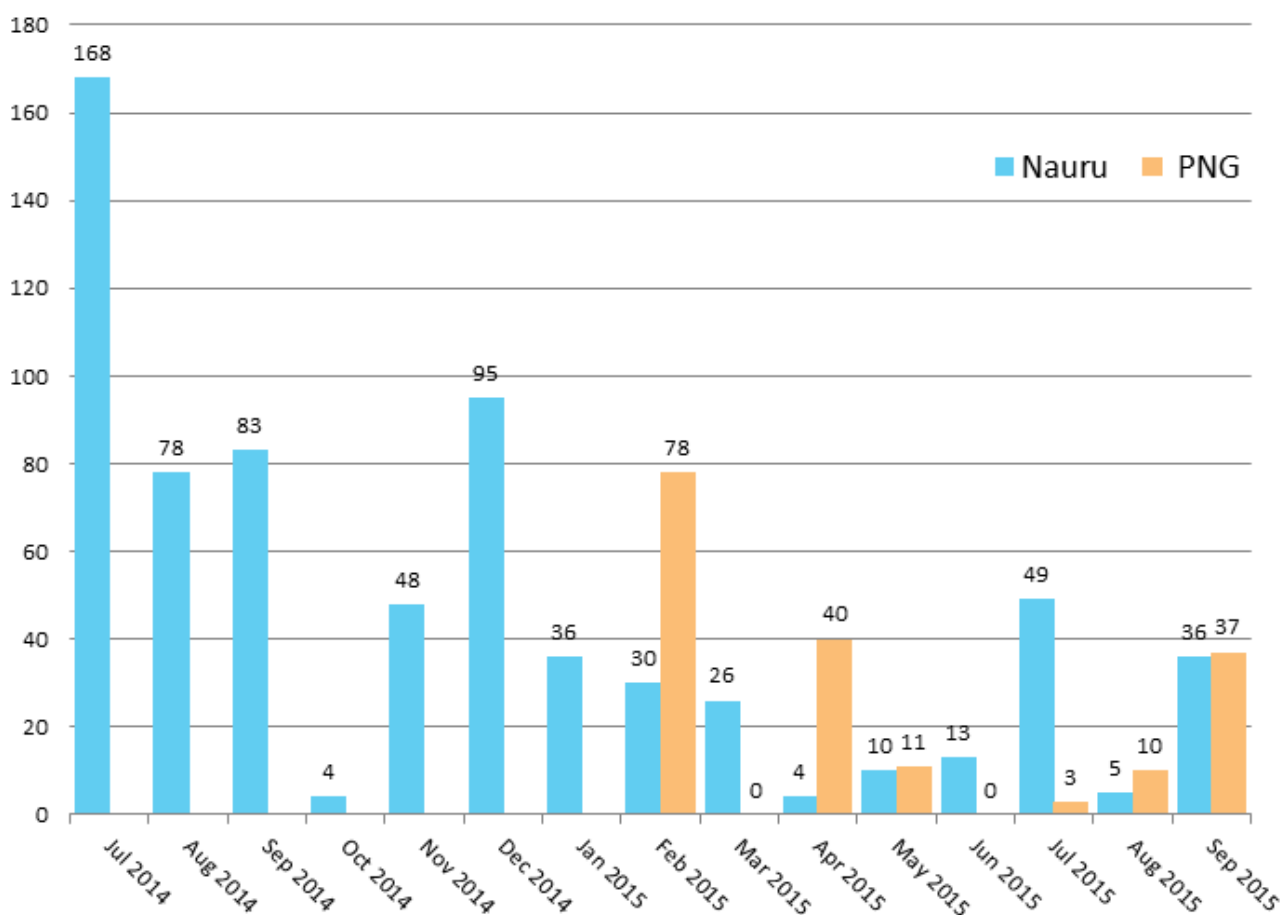
It is not currently publicly known how many asylum seekers have lodged applications to have their asylum claims assessed by the PNG and Nauruan Governments.

The Government of Nauru [commenced](#) its refugee status determinations on 19 March 2013. More than a year later, it began handing down its first tranche of refugee status determinations (though the precise number of persons assessed and outcomes was not made publicly available until July 2014).

The Government of PNG [commenced](#) its refugee determination process not long after, on 8 July 2013. Though it began handing down its initial [assessments](#) a year later, it did not start handing down final determinations until almost two years after it commenced assessing claims.

The following table contains a monthly break-down of the number of final (primary stage) determinations made at the processing centres from commencement to 30 September 2015:

Refugee status determinations per month (July 2014 – Sept 2015)



Source: Department of Immigration and Border Protection: [Operation Sovereign Borders Updates](#).

