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Message from the Director

Earlier this month the JRS Asia-Pacific Regional meeting took place in Thailand, bringing together over 50 JRS staff working there as well as in Indonesia, Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, East Timor, Singapore and Australia. It was a great opportunity to learn from one another, and to share experiences about the JRS projects in our region and the people who receive assistance through these projects.

One such group is the Rohingya, a minority ethnic group from Myanmar. The Rohingya made headlines in Australia recently when it was revealed that the Thai Army, following a period of detention in a desolate island, had pushed them back to the high seas on vessels without engines, and with little food and water. The Rohingya are effectively stateless, as they do not feature on the list of 'national races' published by the military regime of Myanmar.

These Sunni Muslims, who are of South Asian descent, are considered 'illegal immigrants' by their own government. They are subject to restrictions on movement, imposed birth control measures to limit the expansion of their population, confiscation of their land, extortion, arbitrary taxation and forced labour.

From 1978 to 1992, over 450,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh due to increased militarisation and related human rights abuses in Myanmar. Close to 30,000 still live in enclosed camps, while 250,000 others live outside official camps without protection and with little or no assistance. If arrested they face indefinite detention because Myanmar refuses to re-admit them. It is not difficult to understand why these people would seek asylum elsewhere.

Unfortunately, this experience reflects similar realities for many other groups in our region. Early last month I visited Christmas Island to offer religious services and pastoral care to the local Catholic community—there is no resident priest on the island—and the asylum seekers detained there. I spent most of my time with groups of Catholic Sri Lankan Tamils. I wish I could share all the stories of suffering, resilience, courage and hope that I heard from them during those few days. They spoke of persecution and

abuse, horrific journeys in unsafe, rickety boats, hope at the prospect of starting a new life in Australia, and disillusionment and despair after months in detention.

During one of the masses I met Lalitha and Ravi and their three-year old son, Aprit. I was struck by their deep faith and their incredible trust in God as they prayed that the God who had protected them during their perilous journey across the sea would also lead them to the Australian mainland.

And their prayer was answered! I met them again unexpectedly three weeks later, this time at Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney. They had been granted protection visas and were now waiting for final health and character checks before being released into the community. The following week, when I returned for my weekly visit, I was welcomed with great warmth by this family, which had prepared a delicious Sri Lankan meal expressly for me. As she offered me the food, Lalitha smiled and said, 'I didn't forget my promise, Father!' And indeed she hadn't. As we'd said goodbye at Christmas Island, she had promised that the next time we met she would cook a meal for me.

Our Christian tradition calls us to welcome the stranger into our land, our homes and our hearts, and to treat them as we would like to be treated if we found ourselves in their place. And here I was, being welcomed in my own country by those same 'strangers', into their home and their hearts.

As we shared the meal, Lalitha and Ravi expressed their concern for the detainees on Christmas Island and their sorrow for those who had died along the way. 'Why is it that people don't want to welcome us in Australia?' they asked. I replied that if people were to meet them and hear their story, perhaps their hearts would open in compassion. 'Then we will share it,' Lalitha said, 'if it will help others.'

I later discovered the level of their commitment to help others when Ravi mentioned their wish to adopt a child once they were given permission to stay



The Director of JRS Australia, Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, has thanked his staff for their tireless work over the year. Pictured with Fr Sacha are (from left to right) Office Manager Kim Mandelik, Project Coordinator Louise Stack, Project Officer Cecilia Silva and Associate Director Dr Maryanne Loughry RSM.

in Australia. With a second child on the way I was surprised to hear this, but Ravi explained, 'Before leaving Sri Lanka I volunteered at one of Mother Teresa's homes and met many orphans there. My heart moved with compassion for them, and we decided that even if we could only help one, at least we could do that much.'

Here were two people who had suffered so much already in their young lives, who had an uncertain future and nothing to their name, yet they could still think about those less fortunate than themselves!

A JRS staff member working in South Africa wrote recently, 'The mystery of grace is mediated through concrete situations—the more concrete, the more powerful.' This is certainly what we experience in our day-to-day work at JRS. And this is too what we celebrate at this special time of year, Christmas: the advent of God into the world, Emmanuel, God with us—the most powerful and concrete way in which God's grace has been mediated in the world.

Thank-you for all your wonderful support for our work this year, for the many palpable and concrete ways of expressing and sharing this grace with those who are most vulnerable—asylum seekers and refugees—who in turn grace our own lives with their presence.

Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ

Climate change: The tipping point

Mindful of the forthcoming Copenhagen meeting on climate change, the Pacific islands of Kiribati and Tuvalu are calling upon all nations to reduce their carbon emissions so that they might be able to stay in their countries and not be forced to relocate. Over the past two years JRS Australia, in collaboration with the University of NSW Psychiatry Research and Teaching Unit, has been investigating the psychosocial effects of displacement resulting from climate and other ecological changes in Pacific Island nations. Sr Maryanne Loughry, JRS Associate Director, explores some of the preliminary insights that have stemmed from this research.

