

## **First Impressions of Cambodia**

I happened to arrive in Cambodia on Chinese New Year. I could not speak Khmer, but when I met the Khmer staff at the Jesuit House in Phnom Penh, and they found out that I could speak Chinese, the first thing they said was, 'Gong Xi Fa Cai', which means Happy New Year in Mandarin. It was such a lovely greeting!

I have been in Cambodia for about one month now, and all of the Khmer people and staff at JRS whom I have met have been so friendly and welcoming. This is despite the often challenging environment in Cambodia; every day we are reminded of the extreme poverty of the people, pressures on living conditions, issues of corruption within the government, and the difficulties of finding adequate employment.

These challenges are even greater for those seeking asylum in Cambodia. Most of the clients that come to JRS have come here overland via Thailand. When I tell them about the situation in Cambodia, and the fact that even if they are recognised as a refugee it is unlikely that they will be resettled to a third country, the look of disappointment is extremely confronting. It is difficult to sit in front of these people when they realise the predicament they are in, and that they have no alternative but to stay in Cambodia as returning to their home country would lead to persecution.

JRS is the only organisation in Cambodia that provides legal representation, monetary and housing assistance for asylum seekers. Since the UNHCR handed over decision-making in relation to refugee status determination to the Cambodian government in December last year, we are not certain how long the asylum seekers will have to wait in order to get a decision. In the meantime, it is a lonely and uncertain struggle every day for the asylum seekers in the oppressive heat of Cambodia.

*By Lian Yong  
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