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Letter from Director: Fr. Bambang Sipayung SJ



The distinctive mark of Easter is about the blooming flowers with its colorful scene and radiant atmosphere after a cold winter. A friend of mine visiting from the Netherlands reminds me of this Netherlands or probably European atmosphere of Easter. And they were visiting Bangkok close to Songkran, in the wider context a new year celebration for Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos where the weather starts to get hotter and hotter every day. I know that drought has been happening in some parts of Thailand and Myanmar causing difficult times for farmers to start their planting on their farms. Perhaps Easter is never the same climate and atmosphere after all. And it is not the main point of the message that Christians want to celebrate.

The stories of meeting resurrected Jesus in the Gospels are different from every people. Thomas question and challenges the story he heard from other apostles because he wanted to see and to have a direct physical experience. Mary Magdelene only misunderstood the resurrected Jesus as the gardener. The other

disciple entered the tomb later, saw the line cloth and not the body of Jesus and believed of His Resurrection. Different people in the Gospel experienced different ways of His Resurrection and they believed. Their encounter changed their sorrow and suffering into hopeful, joyful and spirited lives.

Fr. Jaewook, a Korean Jesuit working with JRS Urban Refugee Program in Bangkok, shared his stories meeting a refugee family in their house. One of them has been in shock, depressed and has kept to herself most of the time. His visit brought them a conversation where they started sharing many things and he tried to tell stories to her who then started to utter some words and respond. It was joy the family felt by his visit and their mutual encounter. This story reflects a Paschal encounter which sheds lights of joy and radiance.

Easter is not about a climate or an atmosphere and it never was. It is in fact the story of believing something which is beyond our humane limitation, death. It provides us with a future and onward perspective to keep us hopeful despite the challenging moment, and to crave a way for a future world where everyone can live without fear of being pushed out of their home and can share a common space to live and to grow.

Cambodia: Montagnards refugees' cases are finally heard



Phnom Penh, 22 January 2016 – In this historic period where the world is seeing millions of forcibly displaced people on the move, and countries breaching their obligations under international law to protect them, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is glad to see that a group of ethnic Vietnamese Montagnard refugees will have access to a fair asylum process in Cambodia.

On 21 January, the Cambodian government announced more than 170 Montagnards – Degar Christians fleeing religious persecution in Vietnam – who were formerly blocked from registering as refugees will now have their asylum claims assessed. Montagnards have been crossing into Cambodia to seek asylum since late 2014.

Many have spent long periods in prison and suffered torture, harassment and a violation of their land rights for years.

The most recent deadline for the UN refugee agency to resettle the initial group of 13 Montagnards to a third country was 10 January, while the roughly 200 other asylum seekers were told they had until 6 February to return to Vietnam.

However, now, along with assessing the claims of the Montagnards that were formerly blocked, the

government also agreed to temporarily relocate the 13 registered refugees to the Philippines while efforts continue to resettle them to third country.

JRS Cambodia has been assisting the Montagnards by providing food and shelter and accompanying them since they arrived in Cambodia and throughout this limbo period. JRS has also advocated for this asylum process in Cambodia to take place and for the the Cambodian government under no circumstances to deport these people before a fair process is carried out.

Refugees are still worried about their families who face repercussions in Vietnam.

"I have to say that I'm very delighted that the Cambodian government is following its obligations under the international Refugee Convention and beginning to process their claims," says Sr Denise Coghlan RSM, JRS Cambodia Director.

All countries in the world have the obligation not to push back refugees who are at risk of persecution, torture or death. The non-refoulement principle, as it is called, is customary law and thus applicable by even those countries who are not signatories to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention.

We hope this move by the Cambodian government will serve as a model to other countries in the Asia Pacific region and worldwide, and that refugees are granted a fair asylum process and are not sent back to face persecution, hunger or war. This is their right under international law.

JRS also hopes that the root cause of this flight – the lack of religious freedom in Vietnam – will improve, and that people can freely practice their beliefs in the mountains of Vietnam and elsewhere in the world.

-Amaya Valcarcel, International Advocacy Coordinator

International Women's Day: Recognising the strength and capacity of refugee women



'The most vulnerable women in our society are refugees'. Photo by Molly Mullen

'Refugee women are more affected by violence against women than any other women's population in the world'

Sydney, Australia, 8 March, 2016- Women and girls comprise about half of any refugee, internally displaced or stateless population across the world.

On International Women's day, it is important to remember that some of the most vulnerable, yet resilient, women in our society are newly arrived refugees.

Refugees don't leave their homes because they want to. The women we work with at [Arrupe Place](#) have fled their home countries for any number of reasons – they were caught in the middle of a war zone, or were persecuted for their ethnicity, for their political beliefs, for their religion, or for their sexuality.

People flee because it is a life or death choice, and they want to live.