When I visited Kiribati and Tuvalu in May 2009 I asked elders, policy makers and government workers about their five biggest personal fears for the future. Among the top concerns were prospects for their children and the economy, an uncertain future, cultural change and climate change.

Apart from climate change, the people of Kiribati and Tuvalu are also dealing with complex global issues such as overcrowding, unemployment, poverty, pollution, and modernisation. Climate change is viewed as a significant factor that compounds the effects of these stressors, and some describe it as a tipping factor that will eventually make the other problems unmanageable. Climate change is a driver for some of these issues as well as a multiplier of their effects.

Significantly, people in both Kiribati and Tuvalu told me their concerns about climate change escalate when there is a

severe climate event—a tsunami warning, a hurricane or a king tide—in other vulnerable parts of the world. On Kiribati and Tuvalu there would simply be no place to run to. One has only to think of the devastation and fear caused by the recent tsunami in Samoa, America Samoa and Tonga to know that the people of the Pacific are grappling with a major global stressor over which they feel they have no influence.

Both nations have different political discourses about climate change and its future prospects for the population. What does seem to be clear from these responses, however, is that each nation is facing multiple challenges and climate change is only one among many. The adults who were interviewed were very concerned about the future of their children and the opportunities that they might have in the future. They also recognised that their culture is changing and that one of the consequences of climate change may be the need for people to migrate.

When Kiribati and Tuvalu students in Year 13 (the final year of secondary school) were asked to brainstorm and then rank the things that they worried about, their lists included rising sea-levels, unemployment, education, overcrowding, a change in culture, health concerns, development and



Sr Maryanne surveys the effects of climate change in Kiribati

an increase in the cost of food.

Clearly these adolescent sample groups were very aware of the impact of climate change on their country, among the other difficulties currently being faced. What was most apparent from this research, and the accompanying interviews conducted with government officials and other stakeholders, was that both these nations believe they have a major role to play in advocating for nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions as a matter of urgency. They believe that they are presently experiencing the effects of climate change, effects that could result in their own countries becoming unviable unless drastic actions are taken by the world's political leaders.

Sr Maryanne Loughry RSM recently visited Bougainville and the Carteret Islands to collect further data on climate change displacement.

JRS Melbourne Cup Luncheon

The annual JRS Melbourne Cup Luncheon, held in Sydney, again attracted a large crowd of enthusiastic supporters this year. Guests revelled in a day filled with plentiful food and wine, sweeps, Calcutta and raffles, and the popular silent auctions, all of which aimed to raise funds for projects conducted by JRS in both Australia and abroad. The judges of the hotly-contested Hat Parade had a difficult time choosing the winner, but it was Katy Ryko's ebullient orange feathered confection which ultimately stole the judges' hearts. The Director of JRS, Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, thanked guests for their support. "Thanks to your assistance we are able to continue our research on climate-induced displacement in the Pacific region, run our Shelter Project, and support an information and advocacy project in PNG. This year we conducted for the first time ever the JRS Youth Award among secondary school students. We continue working collaboratively with other refugee agencies on advocacy and policy issues and visiting the Villawood Detention Centre, and we have just become involved in Christmas Island," he said.



Shelter Project update: Study and work opportunities arrive at our doors!

Our Ashfield house is all set up now and is housing seven single men from almost every continent on the globe! Thanks to some wonderful donations of furniture, we managed to furnish the house at nearly no cost, which was truly incredible. When you consider the size of it—five bedrooms, two kitchens, two lounge areas and two bathrooms—we really did very well indeed. A huge thank you to all those involved in making this happen. For a while there, my fellow JRS staff members Cecilia and Kim and I, were feeling like ‘furniture liaison officers’, but it was absolutely worth all the hard work to see it come together.

We are also hugely indebted to the Sisters of Charity Foundation, which has provided a grant of \$5000 towards our Ashfield house project. Meanwhile, Joan Edison, one of our marvellous volunteers, has been offering accompaniment and social support to the Ashfield residents. She is in the process of starting up the community garden we were hoping for, so if anyone has any herbs or small plants they would like to donate let us know.

On the job front, we have some excellent news to report. Three of the refugees we have been supporting have recently gained employment with St Vincent’s Hospital and the Mater Hospital in North Sydney. They have been selected to participate in a fantastic 12-month apprenticeship tied in with a TAFE training course, and will finish with a certificate in cleaning and food preparation.

This opportunity allows these young men to gain confidence, learn useful skills not only on the job but in preparing for interviews, and to finally be able to live independently. There are immense hurdles to overcome in obtaining your first job in Australia, particularly when English is not your first language; newcomers have no idea how to navigate the job market, and no Australian employer to vouch for their work. One of our clients dropped by after he had received his first paycheque and donated \$50 to help with the cost of running his old accommodation facility! It meant so much to him to be able to give something back, and make his own contribution at last.

