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Australian Religious Seek Better Life for Trafficked People

A group of women religious from around Australia will make their fifth annual pilgrimage to Canberra next week in a bid to influence policies affecting people trafficked into Australia.

The 12 women, Catholic sisters and their colleagues, are all members of Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH). They will spend a week (August 21-26) in Canberra speaking to Members of Parliament, Embassy staff, public servants, union bosses and Church leaders in their continuing battle on behalf of trafficked people.

Sr Louise Cleary, national chair of ACRATH and the newly elected head of the Brigidine congregation worldwide, said the group was pleased that Federal Ministers Brendan O'Connor (Home Affairs), Kate Ellis (Women) and Tony Burke (Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities) had agreed to speak to ACRATH members. She said it showed the Government's willingness to find out, from groups working on the ground, what issues faced trafficked people.

Sr Louise said ACRATH members had met many Ministers and policy makers over their five years of advocacy. Sr Louise also said that working as part of a network of anti-trafficking NGOs has resulted in a focus on human trafficking being maintained on the political agenda.

"ACRATH is concerned for the well-being of people trafficked into Australia, whether for sex work, for work in other industries, or for organ harvesting," Sr Louise said.

She said the meetings with policy makers would make clear some of the complexities of assisting trafficked people so they are able to begin their process of healing.

Sr Louise said ACRATH acknowledged the current work of the Australian government concerning human trafficking, particularly the encouragement for civil society and government to work together. But she said action was needed on several ongoing issues, including:

- The provision of affordable housing for trafficked women while waiting to give evidence against their traffickers. (ACRATH knows of women returning to sex work in order to pay their rent while they await the trial of their traffickers).
- Access to financial compensation for someone who has been trafficked to assist them to begin a new life.

- Promoting trafficking prevention strategies through Australia's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), and in particular ensuring our ODA reaches 0.5% of our national income by 2015, and 0.7% by 2020 and greater support for girls' education.

"We know our annual trip to Canberra has had an impact in several areas. One big issue for us has been visas and we joined with other NGOs to advocate for better visas for people trafficked into Australia. Our network was delighted when a new visa framework was announced."

"In recent years ACRATH, in collaboration with other NGOs, spoke with government about the inadequate services for people found to be trafficked. The Government listened, and again our network was pleased when the Red Cross was awarded the tender to deliver the government support program for people trafficked into Australia," Sr Louise said.

Sr Louise said many religious congregations around the globe were working with trafficked people, and those in Australia felt compelled to advocate at the highest level on the human rights of trafficked people.

- If you would like to interview Christine Carolan, national projects coordinator with ACRATH, phone 0427 302 755.
- If you would like to interview Sr Louise Cleary, national chair of ACRATH, please call her on 0408 225 088