

## Notes from Christmas Island

As I left Christmas Island after seven weeks as a pastoral worker, I was filled with an overwhelming sense of gratitude for being able to accompany the asylum seekers on their difficult journey to find safety and peace. It was a great privilege to be with these wonderful people, the most needy in our region.

Christmas Island is a beautiful, tropical island, largely national park with many flowering trees, shrubs and flowers and wonderful bird life. There's a small and very welcoming indigenous community comprising Malays, Chinese, Indonesians and Singaporeans as well as a few Australians who have made their home there. Most are employed in phosphate mining, tourism and at the detention centres.

There are two of these centres: the smaller, called Phosphate Hill or Construction Site, is not far from the small township which houses about three to four hundred people, mainly families and unaccompanied minors; the larger one, built more recently and now being extended to cater for a further 600 people, is at North West Point (NWP), about twenty minutes' drive through the National Park.

At the moment there are approximately 1400 asylum seekers, men only, at NWP. The whole site is very well planned. It's divided into five main sections, each separated by high walls of steel mesh and fencing. Another temporary accommodation area has five large air-conditioned tents, each sleeping up to 50 people, to cater for the extra boatloads arriving. There is maximum security but during the daytime the whole area is open for the asylum seekers to go freely so that you don't get the feeling of being in a prison. Also, it is very extensive. Activities are very important for both the physical and mental health of the people so they have a large gym, a sports oval in the open area between the living areas, a library very well operated by the refugees themselves, and designated areas for teaching English and other activities.

As a privilege, and to facilitate my work, I was given permission to go anywhere in the Detention Centre without an escort. Some immigration officials asked if I was afraid, but it never occurred to me as I was accepted and made so welcome among everyone. As several people spoke English it was never necessary to use an outside interpreter and this arrangement was better for them as they were more comfortable and able to speak more freely.

The main groups of people come from Sri Lanka (Tamils), Afghanistan (Hazaras), the border between Iran and Iraq (Kurds), Burmese (Rohingyas), some Arabs from Iraq and Kuwait, and a few Vietnamese. Boatloads keep on coming, and as quickly as immigration processes them and gives them visas to leave the island, their places are taken by new arrivals.

Thursdays are the days for getting visas and the mood in the centre is very tense. Those fortunate enough to get these — generally up to 100 each week — will fly out to Australia on a specially chartered plane the following Wednesday, and so there's great celebration. But for those who came to the island on earlier boats and have been waiting for up to eight or nine months, there is terrible depression. They can't understand that every case is different and some cases take longer for security checks to be obtained. Some manage the waiting better than others. This waiting is the most difficult part for them. They have time to worry about their families, their wives and children left behind and they feel guilty they've reached safety and their families are still in danger. Then there are those few who are being deported and it's a very sad experience to see them go.

To be able to spend time with them as they wait, to encourage them when they've had their cases rejected, to keep hoping with them when they're so depressed — it's not an easy task, but a great privilege. To see grown men sitting alone on the ground slumped over, their shoulders heaving with sobs is not an easy sight, and yet it happens. They're sick with worry over their loved ones

whom they cannot help. While phone calls are good they also bring heartache as they hear children and wives crying at the other end.

One man, a Hazara, learnt that many Hazara women and children had been killed in Quetta in Pakistan where he had taken his family to escape from the Taliban, but they were chased there. The stories are heart-rending, and I believe them. No one has escaped without having suffered at the hands of the Taliban. Boys as young as twelve years old have been trained to behead people and once they have done this it's easy for them to do it again. Everyone can tell of killings and rape.

The Hazaras know that there is no way they can live peacefully in their own country where they are not recognised by authorities, and all must flee for safety; it's not possible for them to return. They are prepared to risk their lives to get freedom so that they can begin to live some kind of a life. These are wonderfully brave men and I've really enjoyed being with them, and felt really accepted and needed.

The routes they take to escape are unbelievable. One man from northern Afghanistan made his way to Kabul, flew to Dubai, then to Laos, down to Bangkok, on to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, then took a boat to Indonesia and finally got a boat to Christmas island, a journey of more than four months in very dangerous situations. He still has to pay back money he borrowed, otherwise his family will be killed.

I was asked by several Afghans to try to find out for them what happened to a boatload of 103 persons, their friends and relatives, who left some days before them from Indonesia; they couldn't find any of them in the detention centre. No authorities have any information regarding this boat and many others that break up in the rough seas with all on board drowned. Unfortunately the news I have to relay to them isn't good. We are aware that most of the boats are unseaworthy but the need to reach freedom is so great they are ready to risk their lives.