Thank you so much to our employment

volunteers who worked tirelessly to prepare the refugees for the interviews, running mock interview sessions, building their confidence and helping them to know what to expect. The hospitals reported that we had the best prepared candidates they had ever seen!

TAFE in Ultimo has started a ‘Digital Storytelling and Communication’ course which is inspiring many of our refugees to learn new computer skills and learn how to tell their own stories. At the end of the 10-week course the students will have made their own three-to-five minute movie and be able to publish it in digital form. A very exciting project!

We have a new ‘Wishlist’ for those who would like to contribute in a more tangible way to the Shelter Project. It gives some ideas on things we really need at the moment, so have a look at our website www.jrs.org.au for more details, click on Shelter Project and follow the links to our Wishlist.

As this is the last Link of the year we would like to thank all of our volunteers, staff, donors and most importantly the asylum seekers and refugees, for making this such a successful and rewarding Shelter Project year. Without your support this would not be possible, so THANK YOU!!!! As always, if anyone is interested in joining us as a volunteer please contact either Louise or Cecilia on 9356 3888 or email us at louise.stack@jrs.org.au or cecilia.silva@jrs.org.au

*Louise Stack
Project Coordinator*

****A special thank you to St Canice’s Parish for inviting us on their fabulous Sydney Harbour Cruise. Everyone from JRS had an amazing time, and we really, really, REALLY appreciate all of the support you have given us throughout the year.***

Would you like to receive your copy of Link electronically? If so, please send an email to info@jrs.org.au with the words ‘ELECTRONIC LINK’ in the subject line.

JRS Youth Award



The Director of JRS Australia, Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, chats to three of the winners of the inaugural JRS Youth Award, Genazzano FCJ College Year 9 students (from left to right: Alice Gornall, Zoe Van Gulick and Kirsty Krumples).

The award is aimed at raising awareness of the plight of refugees and asylum seekers amongst students in Year 9-12. More than 400 students took part in the competition, submitting projects that included films, slideshows, songs, websites, storybooks, artworks, and pamphlets.

Sydney Grammar School students Geoffrey Chang, Branden Chan, Brian Lesmana, Joseph McEvelly, and Jonathan Thambyrajah, won first prize in the Year 11-12 category, while Genazzano FCJ College Year 9 students, Kirsty Krumples, Alice Gornall, Claire Ingham, Zoe Van Gulick and Mickie Tanna, took top honours in the Year 9-10 category.

‘The quality and creativity of the entries was outstanding,’ said the Director of JRS Australia, Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ. ‘We plan to use some of these works to help us raise even greater awareness of the issues affecting the lives of asylum seekers and refugees. We hope more schools will be able to participate next year!’

Roseville College and Loreto Kirribilli were runners-up. Winning entries can be viewed at www.jrs.org.au

Notes from the field

PNG

JRS Australia has appointed lawyer Wren Chadwick to the position of Information and Advocacy Project Officer in Papua New Guinea. Wren replaces Mariano Griva, who recently completed his year-long placement as JRS's first representative in PNG.



Wren Chadwick

With a background in legislation reform, health policy, village development and disaster relief, Wren says she is looking forward to combining her expertise and her passion for refugee rights in the border region of western PNG.

'The main focus [of my role] is to help build the capacity of the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga in their work with the refugees,' she says. 'There's some need for training in human rights and refugee law, and there's a research function in terms of visiting

refugee settlements and finding out what their needs are.' The third prong of JRS's work in PNG is that of advocacy, which will incorporate interaction with the PNG government. Wren hopes to put to good use her experience in legal and advocacy roles in Australia and post-disaster work in the Solomon Islands when she takes up her job in PNG.

CAMBODIA

Australian lawyer Taya Hunt, JRS Cambodia's legal officer, reports that Cambodia continues to receive a steady, albeit small, flow of persons seeking to be recognised as refugees.

'They come from as far afield as Iran, Sudan and Somalia as well as neighbouring countries including Vietnam and Burma. How they came to Cambodia is more often than not a story of escape, survival and resilience.

For most of the applicants and refugees JRS works with, Cambodia is not their preferred country of refuge. Ease of entry

and the fact that Cambodia is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention are often cited as reasons for arrival. For others, the decision to come to Cambodia was made for them by the agents they paid to take them to England, the United States, Australia and the like. These refugees are surprised and usually bitterly disappointed when they find themselves in Cambodia and realise that they have been duped of their life savings and dreams.

JRS Cambodia is working hard to provide legal representation to applicants and to improve the quality of life of recognised refugees in Cambodia. We do this by preparing their claim for resettlement nomination by UNHCR, providing emergency financial assistance and accommodation, and assisting applicants and refugees to find meaningful things to do with their time. The work the team here is doing is valued by a lot of people and I feel privileged to be able to say I work alongside them.'

JRS will launch its new website on 7 December 2009. We hope you will find it colourful, useful and informative. You may also wish to make use of our new online donation facility. The website can be found at www.jrs.org.au



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