



Serving the forgotten refugees

To Accompany To Serve To Advocate



**"...I have suffered for over 20 years...but I do not give up hope..."
declared a refugee during our conversation in a camp.**

To an outsider impatience grows by the minute while to them whose lives are directly affected resilience and hope is the only way forward. Some from the international community, namely the West, continue to clamour for imposed sanctions including economic and trade sanctions, visa restrictions, etc. There is relentless demand for the military regime to end its present course (rightly so!), release Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, and establish democracy (on what/whose model?). Would these measures automatically bring about peace and prosperity—promised by "democracy" advocates—to a people suffering for over 40 years and solve the present Burma stalemate?



Clinging to hope in humanity and God.

An aspect of pre-/post-independent Burma needs consideration. Burma has deeply rooted historical baggage of ethnic struggles/grievances, albeit legitimately, against the ruling Burman majority. Internal strife among political, social and ethnic communities continued and escalated in 1962 military coup. The rest is history--a sad and painful common knowledge since the dawn of the ruling military regime. This has been further exacerbated when splinter groups from the same ethnic community broke ranks and formed other alliances of interests. A further fragmentation, sometimes includes responding to violence with violence.

prisoners, and imposing democracy (what/whose model?) re-establish a new Union of Burma and solve the present stalemate?

Given the history, it is feared that the abrupt collapse of the present regime will ignite an overt warfare which will involve the different ethnic communities and its splinter groups. With the fall of this perverse centre, the door is open for a free for all--communities fighting to rest power for themselves, for their own state or interests. The violence is imminent. It will be a chaos that we do not need and thrusts us further into a refugee/displacement crisis. (Remember Iraq? The 'regime-change experts' with true 'weapons of mass destruction' and falsified evidence vigorously asserted that they will be welcomed with flowers as liberators! The result—hundreds of thousands killed and over 4 million Iraqi refugees. The ensuing civil war was a diabolical intention of the 'experts', contrary to biased media propoganda, to destabilize the country in order to impose a rule—old imperial strategy of divide and rule).

The struggle goes on with some minority groups explicitly demanding their own independent state or country, urging others to fight for this cause. There are still other minorities in exile desirous of working on and hoping for a union of 'federated states' with some degree of autonomy for each--without breaking the Union. In a perverse sense, the present regime is maintaining the "Union" of Burma albeit superficial and certainly brutal. That the regime needs to change is not a question. But how? Again, would the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political

It appears that little thought is given to this scenario as a probability in Burma. A business man engaged in Burma was sharp enough

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I have suffered...

to recognize that in the event of an abrupt collapse of the present regime, the outcome will be colossal chaos. Historical evidence gives credence to this probability, shared by a scholar from this region. Those from afar seem to rant and rave the rhetoric of "democracy" and "freedom." It betrays a clear lack of in-depth understanding of the complexities involved.

In one of my many visits to refugee communities, it was learnt that a man from one sub-ethnic community did not offer assistance to another in need and belongs to a different sub-ethnic community. Both are of the same ethnic community. When the former was questioned why he did not assist the latter, the candid reply was, "...he is not of my [ethnic] community..."

What then is needed? Some way of constructive engagement with the regime at one level while initiating creative and concrete conciliatory measures between/within the diverse ethnic communities. The latter is a level close to the ground, a level where the close encounters of people of different ethnic communities, cultures and faiths take place everyday but is burdened with pre- and post-independence ethnic rifts. Could the coming together of people affected by the cyclone Nargis be the strength of weak links towards reconciliation? It needs to be strategically thought through with people who are willing to exert every effort—disinterestedly. Meanwhile, every attempt should be made to avoid an abrupt regime collapse with a strategy for transition towards a democracy. How the manner of reconciliation is shaped—into a union of federated states or some other model (or a separation into several independent states!)-is something for the various parties to struggle together.

It is important to raise these questions hitherto not widely raised. It is born out of concrete encounters and engagement with refugees from/in Burma and others at various levels. This is not meant to make claims for the solution to this seemingly never-ending impasse. Reconciliation among the diverse ethnic communities and at different levels towards a solution may seem a himalayan task. It is worthy of serious consideration for at least one person who has "...suffered for over 20 years...but [does] not give up hope..." (Bernard Hyacinth Arputhasamy, SJ).

Education: A safety net for children



It was overwhelming to meet all the Burmese migrant children of various age groups coming to school. They were always happy and curious to meet a new person and in their welcome greetings in unison came a mixed note of excitement and a little bit of naughtiness.

JRS Southern Border project, Ranong, team had managed to seek the support and good will of the Governor of Ranong and other local authorities to ensure that the Burmese migrant

children are able to continue their studies. Though the fear of arrests and deportations exist, JRS along with the local authorities has provided students with ID cards co-signed by the school authorities and the local government officials. The ID card is with the students all the time. If their parents are accompanying them to school or moving around in the small town and are stopped by the local immigration officials, showing the ID card frees them from being arrested or deported. This simple fact, that the child is a student in the Thai school and the parents cannot be separated from the child, invariably protects the child to be with the family and ensures their right to education.

Children born in temporary shelters along the Northern Border have become de facto stateless. Their parents fled Burma

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Miss Hompaow Suay Kham, Age 16, has recently finished grade 6 from Rat-raj Opatham Thai primary school and continues studying in Thai informal education for high school education. She is one of the stateless girl child from the Weang Hang temporary camp in Thailand. JRS lobbied for her with the local Thai officials to provide her with the necessary papers for her free movement to pursue higher education. Stateless children like her often have to drop their pursuit of education for lack of any birth certificate, necessary papers and support which can allow them to access education, work, medical health and other associated benefits.



