

Director's Report

Last week I met John, a Sudanese-Australian who came here as a refugee about five years ago. He recounted at a JRS function how he was abducted and forced to become a child soldier at the age of fourteen. He escaped and fled to Kenya, where he was given refugee status and, after spending a few years in a refugee camp, was resettled in Australia. Without a hint of resentment, John spoke of some of the challenges he met when he first arrived, of understanding neither the language nor the culture, of feeling terribly lonely and isolated. Placed in Year 11, he was grateful to be given the opportunity to continue his studies, which had stopped ten years earlier. 'I had a fourth grade education and was expected to perform well in my studies in English, my fourth language. It was incredibly hard, but I managed to pass all my subjects and to graduate.'

John dreams of becoming a doctor and returning to his home country to open up a hospital. He is doing a course in laboratory science and hopes to start medicine. Listening to what he has gone through and what he has achieved, it is hard to believe that he will not succeed. In the meantime, John is already making a difference in the lives of others. He spends many hours

translating documents for other Sudanese refugees in his community and driving them around to appointments. 'It is not much,' he says, 'but we need to help one another. It is the only way we can all survive.'

John knows about survival—that is what he managed to do while in the midst of an armed conflict that claimed the lives of thousands upon thousands of people in recent years. While Sudan is not in the news so much these days, places like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan are. And in the past few weeks we have watched the mass forced displacements of hundreds of thousands of people from both Pakistan and Sri Lanka as armed conflicts in those countries have intensified. They are victims of war and violence and are doing all they can to survive, but the reality is that many of them will not make it.

It is hard for us here in Australia to imagine ourselves in the place of those fleeing persecution, war and generalised violence. But that is what we are called to do: to be in solidarity with those who are most in need, and to work for the kind of responses which we would hope to encounter if we found ourselves in their place.

In the last few weeks the arrival of boats carrying asylum seekers to our shores has reignited the debate as to what Australia's response should be to these people who have been forcibly displaced. Unfortunately, even though it has been consistently documented that deterrence measures are not effective and that mandatory detention is one of the most inhumane responses to people seeking asylum, hundreds of millions of dollars are expected to soon be spent from the federal budget to fund these activities, as the Government tries to counter criticism of its seemingly 'softened' border protection measures.

Yet, responding to the needs of these people cannot be left only to neighbouring countries. When a nation is unable to protect the human dignity and rights of people within its borders, the international community must respond. And those communities and nations with the greatest capacity to assist displaced people have the greatest responsibility to do so. We can all make a difference, even a small one, and we will be the better for it. As John said, it might not be much, but we need to help one another—it is the only way we can all survive.

Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ

The forgotten people

Australian Jesuit Fr Paul Horan SJ has recently completed a placement with JRS in Nepal, where 120 000 Bhutanese refugees have lived in camps for the past two decades. These 'forgotten people', who originally migrated from Nepal to Bhutan early last century, were expelled from the country in 1988. While Nepal has refused to assimilate the refugees, and negotiations to repatriate them have failed, several countries—including Australia—have agreed to take in some of them as part of a third country resettlement program. JRS provides various education programs and care for the many disabled children living in the camps. Fr Horan has been involved primarily with English

classes. 'The majority of staff in all areas of the JRS educational programs are refugees themselves,' he says. 'When you go into the camps it's pretty depressing. You see people either going down to the food storehouse to collect their rations, or sitting around all day. Apart from learning English, the classes are a good chance to get out of the house.'

To help JRS in their work with the Bhutanese refugees, go to the dona-

tions page at www.jrs.org.au or phone JRS on 02 9356 3888



Bhutanese refugees at a JRS-run English class

JRS Shelter Project

JRS recently appointed a Project Assistant to help with the Shelter Project's growing client base. A Peruvian migrant herself, Cecilia Silva has spent the past two decades working with community centres and not-for-profit organisations. Her connections to refugees go back to her early days in Australia when she worked with South American refugees in Sydney. 'There were lots of refugees from Latin America in the 1980s, escaping dictatorships in Uruguay, Argentina and Chile,' she says.

Cecilia later did a Bachelor of Fine Arts, and used her art skills in her work with various community projects, including the Immigrant Women's Speak Out initiative. While serving as a multicultural worker for a local neighbourhood centre, she completed a Cultural Mental Health graduate certificate, and soon realised that art and mental health were intrinsically linked. 'If you abandon yourself into the arts, it takes your mind away from your problems, even if it's only for the time you do it. I believe in the arts as a healing tool. I could see the benefits for some of those refugee women who were able to tell their

stories through painting. They were no longer bottled up within themselves.'

Cecilia hopes to integrate her experience in art therapy with her current role. 'I'm just flabbergasted by the amount of resources and creativity that exists among the refugees and asylum seekers that come to the centre, by the number of artists, musicians, dancers and people who write.'

