

Life among Karenni refugees

In March this year I visited Ban Mae Surin refugee camp in Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand, about 3km from the Burma border. Refugees have been located in the camp, known to most as "Site 2", since the end of 1991, and it is currently home to about 3,590 Karenni refugees.

Getting from the JRS base in Mae Hong Son to Ban Mae Surin involves negotiating difficult terrain in a four-wheel drive vehicle for more than three hours, often necessitating the fording of swelling streams and of rushing rivers. Much of the landscape between Mae Hong Son and Site 2 at this time is a blackened ruin, the result of slash and burn agriculture, and what appears to be a romantic mist in the photographs I took there is actually an acrid veil of smoke and ash.

The JRS Thailand workers in Ban Mae Surin and Ban Nai Soi ("Site 1") camps are outstanding in their dedication and professionalism. JRS projects provide primary, secondary and non-formal education, as well as vocational training; and the distinctive JRS charism of accompaniment is manifested not just in the religious and pastoral care projects in both camps but also in the evident friendship that the JRS staff have with the refugees whom they serve.

While I was in the staff room of one of the three primary schools run by JRS in Ban Mae Surin, fascinated by the rudimentary yet eminently practical



flip charts made out of split bamboo and rough brown paper; and the system for re-blackening carbon paper (does anyone in Australia under the age of 21 know what carbon paper is?), I noticed a little girl strolling in and then stopping suddenly before a calendar that was hanging on a wooden post. It was a religious art calendar, and the painting on display was a depiction of the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. She stared intently for what seemed like several minutes at the glowing colours, then moved an inch or two to the left, shifted the angle of her gaze, and looked again at the painting for a long time – so long, in fact, that I eventually left the room before she did.

She paid no attention to the hulking foreigner close to her, or to the bustle of activity around her, so drawn in was she by the scene before her. Was I missing something? I glanced at the

painting and thought to myself, Guido Reni, possibly, but not his best. I discovered later, searching through Google, that it was by an assistant of Reni's, Francesco Albani, and that the original hangs in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna.

I had barely noticed the dusty reproduction of this minor Baroque work when I walked into the dirt-floor hut, and yet it seemed to have tapped into some kind of deep desire for beauty in this little Karenni refugee. I have been in the greatest museums in the world, and yet I doubt that I have ever truly

looked at a work of art the way that girl looked at that calendar. The overflowing plenty of my life has in some ways made me less capable of wonder and gratitude and joy, while the dreadful and uncertain conditions of her life in a refugee camp had left her sensitive to colour and beauty, and capable of deep and abiding wonder.

We have a privileged and profoundly blessed life in Australia, and yet so many of us grasp anxiously at what we have, and are suspicious of those who come to us seeking a share in our wealth and who make a claim on our protection. We have so much, and yet, in our self-regarding prosperity and security, perhaps we have lost something more significant: our wonder at the gift that is this wonderful world we live in, and the realisation that what is given is given to all, for the needs of all.

Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ

Growing the **Sisters of Mercy** partnership

Jesuit Refugee Service is building on its relationship with the Sisters of Mercy through a series of workshops aimed at identifying further ways in which they might collaborate with JRS's pastoral work among refugees and asylum seekers in Australia.

The initiative follows the recent restructuring of the majority of the Mercy congregations into a single Institute comprising 900 religious sisters from Australia and Papua New Guinea. The Director of JRS Australia, Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ, says that the change has consolidated the sisters' resources, talent and knowledge, and that JRS is hoping that asylum seekers in Australia and beyond will benefit from the consequent pooling of expertise.

"You have Sisters of Mercy who've worked around the world, sometimes in very difficult circumstances in Papua New Guinea, on the Thai-Burma border, and in war-torn parts of Africa, and have gained a huge amount of pastoral knowledge and experience working with the most disadvantaged people in the world," he says.

"At the same time, refugee work has long been a significant part of the Mercy charism because of the existence of Mercy Refugee Service in the 80s and 90s. The new institute, when it articulated its mission, placed care for asylum seekers and refugees as one of its main concerns."

With this in mind, JRS has set about building on its existing relationship with Mercy Sisters, who have represented the backbone of JRS' pastoral care work in detention centres in the Australian mainland and offshore on Christmas Island.

"There would be sisters in the institute who had never even thought of this work, and we wanted to show them what we do and give them the opportunity to

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come to the workshop and to reflect more deeply in the light of their own charism what care for refugees and asylum seekers means in these days."

Fr Mowe said the initial workshop – held in February 2013 – was not exclusively a "recruitment drive" but an opportunity for participants to see what opportunities are available to work with JRS, both in detention centres and within the community.