Children from Weang Hang temporary camp in their day care centre supported by JRS. The children stay in the day care centre and learn basic Thai letters, numbers and phrases. The day care centre also serves as a base for the children to be prepared to join the local Thai schools willing to admit them.



Burmese migrant children in JRS supported schools learning their basics. Migrant workers are increasingly keen to keep their children in school and become educated. Requests are made to JRS team to continue providing education. Additionally parents are also happy that the children are learning basic Thai which could help them in the future.

JRS Mission, Advocacy and Landmines Campaign

About 30 volunteers participated in a one day orientation workshop on the 30th of August organized by JRS Singapore and JRS Asia Pacific Regional Office. The aim was to provide all with a deeper understanding of the JRS mission and vision, style of advocacy, the social teachings of the Catholic Church and an orientation on one of the most prominent issues and campaigns for JRS – the Ban Landmines Campaign, focusing on Thailand and globally. There were new volunteers while many had visited refugee-like situations and had some understanding of the mission and work of JRS. Most of the volunteers had little or no knowledge of the internationally accepted benchmarks on the rights of the refugees and displaced people.

Selected readings (A Vision for JRS and What is Essential to JRS) from the essential documents of JRS, entitled “Everybody’s Challenge” were given as input for reflections and group sharing what it meant to them. Other readings included “JRS, a source of my consolation”--a sharing by the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, who had actively support the mission of JRS during his 25 years tenure. Inputs included global trends and the impact of these trends in the region and the causes of displacement, international instruments on human rights and refugee rights and the JRS style of advocacy. In the session on “Campaign to Ban Landmines in Thailand” participants were made aware of the presence of landmines in our region and

Education...

without documents and unwilling to return for various reasons. While in Thailand, their undocumented migrant status puts them at the mercy of the local authorities risking arrests and deportations. This makes them turn to traditional delivery methods at home rather than going to the hospital where the facilities are better and they might be issued a delivery or birth certificate, thus giving the child an identity or citizenship rights and perhaps a future. JRS has been working with the leaders of these communities and the local authorities to promote safe deliveries in the local health clinics and at once to obtain a delivery or birth certificate. These certificates can help the children to access education in schools in Thailand. (Sanjay)

through posters/pictures became acquainted with the terrible weapon of anti-personnel and anti-vehicles mines.

Volunteers of JRS Singapore continue to support some works of JRS in the region through exposure visits to refugee camps, writing articles and organizing exhibitions/ displays in the churches about the lives of refugees and displaced people to raise awareness among the Singapore community.

The workshop was facilitated by Emilie Ketudat--Coordinator Thailand Campaign to Ban Landmine and Sermsiri (Chompoo) Ingavanija--Assistant Coordinator, with Sanjay Gathia – Regional Information Advocacy Officer Asia Pacific. (By Sanjay, Emilie, Chompoo).



Emilie Ketudat, one of JRS' foremost ban landmine advocates

Prevention from Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (PSAE) Workshop



“What is the PSAE?” Another acronym in the humanitarian aid world! It stands for “Prevention from Sexual Abuse and Exploitation.” It is meant to ensure and provide beneficiaries and the aid agencies a mutually safe environment and help to stop all abuses and

deliver justice to the victim. In order to implement this, some procedures were needed. Thus, a workshop was facilitated for focal point persons in each organization to act as contact persons. They will be available to all within the organisation and the beneficiaries if and when a complaint is to be made about improper behaviour, namely, sexual abuse and exploitation. An investigator is then appointed to verify the details of the complaints and ensure due and just process at every step of the way towards resolution.

Along with Sr. Evelyn from JRS Thailand, I participated in the workshop on PSAE, as the Focal Point persons and Investigators for JRS Thailand and the Regional Office respectively. As members of the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT), it was an opportunity for training on the Inter Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) recommended procedures for receiving and investigating allegations of abuse and exploitation by humanitarian workers. Participants attending this workshop had to demonstrate a commitment to protecting persons of concern from sexual abuse and exploitation and working directly with the affected communities.

“Though the readings and the preparations gave a hard time, the workshop was a very good experience to learn more about protecting the displaced people and also to meet other NGO friends and to share our experiences and explore opportunities to work together. I learnt much from the workshop which will help me to improve support, assist colleagues and the beneficiaries.” (Took/Rachanee, Regional Human Resources Officer, Asia Pacific/ Thailand).

JRS Thailand Annual Meeting

Prayers, discussions, deliberations, reflections, questions, answers, laughter and fun was how JRS Annual meeting went by organised in Hua Hin, Thailand.



Some new colleagues in Region

Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman, S.J. —Country Director JRS Australia - he brings with him substantial experience working with asylum seeker and refugee organisations in Sydney and Melbourne, and as chaplain at the Maribyrnong Detention Centre in Melbourne. He takes over from Fr David Holdcroft S.J, who served as Country Director of JRS Australia for the past four years and is now in Boston for his final stage of Jesuit formation (tertianship).

Ms. Geraldine Chin, born in Singapore, worked as a diplomat and policy planner in the Singapore civil service before joining JRS on 1st September 2008. With a background in civil engineering from Tokyo University, Japan, and specialization in project management.

Mr. Mariano Griva, joined JRS PNG as the Information Advocacy Officer and will be working with the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga and assist in developing information and advocacy skills to the diocesan workers in the Western province of PNG.



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