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If the asylum seekers from far away, who have never known us before, are willing to share their heart and love even in these difficult circumstances, then this should be encouragement for us to get to know them and care for them

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What We Can Learn from Asylum Seekers in Detention

Saefudin Amsa



A detainee visiting and playing chess with those locked behind bars

Only a few people know about Asylum Seekers, their experiences and their daily lives in the immigration detention center. After thousands of kilometers on a perilous journey in search of safety and a better life, they are deprived of their freedom, locked in behind bars for long periods of time. Only a few people understand the reason for their arrival and their presence here. Asylum Seekers are often regarded as difficult.

Actually, Asylum Seekers are persons of love and generosity, who deserve our attention and care. My experiences with them in the detention center demonstrate how Asylum Seekers themselves remain capable to relate in the spirit of sharing and solidarity in spite of their limited access and freedom.

When commemorating *Naw Ruz* (a traditional Persian New Year), detainees of Afghanistan and Iran collected money to buy four goats. They asked Detention Center staff to help them slaughtering those goats and distributing the meat to the villagers living around the detention center.

They themselves did not take any piece of meat. According to Hasheem Ahmadi, there is no reason for them not to provide sacrificial meat even though they are in a difficult situation. “For us it is a kind of obedience and sacrifice. This kind of sacrifice had done by sharing to others. It is our custom.”

On a similar occasion, the commemoration of *Lailatul Qadar* (the Night of Virtue) during the months of Ramadan, Asylum Seekers of Afghanistan and Iran bought food and drinks to share with all other detainees. Sharing is the main spirit of their celebration.

The spirit of sharing was shown too by Sri Lankan detainees while celebrating *Citthirai Puthandu* (their traditional New Year) in April 2013. At first, the Detention Center officers did not allow them to celebrate the festivities because it coincided with a Sunday, the day off for detention center officers. Anyway, the Sri Lankan detainees celebrated it in a solemn and simple way, by making hot coffee and giving it to all detainees in their cells. When detention

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center officers allowed them to have a celebration, some Sri Lankan detainees cooked traditional meals and then all other detainees and Detention officers enjoyed meals together.

They also show the spirit of sharing in daily activities. A common practice of detainees in the detention center is that those who are allowed to do activities outside their cells will help others who are locked behind bars. I observed how those outside the iron bars joyfully help those inside their cells, for example by hanging clothes to dry, bringing drinking water, asking immigration officers to turn on the bathroom water, or just helping to deliver messages to detainees in other cells. It is an inspiring practice of the spirit of serving each other without considering their different backgrounds.

Asylum Seekers who are locked behind bars have shown their great and outstanding generosity. In the midst of their difficult situation, they still care for others they never met before. Physically, the iron bars cut them off from the outside world. Previously, the world they knew was very wide, but now their world is only an area of several square meters. For some of the Asylum Seekers of Afghanistan, their previous world was the busy city of Kabul, the beautiful lake of Gargha as depicted by Khaled Hosseini in his novel *The Kite Runner*, a wide world stretched from Herat in the west to the Hindu Kush mountains in the east that historically were once a

part of legendary Silk Road. For the people of Iran and Iraq, their world is as wide as the imagination depicted in the story of *Arabian Nights*. For the people of Sri Lanka and the Rohingya from Myanmar the outside world is a place of hope, holding the promise of recognition and a better life.

Now, what they see everyday are only the bars of their cells. There is no difference between day and night. What they encounter day to day are only a dozen of officers in dark blue uniforms who deliver food, the blare of a siren which signals that some of them are allowed to get fresh air for a while or signals them that it is time to go back to go back behind bars, other than that there is silence and the spotlights at night looking into the dark corners of the detention center. For most of the detained it is a difficult time. For some it is an episode of life they have to endure.

No one can change their solidarity and their engagement to the world around them. The narrow world of detention, nor the wide world outside the center they lost contact to, nor the situation in their home countries. People around here are brothers like those left behind in their homeland. That is what I feel when they welcome us with a strong warm embrace, praying for our salvation, or when sharing a box of milk. It is compassion that motivates them to donate their blood, or to be friendly to and share what they have with the officers who accompany them day and night. If the asylum seekers from far away, who have never known us before, are willing to share their heart and love even in these difficult circumstances, then this should be encouragement for us to get to know them and care for them.***



Detainees are happy to share even from behind bars

Forgotten Promises: A former Refugee Still Struggling to Rebuild His Life

Daryadi Achmadi and Donatus Akur

Papua is a large and spacious island in the most eastern parts of Indonesia. The political situation in 1980 has colored life on this island with conflict and tension. Conflict and tension between the Indonesian military and a group of people who call themselves the Free Papua Movement (OPM), forced the people who live in some of these areas to evacuate and seek safety in neighboring Papua New Guinea (PNG). Frederikus (73 Years) is one of those who fled, and after nearly 25 years of living in PNG recently returned to his hometown to start a new life.

