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Letter from the Director



Fr Bambang Sipayung SJ - Regional Director of JRS Asia-Pacific

Welcoming, Protecting, Promoting and Integrating are the four key words of Pope Francis' message for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2017. Pope Francis continues by committing the Church to realizing these four proposed initiatives, but it is indispensable to have a contribution of the political entities and civil societies according to their own responsibilities. And currently, two Global Compacts, one for migrants and one for refugees, are on the drafting and approving processes from states leaders in the world.

This edition of Diakonia brings stories of the refugees JRS Asia Pacific serve, and tries to bring out how those words and initiatives, if achieved, will set a horizon for the refugees, migrants and asylum seekers around the globe. Hostile policies and attitudes towards refugees, asylum seekers and migrants affect them, putting them in limbo questioning whether it is still necessary to have a hope for their future. Daily realities gradually and often drastically put them into the margin, sometimes in their desperateness; we too start question hope and solidarity of human beings.

Killing hope and erasing solidarity from our human dictionary surely has a detrimental effect for our common human lives. As Pope Francis said, hope is the door that opens onto the future and future is made of encounters between people. Encounters between

people, even with other creatures, are moments which connect us to achieve and to work for common good. What we see now is a tendency to take out all these sense of connection and desire to work for common good through policies, attitude and media including social media which divide and comfortably close our own circle. Analogically it supplies us with a bad air.

Nature never ceases to impress me on how to change bad air and atmosphere into something beneficial and even useful for human beings and other creatures. These people we serve, who live these challenges, are the example on how to look for an answer and a solution, and on how we should act. Hopefully their stories and lives will become a matter of urgency to decide what should the policies look like.

By Bambang Sipayung SJ

Thailand: World Refugee Day with the urban refugees in Bangkok



Children playing during World Refugee Day, Bangkok, Thailand. (Nimco, JRS Thailand)

"This is not about sharing a burden. It is about sharing a global responsibility, based not only upon the broad idea of our common humanity but also on the very specific obligations of international law. The root problems are war and hatred, not people who flee; refugees are among the first victims of terrorism." — UN Secretary-General, António Guterres

World Refugee Day is observed every year by people around the globe on the 20th of June in order to raise public awareness about refugee's situations throughout the world. This day has been celebrated since 2001 when the United Nations General Assembly instituted it. It was established in order to honor refugees' courage and contributions to their communities. It provides an opportunity to bring refugees and the community together in a friendly environment where they can share their cultures, talk to one another and build a sense of community.

The UN Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) theme for 2017 World Refugee Day was "Embracing refugees to celebrate our common humanity".

For this occasion, JRS in collaboration with other organizations celebrated World Refugee Day with the asylum seekers and refugees communities in Bangkok. All the activities were dedicated to celebrate World Refugee Day in solidarity with refugees all around the world.

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JRS and its partners organized three different events in order to help refugees share their perspectives and to encourage continued hope. On the 17th and 19th of June, two events were held in Bangkok. Asylum seekers and refugees from different communities were invited to the event. Sri Lankan, Vietnamese and Sudanese communities presented and shared their cultural food, and some games were also prepared for the children.

On the 6th of July, the third event occurred. One hundred persons from the Somali, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan communities participated. During this event, members of these communities shared their points of view and had discussions. Somali youth participated in games and dances. The Bangkok Refugee Youth Club prepared lunch.

This kind of celebration is a reminder to the community that integration is one of the pillars of solidarity. Integration and hospitality are not only about opening our borders, but opening our communities. The latter does not result from the decisions of a few leaders, but from our own personal decisions. The power to change our countries starts with our communities. As the Pope Francis said during the World Day of migrants and refugees: 'Our shared response may be articulated by four verbs: to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate'.

Somali refugee women in Thailand find solace in art therapy



Dreams of home. Somali refugee women use paint and fabric to depict the sky and the national Somali flag. (Oratip Nimkannon/JRS)

Six women in colourful hijabs sit in a brightly-lit room, quietly dipping paintbrushes into pots of blue, yellow and black poster paint. One young woman, Nala*, 25, glances down at her work—the outline of a skinny dark stick figure sketched onto white fabric — and a faint smile stretches across her face.

"This is my daughter," she tells the other women, who fall silent as they study the painting. It is the first time that Nala, whose child was left behind in Somalia when she fled to Bangkok nearly 2.5 years ago, has spoken about her past or her family.

The 3-month support group, run by Jesuit Refugee Service's registered art therapist Oratip Nimkannon with the Urban Refugee Program, has brought the women together for art therapy sessions launched earlier this year to help asylum seekers process loss while creating a sense of community and friendship.

Although the first few sessions provoked anxiety in many of the women, who suffer from unresolved trauma stemming from Somalia's brutal 30-year civil war, as the support group sessions unfolded, the women began to paint and speak more openly about the lives they had left behind and their uncertainties about the

future.

"I don't know where my next home will be," said Aaden*, 18, who has been waiting for resettlement to a third country for two years. Aaden's painting depicted a single-storey house with a small door and windows — a sharp contrast to the towering and overcrowded apartment building she now shares with hundreds of other low-income families.

The process for refugee status determination can take up to six years in Thailand, where dozens of Somali asylum seekers have sought refuge from a protracted conflict that has sent more than one million people fleeing across international borders since 1991, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Even for those recognized by UNHCR to be refugees, the future is uncertain as resettlement possibilities dwindle and local integration is unavailable.

Since Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohammed was ushered into power in February 2017, he has officially declared the country a 'war zone' and sworn to eradicate Al-Shabab and other warring militants from the fragile state on the Horn of Africa.

