**NGOs slam govt delay of asylum claims**

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**AAP**

More than 40 non-government organisations from 16 countries have condemned the Rudd government's decision to suspend the processing of asylum claims by Sri Lankan and Afghan nationals.

In a joint statement released on Wednesday, 45 NGOs said the government had sent a clear message that it did not respect the binding nature of its international human rights obligations.

The government announced in April it was suspending the processing of refugee claims made by asylum seekers coming from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka for six months and three months respectively.

Improved conditions in both countries had warranted the suspension, the government said when the announcement was made.

But refugee advocates say the suspension was predicated on a profound misreading of the current situation in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

"It plainly violates Australia's human rights obligations, and may inflict irreparable psychological harm upon Afghan and Sri Lankan asylum seekers - many of whom are likely to be refugees and survivors of torture and trauma," the joint statement said.

"With this message coming from one of the few countries in our region that has ratified the Refugee Convention, we question the basis on which the Australia government expects its regional counterparts to take upon themselves increased obligations towards refugees."

The statement was co-ordinated by Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network.

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) said the statement was an important international critique of the government's decision.

"The Australian government decision has damaged efforts to improve regional co-operation on refugee protection and undermined the efforts of civil society organisations which are working actively with governments to improve conditions for people fleeing persecution," RCOA chief Paul Power said.

Mr Power also criticised the decision to reopen the Curtin airbase in Western Australia to accommodate asylum seekers subject to the suspension, saying it would further exacerbate psychological harm to vulnerable individuals.

"The extreme isolation of Curtin will make the delivery of adequate psychosocial support services difficult, if not impossible, also deterring any regular social and pastoral visits which are so important for emotional support."

The list of signatories to the statement includes Amnesty International, University of NSW, Refugee Council of Australia, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, as well as regional and international NGOs and refugee advocacy groups.