Note: Though as at [30 September 2015](#) some 714 initial assessments had been completed at the PNG processing centre (with 415 persons found to be refugees), this preliminary assessment remains subject to a final refugee determination.

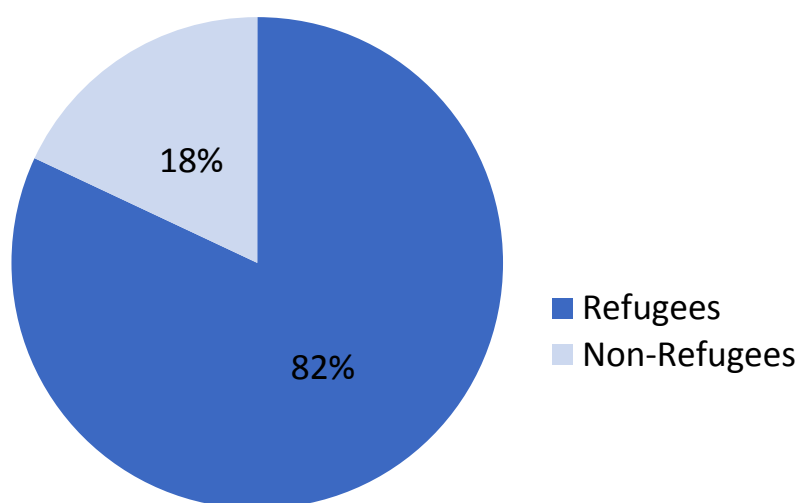
Percentage of asylum seekers found to be refugees in Nauru

As at 30 September 2015, of the 685 people who have had their claims for asylum assessed by the Nauruan Government, **563** had been found to be refugees.

Refugees residing in the Nauruan community are provided with a [settlement package](#) (funded by the Australian Government) which includes:

- language and vocational training
- connection with local employment and orientation
- initial accommodation
- a living allowance
- Primary health care (provided through a Settlement Health Clinic at the local Hospital) and
- Specialist care, such as torture and trauma counselling (delivered through providers at the processing centre).

Percentage of asylum seekers found to be refugees in Nauru (as at 30 September 2015)



Source: Department of Immigration and Border Protection: [Operation Sovereign Borders Updates](#).

Percentage of asylum seekers found to be refugees in PNG

As at 30 September 2015, of the 179 people who have had their claims for asylum assessed by the PNG Government, **169** had been found to be refugees at the final assessment stage (excluding merits and judicial review).

Asylum seekers determined to be refugees by the PNG Minister for Foreign Affairs and Immigration will be [invited](#) to apply for a refugee visa. It is not entirely clear at present whether the Minister will ultimately have discretion to refuse a refugee visa to a person who has been determined to be a refugee and what would happen to the person in such circumstances.

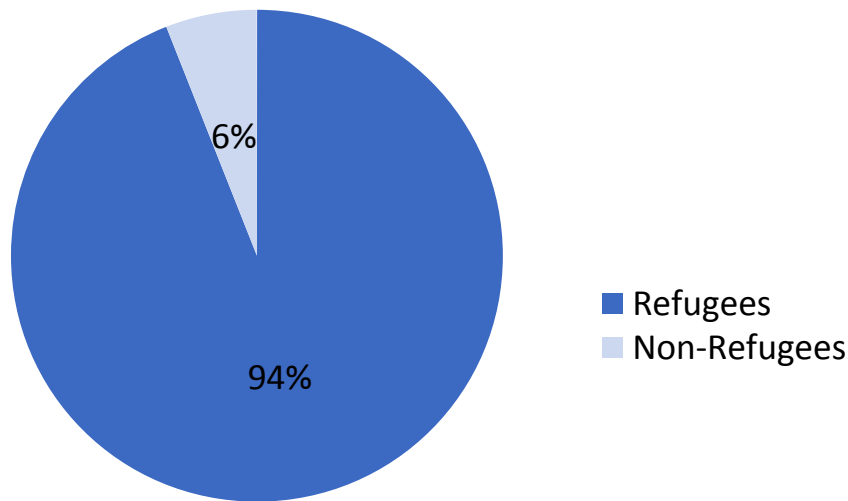
Persons found to be refugees can transfer from the Processing Centre to the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre (Transit Centre) where they have freedom of movement on Manus Island. However, as at [30 September 2015](#), of the 169 people found to be refugees (upon final assessment) only 47 (or 28 per cent) were residing at the Transit Centre. The vast majority (70 per cent) were still residing at the Processing Centre, due to capacity constraints.