Once they flee, often the danger continues. As stated in a recent UN Report: 'Refugee women are more affected by violence against women than any other women's population in the world'.

While Australia does offer protection, refugee women may remain at risk.

Under current asylum policies, refugee women living in the community on bridging visas are often at risk of homelessness and destitution, while at the same time they are not eligible for homelessness, crisis or domestic violence support because of their visa status.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for the newly arrived women in our society is their isolation. They are cut off from their home country, their community and family networks, and often have only basic English and rudimentary knowledge of their local surrounds. Catching a bus or negotiating a supermarket can be a challenge. Yet they are not eligible for federally funded English classes or other settlement services, the very things that could facilitate their connection with the local community.

At Arrupe Place we recognise the strength and capacity of women and we work to offer a range of services and support that empower women and connect them to the local community. Services ranging from English language and cooking classes, to food provision and legal aid are provided through Arrupe Place, to help women start to rebuild their lives in Australia.

Arrupe Place does more than just deliver services, we sit with women who are seeking asylum and listen to what they have to tell us. We accompany, support and work with them to voice their own needs as they struggle to make their way in a new country.

One regular visitor told me, for her, every day is a struggle, "My life here in Australia is so hard," she said. "You

understand my struggle.”

“At JRS there was someone who was willing to listen. Even if they couldn’t work out our problems, we knew that they were hearing us and they were trying to connect us to other services that could help.”

This comment is from a Kurdish woman whose family was made stateless by Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq – they were stripped of their citizenship and all legal recognition of their status or rights in their own country. They escaped by boat to Australia, cleared detention centres, and now live in the community on bridging visas. Still stateless.

“My brother was thinking that nobody liked him, that everything was negative.’ she said. ‘He would sit at home because there was no hope of doing anything. He came to JRS because there was someone who would talk to him, who would listen to his story, who cared enough to call him back.”

One of the most encouraging testimonials we received came from a woman who told us that she continues to visit Arrupe Place “because this place feels like my mother’s house.”

We aim to provide the women who visit Arrupe Place with a place where they feel safe and less isolated, so that they can live with dignity and become self-sufficient whilst waiting for their claims for protection to be assessed.

“When I come here to Arrupe Place I feel happy,” said one visitor. “I feel that you know me. You know my story. You know my heart.”

Maeve Brown, Shelter Project Coordinator, JRS Australia

JRS expands services for refugees in Bangkok



Jesuit Refugee Service programs helped hundreds of forcibly displaced people in Thailand last year. Two caseworkers sit with a woman to provide accompaniment. (Jesuit Refugee Service Thailand)

Bangkok, 18 January 2016- Jesuit Refugee Service in Bangkok had a busy 2015, ending a 12-month program that served almost 640 extremely vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers with projects dedicated to improve access to primary healthcare, medical services, mental health and psychosocial support.

The program, funded with a State Department grant from the Bureau of Population Refugees, and Migration, also helped 717 refugees receive emergency assistance such as shelter, food, serious medical needs and referrals to other organizations – a 300 percent increase over target goals.

JRS counselors noticed a significant increase in the past year of suicidal clients and a high need for psychosocial casework. Intensive interventions for suicidal clients

included emergency counseling sessions – either in person or on the phone – accompaniment to a clinic, home visits and persuading clients to maintain their medication routine.

Seventy-five percent of refugees assisted by JRS counselors reported improved mental health at the end of counseling.

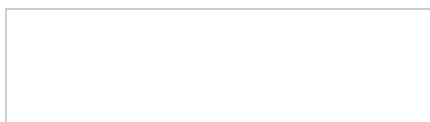
A tightening of security in Thailand following a fatal bomb attack at a popular Bangkok shrine in August led to the arrest of people authorities said were illegally in the country. In some situations heads of families were detained, depriving their families of support. JRS provided assistance through casework and financial support to family members left behind, as the difficulties they faced were akin to those of a single parent. JRS’s casework team expanded significantly in 2015 to cope with the rising demand.

Many asylum seekers and refugees requested to be relocated to surrounding cities. JRS responded by providing them financial assistance for transportation for those who found housing outside Bangkok, and by searching for safer housing locations for some of the most vulnerable.

For temporary relocation needs, JRS made arrangements with some existing clients living in other areas who were willing to host their fellow countrymen for a short period of time while longer-term housing solutions were sought. Some refugees eventually found permanent housing, often with relatives living in other areas of Bangkok.

To respond to situations of homelessness, JRS established an emergency shelter for refugees. This allowed those refugees with immediate housing needs to access shelter as they determined their next steps on their path to safety.

Indonesia: Refreshment for a day



Surabaya, Indonesia- Life became normal again for a few hours for 10 asylum seekers and refugees detained in Immigration Detention Center (IDC) Surabaya.