In her role with the Shelter Project, Cecilia assists the project coordinator, Louise Stack, in advocating for clients, referring them to services and assessing and making provision for their needs. This assistance is particularly important for those who have been denied work rights. 'Where will they stay and how will they live?' asks Cecilia. 'That's where the Shelter Project is trying to fill the gap by offering shelter and support during this waiting process.'

Right now the Shelter Project would really appreciate help with:

- Jumpers, jackets and coats as winter approaches
- a pair of men's size 44 shoes
- DVD players and heaters



JRS' Project Assistant, Cecilia Silva

- donations of travel 10s (pre-paid bus tickets) for use in the bus networks—these are available at newsagencies
- secure, affordable accommodation for homeless asylum seekers—the need is as great as ever as the winter months approach
- employers willing to offer work or training, voluntary or paid—urgently needed.

JRS researches regional displacement

JRS Australia has partnered with the University of New South Wales in a project researching the social effects of climate change and displacement in Kiribati and Tuvalu.

In 2007 JRS Australia commenced a project that focused on mapping the causes and consequences of forced migration in Timor Leste and the Pacific. We recommended to the regional office that JRS Timor Leste reopen to help address the needs of the tens of thousands of people displaced in Timor by civil unrest. We also

started a project in the Western Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG) that focuses on the needs of West Papuan refugees who reside on the border of Indonesia and PNG. In 2008 we contributed to the Jesuit Lenten series by talking about the signs of climate change in small Pacific nations and the challenges this presents for Australia.

This year I am visiting Kiribati, formerly the Gilbert Islands, and Tuvalu, once known as the Ellice Islands, to collect preliminary data on the social effects of climate change. These two nation states have become

known in the international media as 'the sinking islands', nations that may disappear if sea levels continue to rise at the rate forecast by some scientists. JRS Australia hopes that through systematic research we will be in a better position to understand the causes of displacement in our region and how best to advocate with these people for a just solution.

Dr Maryanne Loughry rsm, Associate Director of JRS Australia

Upcoming Events

- **JRS Brisbane Ball:** Saturday 6 June 2009 at Stuartholme College in Toowong. Tickets: \$120 each. Book online at www.jrs.org.au.
- **Xavier Social Justice Network/Melbourne JRS Group Dinner:** Thursday 18 June at the Kingston Hotel, 55 Highett Street, Richmond, from 7pm. Two course dinner, guest speakers and entertainment. Tickets cost \$50 and are limited. Book online at www.jrs.org.au or phone JRS on 02 9356 3888
- **Refugee Week:** 14 – 20 June. The JRS Shelter Project has successfully applied to the Small Grants Program offered by the Refugee Council of Australia to host an event during Refugee Week. This year's theme is **Freedom from Fear**. We would like to invite JRS friends and supporters to be part of this exciting event to be held at 24 Roslyn Street, Kings Cross on 17 June from 11:30 am. Come and share a barbeque lunch and multicultural dishes prepared by our asylum seekers and refugees, and enjoy their specially-prepared program of music, singing and dancing. If you would like to help with our information and fundraising cake stalls, if you have performance or visual arts skills, or if you would like to contribute in any other way, please contact Cecilia on 02 9356 3888 for more information. Many thanks!
- **JRS Winter Solstice Ball:** Saturday 27 June 2009 at Sydney's Hilton Hotel. Tickets cost \$150 each. Book online at www.jrs.org.au

JRS makes music in Perth

It was a spontaneous visit to a Burmese refugee camp that caused Australian university student and musician Joshua Last to sit up and take notice of the forced migration that was underway a world away from his hometown of Perth.

'While living in Dubai, I was told about the situation in Burma and how entire villages have been forced to flee their homes due to internal conflict,' says Joshua. 'So I visited a refugee camp in Piang Luang on the Thai Burma border on my way back to Australia. The people who live there were ordinary, live simple lives and yet now do

not have a place to call home. I taught some guitar to the kids there and their favourite song is 'When you say nothing at all' by Ronan Keating.'

Touched by the people he met in the Piang Luang camp, Joshua was determined to raise both awareness of their plight, and funds for much-needed medicines, when he returned home after years of travelling abroad. The result was a charity fundraising concert held in



Joshua Last with Burmese refugees.



A Burmese refugee learns to play the guitar.

Perth at the end of May. Sticking to

his love of music and guitar, Joshua organised a line-up of three acoustic acts—including himself—and a band. Proceeds from the event went to support several JRS programs being run in the camp, including the provision of vital medicines and fuel for a school bus or truck.

'The fundraising is something I do because I realise that I have to be one of the luckiest people on the planet

to have the opportunity to travel and make so many choices in what I do in life,' says Joshua. 'During my school years I felt that social justice issues were things that happened a long way away. Since then I have discovered that social justice issues are on our doorstep here in Australia as well as overseas.' Joshua hopes to continue organising events such as this. 'I am always looking for ideas. I may start looking for opportunities to help out in Australia.'