“I was a refugee in PNG, along with hundreds of people from Jayapura. At that time there was a conflict between the Indonesian military and the OPM. The best way to save our lives was to evacuate. The evacuation began on February 9, 1984. At that time February 11, 1984, a planned coup failed after it was leaked to the army. People living in certain areas were all suspected of being involved and looked for by Indonesian soldiers. This resulted in most of the people fleeing to PNG. The refugees scattered in two large Camps, in Black Wara Vanimo, Sandaun Province, and the southern Camp Yowara, Kiungga District, Western Province,” recalls Frederikus the history of his displacement when meeting with JRS in March 2013.

Since 2009, Frederikus and his family returned to Jayapura. He started rebuilding his life on the outskirts of Jayapura. Since quite some time he and some other refugees had the plan to return to Jayapura, but felt they had to wait until the situation was right and a return was safe.

“In order to ensure nothing will happen to us, we waited until one day there came an offer from the governor. It was a sign that after returning, there would be a guarantee for our safety. So we followed the governor’s offer and felt, now it was time to go home,” said Frederikus.

Frederikus and his family returned home following the offer from the

provincial government of Papua. *“Our departure was organized in a collaborative effort between the governments of PNG and Indonesia, following the suggestions of the Governor of Papua at the time, Barnabas Suebu. He asked the Papuan refugees living in Papua New Guinea to return home. Governor Suebu’s invitation also came with the promise that the government will provide education, start-up capital for businesses, and a house. Right after the visit of the Governor to PNG in 2008 we signed up for return, but only on November 23, 2009 were we finally allowed to return to Papua,”* he said.

After their return to Jayapura the former refugees feel that the governor’s promises were not kept. After one week living in a Training Center (BLK) belonging to the provincial Department of Transmigration in Northern Jayapura they were asked to return to their villages of origin. It was suggested to move in with their relatives. Each household received Rp 17 million. The 300 houses for the returnees that were promised by the Governor’s officers during the visit to the refugee camp in Kiungga, PNG, never materialized.



The unfinished house of Frederikus

Arriving in his village, Frederikus and his family had to struggle hard from the very beginning to secure a bare minimum life. Even after years of hard work he struggles to finish the house he started building, ensure regular employment and make sure his children can continue to attend school. *“The important thing is I could go back home in order to have a quiet life,”* he said.

After 2 years of sharing a relative’s house and with the help of his brothers he managed to buy 100 square meters land up in the hills. Now living with his son, daughter and four grandchildren in an unfinished wooden house of which only two rooms have walls, other parts still remain open. The roof partly made of plastic tarpaulins is leaking when it rains. The house is still build little by little by their own hands.

“This land was bought by my family. My brothers helped to buy it for IDR 7 million. No help from the government. The only help came from family. I still owe as much as IDR 3 million in compensation for the coconut and areca nut trees that were growing on the land before,” said Frederikus.

“When we asked the government for help, we were only given 10 wooden beams, 30 sheets of zinc, 2 kg of zinc nails and 2 kg other nails. This was only enough to make a shed. This was all the support given by the Department

of Social Welfare in Jayapura,” he continued. The Papua Border Agency for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (Badan Perbatasan dan Kerjasama Luar Negeri Provinsi Papua) has also been helping with kitchen utensils, blankets, towels and mosquito nets.

Frederikus and his son, Silvester, are carpenters and work hard to finish the house. If there is work in a house construction project, the wage for him as an experienced carpenter is IDR 100.000 per day, while his son earns IDR 80.000 per day. From their income they are saving to buy more wood and zinc. Every two weeks they buy clean water for IDR 100.000 which they then store in dozens of cans.

As returnee Frederikus recalls, at first he felt like a stranger, especially his children who did not speak Indonesian fluently because of the many years of using just English in PNG. To find employment was difficult. His only chance was that his skills as a carpenter were needed. By using his skills he now can continue the struggle covering the basic needs of his family. He does not despair but works hard still hoping that the promises made by Governor Suebu will become a reality one day. *“In the refugee camp as well as here, it is the same, you have to keep on struggling, work first and then you earn some money,”* said Frederikus optimistic. ***

Immigration Detention is No Place for Children

Citra Ayi Safitri

Leaving behind conflicts and violence in home countries does not always mean freedom from threat and danger. Displacement is a hard reality and often leads to other traumatic experiences. Women and children are the most vulnerable among the displaced.

Aminah had never imagined that she would experience again tragedy, on the line of life and death. Together with her husband and her seven years old daughter, she had left Iran to search for peace and safety in Australia. After two months staying in Indonesia, she boarded a boat with many other asylum seekers. Unfortunately, the boat had an accident. Many people drowned in the sea. Men, women and children were floating lifeless.

“My daughter was traumatized by the scenes she witnessed. She saw swollen bodies floating, with pale and broken faces. She often wakes up in the middle of the night, crying

and started refusing to eat,” said Aminah.