Spending a day at the Safari Park, sitting in nature, observing animals, to be with many people and eat in a restaurant is a luxury for people waiting to receive international protection from persecution in Afghanistan and Somalia.

Excursions to the world behind fences are events longed for after months or years of confinement. Being detained in immigration detention, they feel like being in a prison, restrained. As soon as they get the chance to see the outside world, they were absolutely delighted, even though some limitations are still applied. The detainees have to wear uniform shirts provided by JRS.

For Rezai, a 26 years old asylum seeker from Afghanistan, this trip was his first encounter with a real elephant. He was so excited, he begged to join the next

trip to Safari Park again, "If there is another trip to Safari Park, I can come again right? When are you going to organise the next trip?"

Faces lighten up when our bus entered Safari Park and one could start observing the animals. When entering the American-European animal zone, phones were taken out to take pictures of the llama, bison, deer, and bear, and other animals in the open enclosure.

For a 17 year old like Ismat, being able to see so many different species of wild animals is a very exciting experience. Excited he took many pictures of birds, elephants, lion cubs, white tigers and snakes. This was Ismat's first visit to a zoo in his life. A moment he would cherish in the months or maybe years to come. Ismat and other 9 refugee brothers are the last group to visit Safari Park this year. These 10 asylum seekers were the latest to arrive in Surabaya IDC after being transferred from Pekanbaru Immigration Office in August.

The trip offered not only the chance to see animals but also to interact with other visitors, mostly Indonesians. Language was not much a barrier as body language and some basic words offered means to communicate. Sometimes they met students or young families with children.

Ali (17) and Ghulam said they were happy to interact with some children they met there. "This reminds me of my family in Afghanistan," Ali said. His two younger siblings were only 6 and 4 years old when he left his country 2 years ago. Ghulam added, "When I see children I remember my nephew, he was only 2 years old when I left Ghazni."

Taty Sufiani, Head of Surabaya IDC is in full support of these excursions for detained asylum seekers and refugees. She believes it will help to ease their boredom and stress living in confinement. "Indeed there are activities provided for them by JRS and IOM, such as futsal, volleyball, and English classes. But recreational activities to see nature will give them the opportunity to recharge their feelings and offers a diversion," she explained.

By Daryadi Achmadi

Praying with Refugees in Thailand: Accompaniment is the cornerstone of service



JRS International Director Fr Thomas H Smolich SJ brought excitement and compassion to Burmese refugee students in the Ban Mai Nai Soi camp on the Thailand-Myanmar border.

Mae Hong Son, Thailand, 29 February 2016 – My recent visit to the JRS Asia-Pacific Region was my first as International Director; it was my first time to Cambodia and Indonesia, and a 1999 visit to Thailand felt like ancient history when I returned. I was truly impressed by the care and dedication of JRS team members I met.

While I knew the general contours of JRS' work in the region, I was also surprised to learn just whom we serve there. Afghans are our main focus in Indonesia, there are Eritreans in Cambodia, and it seems like the whole world has come to Thailand: Karenni and Karen refugees from Myanmar living in camps, Pakistanis and Somalis living in Bangkok.

As always, hearing the stories of refugees is moving and inspiring. As the head of JRS, I am privileged to hear stories from around the world, and I am constantly amazed at the

faith and fortitude of the people I meet. In the region, I also learned something about myself.

I enjoyed speaking with women and men who are optimistic: people who know the road ahead may be as difficult as the road they have already travelled, and find the hope to move forward. I met many such people: an Afghani family hoping to go to the USA; Karenni leaders envisioning a return to Myanmar; two Pakistani women with faith-filled optimism about the future, even though their waits for interview dates for refugee status were measured in years, not months.

But not all refugees are as fortunate or optimistic. I met an Iranian man whose request for refugee status had been denied; the rawness of his worry and confusion was not easy to absorb. While I met several Afghans

becoming proficient in English who were content to be in Indonesia, I also met a refugee English teacher for whom the road is hard and the extended wait difficult to bear. I felt what he was going through, and knew we would likely not feature such a moment on our website. Bottom line: I found myself present to all the stories I heard, and rediscovered the grace of walking through dark spaces.

In JRS, accompaniment is the touchstone of what we do. By walking with refugee and displaced women and men, we make connections that nourish us all. We also learn that each refugee's story is distinct and not all stories move where or how fast or how easily we would wish. In this sense, we are accompanying the paschal mystery lived in our time. While the moment of resurrection is often unknown, we have faith that it will come, be it hard or easy to wait for.

Reflection:

Especially in this Lenten season, let us pray for all men and women on the move, praying the presence of the One who loves us all will continue to accompany them and us.

--Rev Thomas H Smolich SJ, JRS International Director

Scripture:

Psalms 137: 1-9

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

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