

Among the forgotten

It's a long and rocky road from the junta-ruled streets of 1970s Argentina to the remote refugee settlements of modern-day Papua New Guinea, but JRS fieldworker Mariano Griva says he is fortunate to have been given the opportunity to make that journey as the organisation's first fieldworker in PNG.

Mariano has just completed a year-long placement in the province of Daru, where around 10,000 'forgotten' West Papuan refugees have eked out a living for almost three decades.

His own early experience of exile helped to shape his attitude towards displaced people: when he was four years old his family fled junta-ruled Argentina, where 30,000 people would eventually disappear or die. 'But we were not refugees, because fortunately we could afford a plane ticket and my father had developed academic contacts in Mexico', explains Mariano. 'So we exiled into Mexico and then the US.' The family spent 14 years abroad before returning to their newly-democratic homeland.

Later, Mariano was awarded a scholarship to do a Masters in Peace and Conflict studies at the University of Queensland, and, more recently, he embarked on a PHD which further explores the issues of refugees and their protection.

His role as the JRS Project Officer in Papua New Guinea has enabled Mariano to synthesise his theoretical expertise with a practical application. 'It was a chance to look at refugee settlements, so in a way it was a practical insight into what I've been reading and researching about.'

Displaced in the decades following the handover of Dutch-controlled West Papua to Indonesia, the West Papuan refugees have been dubbed 'the forgotten people' because they are a relatively small group and their story is not new. 'The press likes novelty, and there's not much novelty there', says Mariano. 'Some bigger international organisations have a rough time justifying their presence there and the money they're putting in, but JRS has a different approach. That's one of the things that attracted JRS to the area.'

While the refugee population has stabilised and is generally accepted by locals, many dream of returning to their homeland – but refuse to do so until West Papua is granted independence from Indonesia. For now, the refugees have made homes for themselves in a variety of ways: most live scattered amongst 20 remote border settlements where they survive by subsistence farming; some have largely assimilated into the population of Kiunga, and the remainder live in the officially-designated refugee camp, Iowara.

Many of the refugees rely on farming to feed themselves, but, since most land is customary-owned, accessing land necessitates negotiations with local land owners. 'They've obtained some land this way, but it isn't large enough to allow for commercial farming', says Mariano. Hence most refugee families are unable to live economically independent lives.

JRS' project involves disseminating information among refugees, so that they can make informed decisions about their future and advocate on behalf of their own community, and training personnel from the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga so that they can build on their own decades-long work with the refugees, particularly in terms of educating them about their rights. 'Refugee rights and refugee law is so abstract, and so foreign to their understanding', says Mariano. 'To explain it in a way that is understandable and easily captured is a challenge.'

To this end, JRS publishes a bimonthly newsletter informing West Papuan refugees about developments in their homeland. JRS is hoping that local landowners, some of whom feel that the refugees have overstayed their welcome, will also start reading the newsletter. 'Hopefully they will read it and develop a better understanding of why refugees are afraid to go back or don't want to

go back. It's not a whim; they have good grounds to explain their presence in Papua New Guinea.'

As he returns to Brisbane to complete his PHD – and a future he hopes will include further refugee-related fieldwork – Mariano says he is sad to be leaving PNG, and will even miss the endless dingy rides and hikes that were sometimes called for when travelling to remote refugee settlements. 'You get to be outdoors, to see nature, to meet the communities and see how they live', he says.

Mariano credits the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga – the 'living memory' of the West Papuan refugees – for the invaluable role it has played in the establishment of the office in PNG. JRS, he says, is proving itself to be a valuable player in the country. 'It is forming human resources to advocate for themselves in the long run. In a way it is an exercise in citizenship because it leads people to know what their rights are, and how to make them effective in their daily lives. It is not about promoting a handout mentality.'

By Catherine Marshall

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