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## Letter from the Director



An asylum seeker little girl in Bangkok, whom I met few times, always greets and talks to me in Thai. She goes to a Thai school now and communicates with her fellow Thai students. She has become a bridge between her parents who do not speak Thai, and the social worker, and the Thai community.

It is not surprising that children can learn faster than adults. Their developing brains grasp new information and knowledge faster. They are amazed by new things including cultures and people, and make connections.

In our accompaniment with refugees, especially in an environment where they are considered illegal and subject to arrest because of unfriendly policies, there is a finding of a study which shows that children tend to learn fear easily. Their parents keep them at home and in small rooms because they are afraid of immigration raids and the consequence of ending up in detention centers. They also have to live with the harsh realities of life. And it seems this situation provides no hope for the future.

Pope Francis, in his TED Talk on April 25, 2017, starts by saying the future is made of encounters between people. The connections of the whole with each single unit create happiness.

The door to that future is hope as it is like a seed which is small but will grow to a large tree in time. Or like yeast which is invisible but leaven the dough. He ended his talk saying that power needs to be connected with humility and tenderness so it becomes a service, a force for good. He wants to remind us that despite the stark realities of our societies which we have to take seriously, there is still a reason to hope for a brighter future by recognizing others as you.

The little girl with her ability to speak a new language, and children in general with their interest and curiosity of something new, may have been important actors to guide us through a series of encounters. It is a way to be amazed, surprised and ultimately, to be humbled by something beyond our limited spaces. It is a way to recognize her as you.

By Bambang Sipayung SJ

## Warm Welcome for a Refugee



20 teachers and staff members of Don Bosco Junior High School Manado listening to Azizullah's story of why he became refugee

"My life is threatened in Afghanistan. I was chased by the Taliban because of my face and my religion, and because I work for a foreign institution," Azizullah\* a refugee living in Manado Immigration Detention Centre (IDC) spoke before 20 teachers and staff members of Don Bosco Junior High School Manado recently during a public awareness session initiated by JRS. This session was aimed at sharing information about refugees and asylum seekers to the public and introducing JRS work for refugees and asylum seekers in Manado IDC.

JRS brought Azizullah to this session with a special permit from the IDC. That day, Azizullah told of the difficult life of Hazara people in Afghanistan, being the minority whose rights are violated and who are often treated unjustly. Longing for a life of peace, escaping threats and violence, Azizullah and his friends sought protection in other countries. His speech made a strong impression on the teachers and staff members. Knowing about refugee issues only from the news and media, they could finally meet a cross border refugee in person. They were also quite impressed by Azizullah's ability to speak Indonesian, even with a Manadonese accent. Some of the teachers admitted that they were not aware about refugees living in Manado. Some also shared their experiences of being displaced during the Ambon conflict years ago. Listening to Azizullah's story brought back memories of that difficult time. Even though the situation was quite different, they could understand what Azizullah had been through.

Then some of the teachers asked questions: How is the refugee status determination process? Who is responsible to pay for refugees' living costs? What are their daily activities in the detention centre? What are the refugees' backgrounds?

JRS answered all those questions and shared that refugees come from various different backgrounds. They are just the same as us; they have families, jobs and businesses, some have good educational degrees. Some were Bachelors, and some were Ph.D candidates. But they had to abandon their education and lost everything when they left their country in search of safety.

JRS Manado facilitates community service activities for refugees who like to share. Chrispina Maria Gracia 20 teachers and staff members of Don Bosco Junior High School Manado listening to Azizullah's story of why he became a refugee Warm Welcome for a Refugee 5 Jesuit Refugee Service Indonesia their knowledge and experience to local communities. For example, one refugee from Iraq is now regularly teaching Arabic language at IAIN Manado, and another one from Iran is now teaching graphics and website design at Citra Kasih Senior High School. Other refugees have also expressed their interests to be involved in community service activities.

JRS took this chance to offer this opportunity for Don Bosco School to facilitate such activities. The Headmaster of Don Bosco, Fr. Drs. Herman Mandagi, CMM expressed interest. He emphasized that refugees are also one of the Church's concern. The Catholic Social Teaching has boldly stated preferential option for the poor, including the refugees, those who had to flee and seek protection in other countries. As part of the church, both teachers and staff, individually or as one school institution, have to realize their concern in real action. The school is open for refugees to teach in the English club. This can also serve as a learning opportunity for students to meet those refugees who live near them.