The refugees are both victims and survivors of three decades of state instability — and their vulnerability shows itself in their artwork.

In an earlier art therapy session, 19-year-old young woman, Khaadija*, asked if she could paint a tumultuous black sky. Reserved and soft-spoken, those who know Khaadija said she often looks sad and seems to have a lot on her mind.

"Surviving years of civil war and inter-clan conflict has affected many of the women's abilities to trust and feel safe in the world," explained Nimkannon, a registered art therapist with the Australian and New Zealand Arts Therapy Association.

According to World Psychiatric Association (WPA), art therapy is a potent tool to help individuals reconstruct their interpretation of daily reality and process traumatic emotional material.

Art is both "a clue to the inner structure of the brain... [and] a means of potential transformation", notes the WPA.

Psychiatrists also stress that displaced individuals feel bereavement from the loss of cultural norms, religious customs and social support that accompanies migration. Without help, the compounding stresses increase their risks of mental illness, reports a study co-authored by Dinesh Bhugra, a mental health professor at King's College based in London.

In Somalia, where clan relations and complex kinship structures dominate collective social life, the absence of loved ones can be particularly devastating.

"Social connection is an important but missing element in the lives of many young Somali women seeking asylum in Bangkok," said Nimkannon, who says the safe space provided by art therapy aids psychological healing.

Painting images of home, as popular Somali songs peel in the background, the women's comfortable chatter seems worlds away than that of the bloodshed and inter-clan violence now taking place on Somali soil, where roughly half a million

people have died since the country descended into chaos thirty years ago.

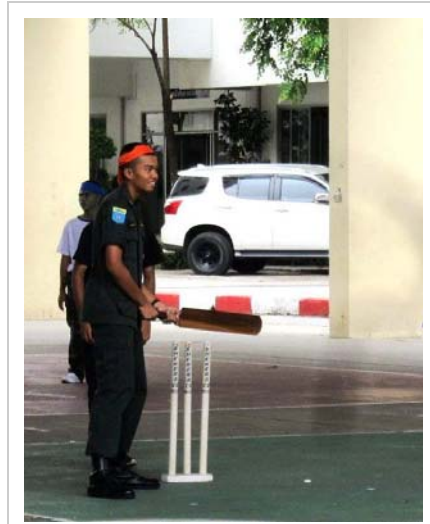
"The women have found support in each other's company, learned to voice their needs and trust the therapist as well as each other," said Nimkannon.

"Though the sessions are not enough to create long-lasting change, the women have been given back some sense of control over their lives."

*Names have been changed to protect identity.

The program is funded with a State Department grant from the Bureau of Population Refugees, and Migration.

Urban Education Project: Creating dialogue between Thai and refugee students



Beer, MTTs student, discovering cricket and playing with refugee students from the JRS Education Program. Luukmi/JRS

Fifty chairs and a stage were installed for this occasion. 50 chairs that would be soon filled by young boys and girls from different countries, with different lives, different cultures and different languages. The first to arrive were the Thai students of the Military Technical Training School in Bangkok welcoming the event. They waited, impatient to meet their soon-to-be new friends, and prepared the room. Then, the youth group from the asylum seekers and refugees communities arrived. Suddenly, the enthusiasm was overflowing amongst the students. They knew that this day will be about meeting new persons, sharing cultures and learning from each other.

Integration goes through education

In urban areas like Bangkok, access to education is a serious issue for asylum seekers and refugee children. Thailand became a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992, agreeing that education should be available and accessible to all children without discrimination. Unfortunately, restrictive government policies for asylum seekers and refugees continue to prevent parents from sending their children to school.

As Thailand did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention, the country's policies do not distinguish between the asylum seeking/refugee population and other undocumented immigrants. Refugees and asylum seekers in Thailand are considered illegal

residents. Parents fear arrest if they escort their child to school. As a result, education is inaccessible for many children and young adults.

JRS Thailand is very concerned about asylum seekers' and refugee children's inability to access education. This is why JRS Thailand decided to launch the Urban Education Project for Refugees in January 2017. It intends to give access to education to refugees and asylum seekers in Bangkok. It will also promote awareness and understanding in the Thai community of asylum seekers' and refugee children's dilemma.

"I want to learn how to be accepted by the Thai population"

Throughout the day, twenty-five young refugees from JRS Urban Education project and twenty-five Thai students from the Military Technical Training School met each other. The two groups discussed and mingled in order to get to know everyone. After a brief introduction, they showed their traditional clothing from Thailand, Pakistan, Somalia and Afghanistan. Then, they shared a meal of traditional food from each country. Later, everyone played cricket, a sport very popular in Pakistan.

Abdul Basit, a nineteen year old Pakistani student said, "Today, I can feel equal to Thai students. I felt lucky to meet them, especially as they are in military school. It's not everyday you meet Navy and Air Force personnel!"

After this special day of exchange, discussion and games, Thai students were surprised by the culture and diversity that refugee communities bring to Thailand. This project helped Thai students learn about cultures, traditions, food, and games they had not known about before. They gained appreciation for multiculturalism.

Beer, a sixteen year old Thai electrical student at MTTs said, "It was an opportunity to discuss the reasons why refugees are coming to Thailand. I heard about many of these countries before but not very much. I talked to many refugees and I would love to participate in more activities like this! "

This day helped promote awareness within the Thai community about the situation of the asylum seekers and refugees in Bangkok and to better understand them. JRS Thailand will continue to focus on access to education as it supports education centers established in Bangkok as well as peer support activities. JRS Thailand will also continue to support education programs along the Thai/Myanmar border.

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Editor: Elphie Galland