**Amnesty slams Australia over refugees**

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**AAP**

Australia is facing fresh calls to end its freeze on processing refugee claims by Afghan and Sri Lankan asylum seekers and stop discriminating against Aborigines.

Amnesty International issued the pleas in its latest annual report on human rights abuses in 159 countries, released in London on Thursday.

The report highlighted the treatment of Afghan and Sri Lankan asylum seekers, the racial discrimination of Aborigines in the Northern Territory and the need for a human rights act as key issues for Australia.

With thousands of refugees fleeing war-torn Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, South Pacific nations such as Australia had a responsibility to help, it said.

The federal government earlier this year imposed a three-month freeze on processing asylum claims from Sri Lankans and Afghans.

Cabinet is due to make a decision in June about when it will start processing them again.

Amnesty Australia national director Claire Mallinson accused the federal government of placing political self interest above the need to uphold its international human rights responsibilities to asylum seekers.

"The Australian government has said it will review the situation, but people are still in limbo," she told AAP.

"It is dodging its responsibilities.

"We would like the government to reverse its decision (on the freeze). They are making the situation worse for people who have the legal right to seek asylum."

Australia's controversial intervention policy for Aborigines in the Northern Territory also came in for criticism by Amnesty.

The report said 45,000 Aborigines were still subjected to racially discriminatory measures as a result of the policy introduced in 2007 by the former Howard government.

The policy, which has been slammed by the United Nations, allowed the Racial Discrimination Act to be suspended in the NT so alcohol bans and restrictions on how Aborigines spend their welfare cheques could be rolled out.

The Rudd government has announced plans to reinstate the act, but only if it can extend welfare quarantining to non-indigenous people across Australia.

Amnesty urged the federal government to reinstate the act to put an end to the ongoing racial discrimination against Aborigines in the NT.

"More than 40,000 people currently have no rights in relation to being discriminated against racially," Ms Mallinson said.

"That's outrageous. If they decided a suburb of Sydney was to be treated in that way, people would be up in arms."

Amnesty also expressed hope that Australia would introduce a human rights act after widespread public support for one was revealed during a major consultative process in 2009.

Despite its own consultative committee recommending such an act be introduced, the government instead plans to subject new bills passing through parliament to greater scrutiny to ensure they meet international human rights obligations.

It plans to review the framework in 2014.

"It's very disappointing that despite the public support the government has decided it will have a framework and review whether it will have an act later," Ms Mallinson said.

"It's an example of a lack of courage and lack of leadership because again it's an opportunity to ensure that people who are most at risk don't have their voices ignored."