Not long after my arrival I met a 19-year-old young man who sailed with 39 men from Sri Lanka to Christmas Island. After 59 days the boat, which had broken down several times, finally took on water, broke up in the rough sea and sank. For 18 hours the men clung onto anything that was floating before a Thai fishing boat picked up 27 of them. Unfortunately, this boy's father was among the 12 who were drowned; only one body was found. I was told by an officer who was listening to this sharing that this was the first time he had seen the boy talk, so I was glad to hear he was beginning to live again after his terrible trauma.

When I was sharing stories with a group of Kurds they pointed out a big six-foot-four, 23-year-old man whom I hadn't seen before, and said he was very sad. He didn't want to join the group but later I was able to speak with him by himself. He told me that his visa application had just been rejected a second time, but his brother was given a visa and his sister was married in Sydney, where he also had cousins. Cases are not always straight forward and there are many things we do not know. He was desperate, not eating, not sleeping but I tried to get him to keep hoping that his next appeal would be granted. He seemed to be in better spirits as I left him and he promised he'd try to keep hoping. I told him I'd see him the next day and talk to him. But it was too much, and when I arrived I was told that he had attempted suicide. I found him in the medical centre and his face brightened as he saw me, so I was able to lift his spirits a bit. He has been transferred to Perth where he'll get some treatment and, hopefully, lasting help.

Another Hazara, a father of five, was on the Tampa and was finally deported. On arrival in Afghanistan, he was shot at by the Taliban, left for dead, but rescued by the family, and taken to a hospital across the border at Quetta in Pakistan. After five years he again escaped and spent two years in a UNHCR camp in Indonesia. But since nothing was happening for him, after another couple of years he escaped to Christmas Island and is now waiting on a visa.

It's unusual to find families together but one Afghani family of 10 managed to escape together. The mother, who is 60, looks 80, and the father also is much older; suffering makes them age so much. All escaped the Taliban, fled over the western border to Iran where, as stateless persons without any documents, they couldn't make a living and so found their way across many countries to freedom.

Unfortunately for them while in Djakarta their 12-year-old son, the youngest, who had previously received head injuries, wandered away from the family and was lost. When they were unable to find him after much searching in a large and foreign city, they had to leave without him. As you can imagine this was a dreadful suffering added to their already big load. Their boat was rescued off Ashmore Reef by the Australian Coast Guard, which brought them to Christmas Island, so it was a good ending to their long but painful journey.

I've found 43 Rohingas from Arakan state in Burma in several areas of the two detention centres. All of them have spent many years— some up to 11 years — in Malaysia and Indonesia. Like the Hazaras and Kurds, they too are stateless and have been deported many times, have paid so many bribes to soldiers and police they've lost count, and thank God they can now laugh as they recount their stories. But they say, 'I just want to live without being scared of being killed all the time.'

Many have married in Malaysia and have children, but are not allowed to go to school. Like the Kurds on the borders of Iran and Iraq who told me they're not allowed to own a business or a car, they've never gone to school. One man described his life 'just like a donkey: eat and sleep.'

Having been in the detention centres for almost two months I can say I'm very impressed with the way the asylum seekers are treated with great respect and dignity. I've found the staff of Serco — the independent contactor which runs the centre — very good to work with, but it's hard work and long hours in hot and humid conditions.

The immigration staff has been increased recently so that they are processing cases more quickly and are seen in the compounds for some time each day, walking among the people so that they can ask questions if they want to. There is generally a good atmosphere in the compounds, people are very friendly and ethnic groups seem to mix well.

The most difficult aspect of my stay was the lack of any kind of team with whom to share. At night, while you could see some people from immigration or Serco, there was no-one with whom you could debrief. All other groups had dozens of staff and found company among each other. However, all staff seem to rotate from the mainland to the island in four, six or eight-week stints, so there is a lot of coming and going. Some of those staying longer have brought their families with them, and children go to school on the island so their lives are more normal.

Both Serco and immigration asked me to see if JRS could get more staff, and said that accommodation would not be a problem. They will be happy to find us room, and they reiterated that several times. I think initially they were a bit tentative about what services might be offered, but having seen the good that's being done and way the asylum seekers responded, they are now more than willing for us to have a bigger presence. They have often commented on how good it is to see me among the people, so I strongly recommend we find additional staff, not necessarily religious but possibly retired lay people who could offer themselves and be willing to spend some time there. It's a huge job for one person or even two people: two detention centres, two locations and more than 1800 people all needing some TLC.

In conclusion I would like to thank JRS for giving me the opportunity to accompany so many people, to share their lives and help them during their painful days of waiting and not knowing their future. It has been a privilege and I'm so grateful for the experience.

*Maureen Lohrey RSM, March 2010*