"We want people to find out for themselves what's possible, where their heart's calling them to be," he says.

The first workshop was so successful that several Mercy Sisters are already working at Curtin Detention Centre in Western Australia and several more are lined up to potentially work with JRS later in the year. JRS will furthermore participate in a larger Mercy workshop on refugees set for early May, which will broaden the reflective reach of the first gathering, and will include speakers from Amnesty International and the Edmund Rice Centre.

For more information about the workshop go to www.jrs.org.au



Mercy Sister Valda Dickinson (left) with immigration officer Ann Buckman

Caring for Burmese refugees in **Mae Sot**

It was his experience as an ethnic minority in Thailand that prompted JRS Asia Pacific staff member Sanam to devote his life to helping Burmese refugees and migrants who had fled their homeland and come to settle across the border in the town of Mae Sot. As a member of the Thai-Karen group, Sanam knows what it's like to be marginalised: the equal rights he shares with his compatriots haven't always been fully respected in practice, he says.

"Maybe as a Thai person it seems like I have equal rights, but in a practical way, [I don't]. We have a different culture, a different way of life. That is why I want to help the refugees and migrants to be accepted by the majority, the powerful groups."

Sanam joined JRS in Mae Sot almost seven years ago; before that he worked in the town's refugee camps with the Dutch NGO ZOA (Zuidoost-Azië). Employed as a caseworker with JRS, Sanam discovered that two-thirds of Burmese refugees and migrants were now living undocumented lives outside of the regulated refugee

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camps; many of them had no livelihood, and so JRS started providing emergency financial assistance as well as food supplies and blankets.

Today, JRS continues to focus on these unregistered refugees, many of whom work in factories in the region and have little or no support; although NGOs are prolific in Mae Sot, most of them work inside the region's seven refugee camps, which impose strict restrictions on their inhabitants and are prone to corruption. In coming to these people's aid, JRS partners with a variety of CBOs – community groups such as the Overseas Irrawaddy Association (OIA) – which represent various ethnic Burmese communities and are supported by organisations like JRS as well as private donors.

JRS' financial aid program is strictly limited to three months and so, with a long-term view in mind, it runs a livelihood project which has assisted families to set up small businesses such as grocery shops and cooking services. Candidates are carefully selected, and are



(Left to right) Sanam, Burmese migrant Moe Moe San and JRS Community Development Officer Misheh

usually disadvantaged through age, gender or injury.

"They can support themselves and also support the family with this kind of activity," Sanam says.

JRS provides training for migrants and refugees in Thai language and culture, labour rights, trafficking, psycho-social development and health, and vocational training in which migrants are given the opportunity to improve their skills and thus find employment more easily.

"We also support learning centres and try to integrate lessons on labour rights and sexual health and reproduction in the schools," Sanam says.

It's fulfilling work in which Sanam has been able to both empathise and bear some of the burden experienced by new arrivals in Thailand.

"Maybe the way I'm working is not only for myself, but is helpful and meaningful for the refugee. I prefer to work to solve this problem of the suffering of these innocent people," he says.

To support JRS and Jesuit Mission's projects in Thailand go to www.jesuitmission.org.au. For more on JRS' work in South East Asia go to www.jrsap.org

Sadness as Ashfield **closes**

JRS staff members are reflecting with pride and more than a twinge of sadness on the success of the Ashfield residence, which has had to close down due to the imminent sale of the property by the landlord, Josephite Community Aid. The residence was a model of communal living for asylum seekers, who face a unique set of challenges when seeking refuge in a country like Australia. In the almost four years since the residence opened, 24 asylum seekers have called it home.

“Ashfield always had a very nice atmosphere about it, a homely feel with lots of space for the clients to use, a big living area and backyard,” says JRS Project Coordinator Louise Stack.

“It was really close to the train station, which made it so much easier for people to travel to and from their appointments while they were moving through the immigration process and trying to create some stability for themselves. It enabled them to live with dignity at a time when they were extremely vulnerable and without much support or connection in the community.”

Some of the residents got involved in the garden, growing vegetables and flowers, one resident brought some of his own carvings with him to Australia and proudly displayed them in his room, and volunteers engaged enthusiastically with the community, Ms Stack recalls.

“The volunteers brought energy and a positive outlook and most importantly offered their time to people to help them feel part of the community.”

The residence was also an important conduit for engaging students from St Ignatius’ College, Riverview, who volunteered there as part of their Faith in Service experience, under the guidance of JRS caseworker Cecilia Silva.

Some of Ashfield’s residents have been granted permanent protection visas, whilst others continue to wade through the visa application system. All have transitioned to independent living. JRS remains, nonetheless, just a phone call away, ready to support the residents should the need arise.

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