



To Serve

JRS To Accompany

To Advocate

Serving the forgotten refugees

diakronia

*News from the Jesuit Refugee Service - Asia Pacific
Issue 70, September 2007*



dignity in despair

Diakonia, meaning "service" in Greek, is published three times in a year by the Asia Pacific Regional Office. It aims to bring forth reflective stories and testimonies directly from the communities we work with to the reader and highlight the various issues concerns and the aspects of the displaced persons and forgotten refugees whom JRS aims to accompany, to serve and to advocate their cause here in the Asia Pacific region.

Cover photo: Urban refugee grandmother and grandchild sitting and looking on while the World Refugee Day 07 celebrations are on in Bangkok, Thailand.
© Photo by Sanjay Gathia, JRS.

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Mok Cham Pae students looking at the display of messages written by their friends for the refugee children in the Mae Hong Song camp. As part of the public awareness on refugee issues, JRS Thailand had made a small powerpoint presentation to the children in the local school in Mae Hong Song. The response was very positive.

Photo JRS Thailand

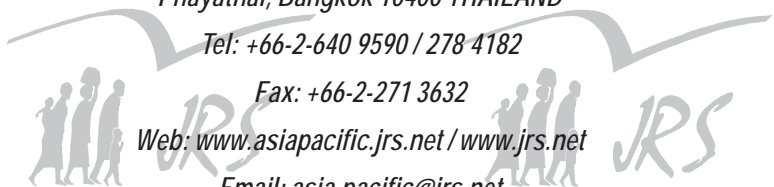
**For any further enquiries please contact:
JRS-Asia Pacific (JRS-AP) Regional Office
43 Rachwithi Soi 12, Victory Monument,
Phayathai, Bangkok 10400 THAILAND**

Tel: +66-2-640 9590 / 278 4182

Fax: +66-2-271 3632

Web: www.asiapacific.jrs.net / www.jrs.net

Email: asia.pacific@jrs.net



Dignity in Despair

By Mr. Sanjay Gathia, Regional Information Advocacy Officer

“World Refugee Day” celebrations were held on June 20 and all concerned organisations held events to mark the rights of the refugees and highlight their plights. Activities were organised by the refugees themselves, highlighting their own cultural heritage which they have got, and trying to voice their concerns through such events.

While on one hand there were these noted celebrations, messages and events held in countries across the region, post two months of the World Refugee Day, JRS colleagues in the Asia Pacific region have noted an increase in the state response to close their borders, making immigration procedures more stringent, increasing sea patrols to stop “boat arrivals” and in some instances simply making life a “living hell” in the detention centers.

Colleagues are finding the life of the detainees becoming harder and harsher with the changes in the attitude of the governments’ and its officials. Perhaps it can be sadly said that the security syndrome has overtaken the humanitarian concerns for those who are feeling for their lives. During their work in accompanying, serving and advocating for the rights of the displaced people, asylum seekers and refugees in the region, colleagues find that these people are left with no choice and subject to the governments’ co-operation or sometimes whims which could be unpredictable.

Civil society, human rights groups, and concerned institutions and people have also noted the change in some of the governments responses in the region being driven by national security reasons and more so a worrisome xenophobic sentiment being used for political gains. The already vulnerable people are becoming even more marginalized.

It is no wonder that small school-going children call

refugees as “*aliens or immigrants*” when asked, a crystal clear message from the children in Thailand when some colleagues asked them. How is such an opinion shaped, where do such thoughts come from? It is no surprise when one hears high officials talking the same language and treating people from different countries and ethnic groups in a demeaning manner, these sentiments get reflected in the speech of the small children.

Yet it was also surprisingly a delight to find the same children open to different ideas with an eagerness to learn and be friends which children in the refugee camps and write messages of solidarity, hope and encouragement to the refugee children in the enclosed camps, from where they are not able to venture out for any thing and have a glimpse of the world outside the camps. A situation which presents a contradictory nature of their commitment to the Child Rights Convention which most of the governments in the region are signatory to.

Public and government opinion needs to be like these open minded children who are eager to help, to befriend and to give moral and mental support, (if not material support to sustain them), not to rebuke people who have been mentally, physically and socially displaced from their place of origin and are living on the mercy of their benefactors and host countries.

Refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people still need a lot of support particularly from host countries and where they could be tentatively resettled. Their cry for humanitarian needs must be understood, felt and addressed and not lost in the quagmire of words and statements voicing criticism or support and stacked up as paper work to be shown around. There must be practical steps taken to help them overcome the despair they feel.

They need a place to find peace, rest and recuperate. They are looking for a place to find their dignity back, a chance to be productive and to contribute their efforts to the society. There are some who would like to work, to study and even become teachers, doctors, business people and some even want to take up social work and help others like themselves to overcome their own destituteness.

Nationalism and inconsistent policies must not allow our sense of being human and providing humanitarian assistance to be swept aside due to national security concerns however valid. ■



Thai children eager to answer questions on refugee issues. Photo JRS Thailand

Educating the Children

By Ms. Dominique Maidment, Education Programme Assistant, JRS-Thailand



Mok Cham Pae school children sending their solidarity messages to the refugee children in the camp

World Refugee Day is a big event in the two Karenni Camps in Mae Hong Son. Students march to one of the big meeting grounds, and listen with the rest of the community to speeches from community leaders encouraging them to stay strong, to continue their studies, to have hope for their future. Sports tournaments are organized so that the finals fall on World Refugee Day.

But what about outside the camp? Karenni Camp 1 is in Muang district of Mae Hong Son, only an hour from the provincial capital, but it's hard to find awareness raising activities here. Often in conversations with Mae Hong Son residents, JRS staff find ourselves explaining where we work, who the refugees are and where they come from. Media images of people from Burma are overwhelmingly negative, focusing on illegal immigration and on the threat of diseases (such as drug-resistant TB) that the immigrants are said to carry.

We rarely find information about the ongoing fighting that Karenni refugees are fleeing when they seek sanctuary in Thailand. Mindful of the third part of JRS' mission, to advocate, JRS decided to address this lack of information in the wider community. As our work in Mae Hong Son is in education, it seemed appropriate to begin in a school.

Mok Cham Pae is a high school outside Mae Hong Son. The grade 9 students, dressed in their matching scouts uniforms (so different from the students in camp), helped to set up the projector and then sat quietly.

"What's a refugee?" At first, nobody answered. Then, a voice from the back: "Someone from another country." And another: "An alien. An immigrant."

Exchanges of words from Mok Cham Pae school

*"To all refugee friends,
Just want you to concentrate on your studying cause your
brighter future is waiting for you, don't give up. Be patient.
From your student friends"*

*"Don't give up, we will support you, don't forget you have
friends here.
From Mae Hong Son people, Mok Cham Pae school."*

*"How are you? We have seen your pictures. You looked
different from us but it doesn't matter.
We will support you.
If you are discouraged, just think of us."*

The attitudes of the students reflect those of the wider community. We emphasized in our presentation that refugees do have to leave their country, not because they want to migrate or are seeking better opportunities, but to escape from persecution. This distinction between refugees and migrants is not often made in the media.

We briefly discussed refugee situations around the world, and then closer to Thailand. As the students warmed up, they became more forthcoming. "Aung San Suu Kyi!" shouted one girl, as she saw a picture of the pro-democracy leader come up on the screen. Her friends giggled.

Our presentation ended with an explanation of daily life for students in Karenni Camp 1. The Mok Cham Pae students listened attentively. They were excited to have the opportunity to write a message to the camp students they had learnt about, taking the chance to ask questions - "We would like to know, how are you doing? What do you eat? What's going on there?" The students from Mok Cham Pae encouraged their refugee counterparts, and it's moving that many of them expressed solidarity with the refugees.

We are translating the comments to take back to camp for the students there, and we think they'll be pleased to read of the students in Mae Hong Son who are thinking of them. It's heartening for us to think of the change in the Mok Cham Pae students' attitude towards refugees after just a little exposure to the realities of their lives. We hope to continue to raise awareness of the situation of the refugees in Mae Hong Son, not least on future World Refugee Days. ■

Dreaming of Going Home

By Hla Htay, Burmese Refugee in Cambodia
via Rebekah Leong, Legal Officer, JRS Cambodia

When I look back at the past, my heart becomes hard because I miss my mum so much. Actually, I left my family seventeen years ago. My family is in Arakan state of Burma where people are ever crying for freedom, equality, justice, and democracy. And I left my country ten years ago. Leaving my family and my country is not the same. I left my family for Rangoon, the capital of my country to continue my education. However, I left my country for Thailand to escape from the military that are always looking out for the democratic activists.

