Ethnic Affairs Minister Kon Vatskalis has described the decision by Federal Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock to grant permanent visas to East Timorese residents as welcome but long overdue.

Mr Vatskalis today called on Mr Ruddock to move quickly on the approval process as some of the residents were living on no money and only getting by with the help of friends and supporters.

"I welcome Mr Ruddock’s move but I feel that people have been put through hell and back before this decision was eventually made," he said.

"The federal Minister must now act quickly to have these visas put into place.

"50 East Timorese living in the Territory have received letters indicating that they need to undertake health and character tests. These tests are expensive and residents living on no money at all will struggle."

Mr Vatskalis said a lot people had worked hard to get to this point, including the offices of Territory Ministers and local Labor members, something recognised by Mr Ruddock himself yesterday in Federal Parliament.

"This positive outcome was in the end the result of pressure and persistence from many Territorians from all walks of life with the common desire for justice to be done for these people who have become part of our community," he said.

"I am also extremely grateful for the amazing job done by agencies such as the St Vincent De Paul, Red Cross and Legal Aid, as well as my own office of Ethnic Affairs."

Mr Vatskalis said that not all Darwin-based applicants had received letters from Mr Ruddock and he remained concerned about what will happen to the remaining dozen or so East Timorese whose future was still unclear.

© Copyright 2003 Northern Territory Government of Australia | Ph: +61 8 8999 5511