

Fr Chris Jenkins SJ spent a month in Christmas Island before heading last week to work with JRS in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Northern Kenya in April 2010. Below is a short reflection on his time there. Chris will be working with other JRS volunteers and refugees in Kakuma, helping coordinate a project by a small number of American Jesuit universities to provide distance learning (tertiary courses on line) for refugees. The scheme is beginning with a pilot program in three different countries, Kenya, Malawi and Syria with twenty people in each site.

Christmas Island

My immediate memories of Christmas Island are of the rain, the humidity, the jungle, the crabs, the roads, the birds, the beauty of the place – powerful, abiding memories and images of an environment so different to the Clare Valley in South Australia, where I had lived for the past five years.

But I am sure that it will be the people and their stories that I remember best in the future.

Most of the nearly two and a half thousand detainees there come from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, fleeing war, oppression and discrimination. Some come as families, some as unaccompanied minors, and some as single men. They are housed in three separate camps, in facilities built for less than half their present numbers. So, overcrowding is a great problem, adding to the tension caused by separation from family, uncertainty about the future and a loss of control over their lives. And all of this after a frightening trip in a small, overcrowded boat across the open sea.

These are brave people!

They have survived the trials of their country's turmoil, risked all they have, including their lives, in the hope of a better future in distant Australia, a fabled land of peace and freedom. They risk all not just for themselves but for families back home, who crave for news of their condition and hope to join them. Most are scarred, if not traumatised by their experience of war and loss, and often by the terror of a long sea voyage with a crowd of strangers.

In the midst of the daily boredom of living in a detention centre, celebrations and gatherings are especially welcomed. On Mother's Day a couple of weeks ago, we celebrated a memorial mass for the two young children of a Tamil couple who had been killed last May in the final days of the Sri Lankan civil war. Through her tears and grief the mother spoke of her children, and at the Offertory Procession brought candles and photos to the altar. The church was full of Tamils, both Christian and Hindu who supported these parents whose pain and loss many shared. It was a great celebration of hope and mutual support, amidst all their suffering, in a communion of grief.

My experience was that all the liturgies in the camps were marked by a sense of celebration. They were keenly prepared for—a highlight of the day for detainees. Not only did they break the boredom but gave a sense of connection to normality; Mass was a reminder of their past life at home and a connection to a wider world, the praying church.

As part of the body of Christ, they are part of us, these people detained in our name, and we of them. They deserve our prayers but much more besides. How will we respond?

Chris Jenkins SJ