Because I participated in democratic movements, which the military saw as a threat, I had to leave my country and loose my mother. I left my country for Thailand in the last week of 1996. Later, I became a member of Arakan League for Democracy (ALD-Thailand) and RPLC (Rakhaing Patriotic Literature Club) in Thailand. I became a reporter in 2003 after studying journalism.

I arrived in Phnom Penh in August 2006¹ and applied at the UNHCR office to be a refugee. Two months later, fortunately, I was recognized as a refugee. Sure, being a refugee I feel that I have become more human with some rights compared to my previous life in Thailand as an illegal immigrant. However, I realize that I'm not as real as other human beings yet.

Whoever I am, whatever I do, and wherever I stay, the people and place I have never forgotten are my family and my country. I miss my mum as well as my home land. I hope that I can return to my mum and my country one day when the doves can fly peacefully. Then I will explain my mum, who I am and that I've been ever dreaming of returning to her and my land. ■

(Footnotes)

¹ One day, I went to Laos with the hope of getting a Thai re-entry visa, I was unfortunately denied by Thai embassy there. So, I contacted the UNHCR office in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia.



Refugee women in Bangkok displaying their cultural skills.

I Have No Answer

By Hla Htay

Lying down, Thinking how, Quietly

In my rough bed
By putting one hand
On my forehead

My mum suddenly appears
In my imagination of the world
She greets me with her warm smile
I feel I'm in a peaceful land

She says,
"I miss you so much, my son."
And asks me,
"When do you come back into my arms?"

My body shakes
Like a building high
When a powerful earthquake hits.

My strong heart melts
Like an ice-cube crying
When the sunlight is beating.

I feel so suffocated.
The whole face of mine is in an ocean.

I try to answer my mum
When I come back into her arms
But I find no answer
Yes, I have no answer

I try to answer
Again and again
When and when
But I find no answer
Sure, I have no answer
Whenever my country is in danger.

My mum suddenly disappears
From my imagination of the world
I am left wrestling with tears
Weeping deeply, nobody near.

Testimony of a Former Patient

By John Zam Lian Hang, 17 year-old Chin from Burma

via Leslie Tan, Information Advocacy Officer, ACTS (JRSAP partner in Malaysia)



I fled from my country in 2006 fearing for my life.

In that year, soldiers came into my village and forced me to carry boxes of ammunition and follow them into the jungle. When I refused, I was hit in the face and in

the shin with a rifle butt by an army officer who was forcing me to be an "arms porter". My leg was so badly hurt and mangled that I was sent to a hospital for treatment. After I was treated and fearing that I'd be enlisted as a porter, I fled the country.

Editorial note: John stayed at PERCH convalescence home for four months while following up on hospital appointments. He attained full refugee status and was resettled to the United States on July 23. He is now a healthy picture of himself compared to what he was when he first came to Malaysia and he is full of hope for the future. His dream – to study hard and to become a Pastor, ministering to the needs of the poor.

Once I arrived in Malaysia, I tried to find a job to help my family back home, but my leg was starting to hurt badly and the wound had become worse. I became really depressed. I was informed by my friends that there was a mobile clinic in Kuala Lumpur conducted by an NGO, providing free consultations and medicine.

I went to the clinic and was told that I had tuberculosis of the bone after getting an X-ray done on my leg. I was then sent to the hospital to receive treatment and after that I was placed into a convalescence home in Batu Arang, some 100 kilometers north of Kuala Lumpur.

At the convalescence home, I was moved by the selfless giving of the staff to the other patients at the home as well, the staff gave of themselves without looking at the colour of the patients' skin or their ethnicity, and for the first time in months, I felt at peace – peace within myself and peace in the surroundings. It was during this time that I rediscovered my faith in God.

"My experience at the home has been one of warmth, compassion and goodness and at PERCH it was like a family – there were times of sharing and laughter among us patients and the staff and I especially enjoyed our meals together as one big family.