Refugees receive the following [services](#) at the Transit Centre (funded by the Australian Government) including:

- basic welfare assistance including a living allowance
- cultural orientation and language training (English and Tok Pisin)
- access to a health clinic and local health services
- torture and trauma counselling and
- case management support.

Longer-term arrangements for the permanent settlement of refugees in the PNG community are expected to be [implemented](#) by the Government of PNG following Cabinet approval of its refugee settlement policy, which was yet to be finalised as at mid-2015.

Percentage of asylum seekers found to be refugees in PNG (as at 30 September 2015)



Source: Department of Immigration and Border Protection: [Operation Sovereign Borders Updates](#).

Cost of operating the offshore processing centres in Nauru and PNG

The combined budget expenditure in 2014–15 for operations in Nauru and PNG (excluding aid contributions) is approximately \$1.2 billion dollars.

The 2014-15 [budget expenditure](#) for PNG is \$333.861 million in administered expenses, \$271.8 million in administered capital, and departmental costs of \$23.8 million for 2014-15. This amounts to a total of approximately \$630 million.

The administered expenses mentioned above can be further broken down as follows: charters \$20.7 million; escorts \$7.8 million; reviews \$387,000; garrison and welfare support \$386,000; health care \$177.82 million; advisory committee functions \$3.131 million; returns \$2.2 million; removals \$992,000; visas \$1.6 million; leases \$8.3 million; payments to the government of PNG \$7.9 million; ongoing community support \$12.6 million; and post-assessment costs \$41.3 million.

With respect to **Nauru**, the total administered allocation for 2014-15 is \$434 million. The administered capital is \$113.4 million and the departmental costs are \$35 million. This amounts to a total of approximately \$582 million.

The administered expenses mentioned above can be further broken down as follows: charters \$24.7 million; escorts \$8.6 million; independent reviews \$479,000; garrison and welfare \$316.9 million; healthcare services \$25.4 million; family and unaccompanied minors welfare support \$26.15 million; property \$150,000; advisory committee costs \$205,000; returns \$2.8 million; removals \$810,000; visas \$15.5 million; leases \$1.8 million; other payments to the government of Nauru \$600,000; and other costs \$9.9 million.

Annex – List of reports and inquiries into Offshore Processing in Nauru and PNG

Nauru

- Amnesty International, [Nauru Offshore Processing Facility Review 2012](#) (released November 2012)
- [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Mission to the Republic of Nauru: 3 to 5 December 2012](#) (released 14 December 2012)
- Keith Hamburger AM, [Nauru Review 2013: Executive Report of the Review into the 19 July 2013 Incident at the Nauru Regional Processing Centre](#) (released 8 November 2014)
- [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees monitoring visit to the Republic of Nauru 7 to 9 October 2013](#) (released 27 November 2013)
- Australian Human Rights Commission, [The Forgotten Children](#) (dated November 2014)
- Phillip Moss, [Review into recent allegations relating to conditions and circumstances at the Regional Processing Centre in Nauru](#) (released March 2015)
- [Senate Select Committee on the Recent Allegations relating to Conditions and Circumstances at the Regional Processing Centre in Nauru](#) (released 31 August 2015)

PNG

- [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Monitoring Visit to Manus Island, Papua New Guinea: 15 to 17 January 2013](#) (released 4 February 2013)
- [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Monitoring Visit to Manus Island, Papua New Guinea: 11 to 13 June 2013](#) (released 12 July 2013)
- Robert Cornall AO, [Review into Allegations of Sexual and Other Serious Assaults at the Manus Regional Processing Centre](#) (released September 2014)
- [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees monitoring visit to Manus Island, Papua New Guinea 23 to 25 October 2013](#) (released 27 November 2013)
- Amnesty International, [This is Breaking People: Human Rights Violations at Australia’s Asylum Seeker Processing Centre on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea](#) (released December 2013)
- Robert Cornall AO, [Review into the events of 16–18 February 2014 at the Manus Regional Processing Centre](#) (dated May 2014)
- Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee [Inquiry into the incident at the Manus Island Detention Centre from 16 February to 18 February 2014](#) (released 11 December 2014)
- Human Rights Watch and Human Rights Law Centre, [The Pacific Non-Solution: Two years on, refugees face uncertainty, restrictions on rights](#) (dated July 2015)

© Commonwealth of Australia



Creative Commons

With the exception of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, and to the extent that copyright subsists in a third party, this publication, its logo and front page design are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Australia](#) licence.