In his closing words, Azizullah expressed his gratefulness for being welcomed as a guest in Don Bosco Junior High School. He experienced the warmth of Manado people, therefore, he'd like to return the kindness by doing something useful for local society. "Thank you for your kindness in welcoming us, refugees. We are here to serve you with our knowledge and skills," Azizullah said to the teachers and staff members.

Chrispina Maria Gracia

### Thailand: Reflections from Children's Day for urban refugees



Children and parents gather together at the venue patiently waiting for the event to begin (Damrong Cheenuang/JRS)

#### *"Children's Day for urban refugees"*

13 January 2017 was not an ordinary day. The staff of the JRS Urban Refugee Program in Bangkok held an event to commemorate Children's Day in Thailand. Children of urban asylum seekers and refugees, along with their parents, were invited to participate. Games, art activities, ice-cream, snacks and an entertaining mime show were prepared to create enjoyment and excitement for them, not to mention the balloons, colorful decorations, and also plenty of prizes!!

For JRS staff, the day represented a chance for us to allow children the delights of childhood. For the children this was a precious opportunity, for many of them are excluded from opportunities for education and recreation in Bangkok. They do

not get the chance of living a normal life as a child. They are away from home and close families, living in cramped apartments with only one bed for the whole family. They have few toys and experience the same fears and worries like their parents do, instead of experiencing joy.

To begin a short video was played in the hall of King Rama IX , in order to pay respect to the beloved King, who passed away in October last year. Thailand's National Anthem was also played and all the people in the hall stood up. Some of these refugee children were able to sing the anthem quite well although Thai is not their first language.

Four activity corners started simultaneously at the event: two games (Ping-Pong Ball corner, Throwing corner), a writing activity and an art activity. In the Ping-Pong ball corner, children were to carry a Ping-Pong ball on a spoon from the starting line to the other side and back without it falling. In the Throwing game, children were to throw a triangle-form stack of plastic cups with a small soft doll. They were so excited while participating in these games! In the Writing Corner and Art Corner, the excitement of the children was the same.

When the children lined up to claim their games prizes, it turned a bit chaotic. The crowds of children tried to get as many prizes as they possibly could, grabbing all kinds of toys that they wanted, even though they had been told to queue. Some parents also got themselves in the act. Any proper distribution of prizes was practically unmanageable. Some children who did not get the prizes cried or went away disappointed. Some parents and children who had received a prize were asking for even more prizes!

After the break for food, snacks and ice-cream, the children gathered back to the hall to watch the mime show. The mime show was great entertainment for both children and adults. Everyone was transfixed and joyful while watching the funny performer with his tricks. The smile on everyone's face was priceless!

This Children's Day event left me and other staff members with important reflections and lessons. What I mean is not about the technical preparation or the organization of the event, but it was about the people we serve.

Despite the chaotic crowds scrambling for prizes, the children pulling down balloons full of excitement, and other incidents, I saw real joy in the faces of the children and parents. A woman who came with her only daughter approached me personally, saying "Thank you for all you have done for my daughter and me. I am so blessed." Her comment touched

me! Some of my colleagues also happily reported that the parents expressed their gratitude and happiness to JRS for holding the event for them.

Perhaps as human beings we should look through the eyes of our clients – the refugees – so that we are able to understand more about them. For these children coming to an event where there are colorful balloons, plenty of toys, a huge basket of ice-cream, and a funny performer is like coming to an amusement park. They forget all stresses, worries and fears and there is only joy, even if only for a day!

When you can make someone happy, feeling joy instead of sorrow, it is an invaluable gift. In return you get emotion, something that cannot be quantified or bought. Getting a genuine expression of gratitude from someone who comes from a situation of deprivation – like our clients – makes all our hard work worthwhile.

This is the wonderful thing of our work at JRS: to provide excellent service, accompaniment, advocacy, and to see the joy experienced by these children and their parents is our gift in return.

These children have shown to the world who they really are. They have proven that they are stronger, tougher, and more persistent through difficult times. They are excluded from education, but they become more motivated to get other learning opportunities outside a school setting. They have shown to the world that they are extraordinary children. They believe that they can change the world. They have more faith than others do, which helps them endure. To me, they have also changed my life.