In time, my wound healed and I had to leave the home but for the memories I have of the home - I will always carry them in my heart." ■

St. Francis and St. Clare Award for Distinguished Achievement in Peace and Social Justice to Mrs. Emilie Clevenger Ketudat

Emilie Clevenger Ketudat earned a bachelor of science degree in chemistry and mathematics from Marian College in 1959 and a master of science degree in chemistry from University of Florida in 1961. Before joining the U.S. Peace Corps, Emilie Clevenger Ketudat was an instructor in chemistry at University of Florida.

The first Marian College Distinguished Alumni Award was given in 1969 and continued periodically throughout the next 15 years. In 1996, a growing awareness of alumni accomplishments encouraged Marian College to begin recognizing and celebrating individual achievements in a significant and deliberate way. In that year, six award categories that reflect the values and mission of Marian College were established by the national alumni board.

Emilie's interest in peace and social justice eventually led her to Bangkok, Thailand, in 1962 where she continued her role as educator, lecturing students in chemistry and chemical technology at Chulalongkorn University. Following her successful career in academia, Emilie was moved to increase her involvement with the U.S. Peace Corps and became a full-time volunteer working with refugees, migrants, and civilian survivors of landmine accidents in Thailand. She helped organize an international

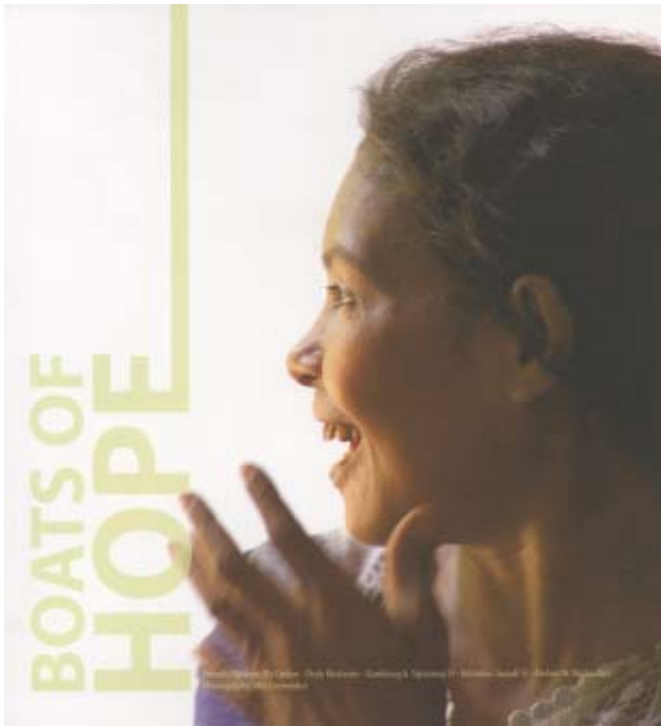


conference to develop a comprehensive plan of action for the resettlement of the Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees in Manila; a plan implemented by the Asian Pacific regional office of Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) located in Bangkok. JRS took the lead role in finding a solution that would provide for the dignity of individual refugees and refugee families.

Emilie worked diligently to address the tragedy befalling Cambodian citizens fleeing across the Thai-Cambodian border. Her efforts earned a welcome but unexpected

achievement when Thailand signed the treaty banning mines known as the Ottawa Convention on December 3, 1997.

For over a decade, Emilie has led the campaign to ban landmines in Thailand and Southeast Asia. As the Ban Landmines Coordinator for the Jesuit Refugee Service Asia-Pacific, she works with local and international NGOs to destroy stockpiles, remove mines, provide mine-risk education, and assist landmine survivors and their communities. ■



On 20 June, JRS-Indonesia did a public launch of its latest publication "Boats of Hope" which recounts the story of a Kesui community that were driven out of their homes and their eventual return journey home. The Kesui who had to flee their homeland fled by boat after outbreaks of violence which began back in 2000. Prior to the outbreak of conflict, the different religions had lived side by side in peace.