To listen to Joshua's music, go to www.whereongodsgreeneearth.com

JRS advocates for victims of forced evictions in Cambodia

The most pressing human rights issue in Cambodia today involves forced evictions. At least 150,000 Cambodians currently live under threat of forced eviction including approximately 70,000 in Phnom Penh. The evictions occur within a context of rapid development, endemic corruption and inadequate provision of secure land tenure for poor households.

On 24 January 2009 the Phnom Penh inner city community of Dey Krahom were evicted from their homes. Starting at 4am, more than 400 families were evicted, including approximately 150 households with legal possessory rights. The other families that were evicted were renters and stall vendors who slept at their stalls. Three-hundred-and-thirty-five families (over 1000 people) were relocated to Damnak Trayung, almost 20 kilometres outside of Phnom Penh. The community now lives on the side of a road under makeshift shelter.

JRS, along with other NGOs, carried out a needs assessment of the relocated community shortly after the eviction occurred. The findings of the report present a snapshot of the community's living conditions and the hardships families face post-eviction:

- The conditions pose dangerous health risks to the community, particularly to those living with HIV/AIDS and to children and their development;
- The community does not have access to latrines or to water for hand-washing;
- Many do not have access to clean drinking water;
- Around 64% of those evicted have lost their occupations because of the eviction;
- Many have inadequate shelter in which to sleep; and
- Many of the evictees suffer from mental health problems attributable to the fact

that their basic needs are not being met and exacerbated by concerns about the possibility of further displacement.

The community's experience is neither unusual nor extraordinary. Communities all over Cambodia live under threat of forcible eviction. Central to the problem is the exclusion of the poor and most vulnerable communities from the process of accessing secure land tenure. One such community, known as 'Group 78', lives on land adjacent to the site of the new Australian Embassy in Phnom Penh. We hope that with advocacy and key intervention the conditions described above will not be experienced by the families of Group 78.

Taya Hunt, the author of this article, is currently working as a refugee lawyer in Cambodia

A MAGiS Evening with JRS

MAGiS Victoria's interactive lecture series, MAGiS *Evenings With...*, began in 2008 as a means of facilitating discussion and debate on contemporary issues. Importantly, our evenings seek to move discussion a level beyond that which is explored in the everyday media and consider the issues at hand in light of our Catholic faith.

Recently the event brought together three panellists: Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, Director of JRS, John Keloktuol Konybai, a Sudanese refugee, and Isadore Biffin, a young JRS volunteer whose fundraising efforts in support of rehabilitation programs for child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo were featured in the last issue of *Link*.

Sacha shared with us some statistics that put Australia's refugee situation into stark perspective. Whilst the issues of irregular boat arrivals is a magnet for the media spotlight and public debate in Australia, in reality, these arrivals make up a minute proportion of Australia's overall intake of asylum seekers, and an even smaller proportion of the number of refugees and displaced persons globally.

These statistics reminded us of the need to look beyond what is presented

to us in the media and consider the full breadth of issues involved in the plight of asylum seekers and refugees. Most importantly, however, Sacha reminded us that whilst statistics can be illuminating, we cannot forget that we are not talking about numbers, but about people—each with a life and story of great importance.

We were honoured to hear one such story: John Keloktuol Konybai spoke to us about his journey from Sudan, through a refugee camp in Egypt and finally to Australia. In sharing the challenges he has faced since coming to Australia, John reminded us that arriving in a new land is not the end of the journey—in many respects it is only the start of a new beginning.

Awareness of the struggles and needs of others often leads us to ask, '*How can I help?*' Isadore's work in supporting the rehabilitation of child soldiers provided us with a wonderful example of how we can turn this desire to help into action. Isadore spoke with great passion and enthusiasm, and encouraged us all to believe that our actions can bring about real change.

In a country that generally prides itself on espousing values of freedom, justice and equality of opportunity, the hostility



Isadore Biffin

stirred up by debate over asylum seekers stands out shamefully. The debate is often narrow, and muddled by a politics of fear. This event helped us to start separating truth from myth and to ask, as people of faith, what we are called to do. Here, I believe, the message is clear. We are called to welcome the stranger—to look not upon their legal status, but to see the person, and welcome them to the home we are so lucky to share.

Nikki Flook

Notification of Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting of JRS (Australia) Incorporated will be held on Thursday 11 June 2009, at the JRS Offices, 24 Roslyn Street, Elizabeth Bay, starting at 5pm. Under the Constitution, Associate Members are welcome at the AGM and can raise business for the agenda. If you wish to raise matters for the agenda please notify the office *no later than Thursday 4 June*.

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PO Box 522
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