By JRS Thailand Staff

“Let the children come to me and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19:14)

## Myanmar & Thailand: Weaving the future by fostering understanding



Small huts where refugees live in Camp 1 on the border of Thailand & Myanmar. (Fr. Bambang Sipayung SJ)

### Weaving the Future

The future is never an easy question to deal with, mostly because it is unknown territory for most of us, and I can see that clearly after I met refugees in the Mae Hong Son camps. I saw their dejected faces and they felt emotionally downhearted when I met and talked with them. I even realized how a seemingly clear future of being granted resettlement can turn into another incident of waiting as I heard of two families having to return to the camps due to the executive order of the US President in January this year. My colleague from JRS Loikaw said he noticed a lack of confidence among them after he had a brief chat with a few of them during our meeting.

Our visit to the camp was part of a coordinated meeting and joint effort between JRS Mae Hong Son from Thailand, and

JRS Loikaw from Myanmar to prepare for the possible future return of refugees from Mae Hong Son camps. The first coordination meeting took place in November last year in Myanmar with three JRS Mae Hong Son staff meeting with organizations working in Loikaw, the Kayah State Education Department, and of course myself and Mariano who are part of JRS Loikaw. This past February was our chance to visit the refugee camps, the first time for both of us to meet people of our own ethnicities who had fled to the Thai – Myanmar border because of conflict.

I experienced war directly in Kayah State in the 1990s and the suffering of the people fleeing their houses and having to stay in the IDP camps. I know some people fled from Kayah State while some others stayed. I did not flee the war and cross the border to live in a refugee camp, this was my first time to visit the refugee camps in Mae Hong Son, Thailand.

It was the first time for me to have direct exposure to people who had fled our home state. It was also a beginning for me to cross over the gap of what their absence was to so many of us who had stayed. Some of them are my relatives, distant relatives, or students I worked with. Many of them, the young generation in particular, are not known to me and have never even been to or even know Kayah State.

### Challenging Moment

As we arrived in the camps, I was informed their houses are small huts that are close to each other on the slope of the hills. It is an hour's journey from the center of Mae Hong Son, with either a dusty road during dry season or a slippery muddy road during the rainy season. I had a hard time moving from one hut to another and I can imagine others may have had some problems or maybe not as they are used to going up and down the hills for daily routine tasks. I also learned that three years ago, there was a big fire that consumed many huts and killed 30 people. It was unbelievably sad and shocking for me to learn how much they have to overcome and to cope with such a hard life in the camp.

The refugees in the camps depend on international support for their daily needs in the camps such as food, shelter, health and education. They are not allowed to work outside the camps and are confined to move only within the camps. I understand their worries of being dependent on food rations and aid because I know that this is not a sustainable way to live. Some communities can stay outside the camp, a long neck tribe, to create “a long neck village” and earn money from tourists in Mae Hong Son. But how to end this encampment when

peace talks have not reached the final stage to guarantee their safety and dignity upon return to their home land. On top of that, I wonder how the community who stayed in Kayah state, my community, will provide them with a livelihood or job opportunities.

My colleague had a discussion with two high school students who are in their final year of high school. They asked questions about the situation, the education system and its quality in Myanmar, with some practical questions regarding the possibility of continuing their higher education at universities in Kayah State. Pursuing higher education is a priority for some students in the camps, with the challenge being recognition of their camp-based education. Listening and observing all of what goes on in the camp, I see a challenging moment for both JRS Mae Hong Son and JRS Loikaw to work for the greater good of these people.

### **Fostering Understanding**

Our visit helped us to understand the reality of the people JRS Mae Hong Son has been accompanying and working with for more than twenty years. The work of JRS in education is fundamental to keeping the fire of learning going among the second and third generations of refugees in the camps. It also helps to lay a foundation that learning and knowledge are about a process of widening horizons and fostering understanding.

The long absence and separation between these refugees in the camps and the people who stayed in Kayah State, like my JRS Loikaw colleague and I did, is the sense of separation where misunderstandings and negative perceptions on both sides can prevent mutual understanding of what happened to us. Expanding horizons by a direct encounter with those whom I have long been separated is an important step to make.

It will foster an understanding during a time where division and misleading information is overwhelming. Listening to each side's stories to create a platform for fostering understanding is necessary and an important step.

By Rosemary, JRS Myanmar Staff

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