Kesui society is traditionally based on the importance of kinship ties which had proved to be stronger than the individual's religion. And though the Kesui are now home, the needs of both returnees and local communities must be catered for so as to avoid future clashes. With this book JRS advocates for the islands future and its development with the need for the Government and Civil Society to address these issues and prevent future clashes.

Fights between Christian and Muslim Ambonese in Jakarta during the riots in 1998 brought about feelings of religious hatred among those involved. JRS staff has felt that the military's decision to send hundreds of young Mollucan rioters back home could have been a major trigger for the spread of violence in Moluccas itself. As in stressful times people do not easily distinguish between gossip and real news, violence easily spread out to other islands including Kesui.

The recommendations developed by JRS to the government based on the case of Kesui can easily be used to develop overall strategies for conflict management or even prevention as it focusses on the need for better targeted development assistance for isolated areas. JRS Moluccas field staff recounted their experience in accompanying and serving the Kesui refugees, from their time in the refugee camps to their return. The stories in the book also showed the important role women played in the reconciliation process. ■

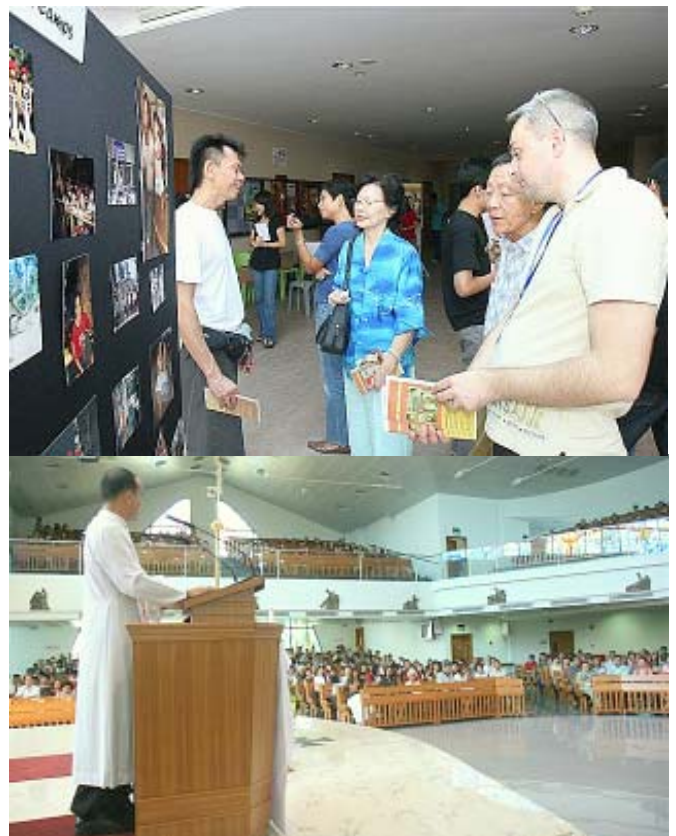
JRS-Singapore: Commemorating World Refugee Day with Prayer and Exhibition

To commemorate this year's WRD, we focused on the situation of the Burmese refugees and held the following activities:

23/24 June - Exhibition on Burmese refugees at Church of the Holy Spirit. Video explaining why the refugees fled to Thailand shown at 5 masses with sharing by Fr. Mark, Karenni Chaplain of the Karenni Catholic community in Mae Hong Song based in Thailand. Shan handicraft sold with tag explaining how purchase can give dignity to refugees (Joe will be happy to hear that everything has been sold out).

29 June - WRD mass celebrated by our Archbishop with 12 other priests (a record for us !). Video show; homily by Fr. Mark. About 500 persons attended mass. Burmese Catholic Community (BCC) partnered us in organizing the event; they led the choir and sang the Our Father and final hymn in Burmese. BCC also prepared Burmese food for the fellowship after mass and dressed in their various ethnic traditional costumes to perform dances. At end of mass, one of our volunteers (Jeremy) shared about what touched him when he visited the Shan camp in May 2007.

30 June - Talks by Fr Mark on his work at Mae Hong Song and peacekeeping efforts, and Rosemary of ACTS on their work in Malaysia. ■



JRS Singapore invited Fr Mark, Karenni Chaplain to say the mass and also share the situation on the Burmese border with the people of Singapore. A public awareness display was also put up. Photos by JRS Singapore.

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