Currently, Aminah is one of mothers living in an overcrowded Immigration Detention Center. Rescued from the sea after the accident, she thought she would be placed in the community to heal the trauma. Apparently, she was mistaken.

“When we were taken to this city, I thought we would stay in a house, but they took us here. This place is not clean. We live in a small cell with 6 other people, two families, so there is not enough space to sleep. This is not a good place and it will make my daughter’s condition worse,” Aminah complained.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers living in a Detention Center often lose their rights. Detention Center is an Immigration Prison. They are held in cells, losing their freedom, their

privacy, and sense of security, and worse they even lose their hope. States accommodating Refugees should be encouraged to explore and implement alternatives to detention as soon as possible.

Detention Centers are an especially unfriendly place for children. Children need a comfortable place to grow and to learn values of peace, respect, freedom, and creativity. Children need more excitement and a spacious place to move because their world is a world of play and learning, their world should never be a jail.

"I have taken my daughter to the doctor. I have asked the doctor to give her vitamin because she rarely eats, but the doctor gave her nothing. The doctor told me to ask my daughter to eat. I can not force her to eat," Aminah says with a quiet voice.

Witnessing even the smallest joy in a child's eye is the happiest experience of a parent. Being unable to free your child from sadness even for the shortest moment is the most distressing experience to any parent. Detaining displaced families is a practice that can lead to extreme mental harm and deprives children of many of their rights. *"Yesterday was the 7th birthday of my daughter. Last year when we were in Iran, we celebrated her birthday together with her friends by providing a birthday cake. Now, she wants a birthday cake and toys, but I cannot provide them.*

Do you have a child? Can you imagine what I feel as a mother when I cannot give a birthday gift to my daughter?" Aminah said with tears in her eyes.

For Refugees and Asylum Seekers who are locked in detention cells, the presence of a companion who is willing to listen and pay attention to their experiences is very meaningful. JRS is present among them to be a friend, ready to listen and to serve them. JRS presence among those who are locked in a Detention Center is a practice of solidarity and often their only contact to the outside world.

When JRS brought a birthday cake for her 7 years old daughter and celebrated her birthday in a very simple way, happiness returned to her child's face. *"Thank you for all you have done. This is very meaningful to me. I will never forget this."*

Children who experience trauma due to displacement need special attention to help to overcome traumatic experiences and be able to heal. Releasing children from Detention Centers is an important first step that has to be done as soon as possible. Detaining innocent children with traumatic experiences should never happen again, not to Aminah's child or any other child in the world. Indonesia should lead in this effort to stop immigration detention of children, now. ***



A child in one of Detention Centers in Indonesia. Foto by Enggal

Even One Woman Displaced is Too Many!

Fransisca Asmiarsi



Qamariah as-Sabiha was born as a daughter to a minority clan. She grew up in a small village in the Ethiopian highlands. The majority populations in this region are of Somali decent. When she was 15 years old, she fled to Kenya in order to escape rape and murder threatening women in her area. Qamariah's father and her brothers were killed in a shooting tragedy before her flight, she had to watch them die, unable to help. Her mother was arrested and put in jail. Qamariah never heard again from her and fears she will never meet her again.

"All of my neighbors, especially the women, suffered physically. They were raped. The men were shot and killed. Ordinary people get no protection at all," Qamariah said remembering why she left her country.

Conflict and violence in the area led to suffering and death of many civilians. The civilians, both men and women, often became victims for no obvious reasons. Often unwarranted accusations about political activities can lead to death. Women and children receive no protection and are vulnerable to the threat of maltreatment and rape.

"One day, the gunmen came to my house. They accused my father of being involved in a political activity. My father explained that he was not involved in any political activities. They did not believe him and shot him in front of my mum and us children. My brothers tried to help and protect him, but the gunmen immediately shot them as well. At once, all of them died," remembers Qamariah.

After her arrival in Kenya, Qamariah worked for a year washing dishes in a restaurant. This job allowed her to get

food and a place to stay. She stopped working when the restaurant owner decided to move the restaurant to another city. Then she worked for two years as a housekeeper at a Somali family who has a citizenship of one country in Europe, which lived in Kenya for a while. During her stay with this family Qamariah earned some money and was able to indirectly learn from her employer's children who went to school. *"Because I cannot go to school as they do, I always ask them the lessons they learn at school every day. I learn from them,"* said Qamariah.



An Asylum Seeker Woman living in Community in West Java

Qamariah was lucky to be employed in a nice family that also helped her to claim asylum at the local UNHCR office. *“I was interviewed by the UNHCR for the first time. Six months after the interview, UNHCR invited me to come to the office, but I could not go because I was very ill,”* she continued.

At the time her employer’s family had to move back to Europe they prepared travel documents for Qamariah to be able to follow them to Europe. A travel agent was entrusted with the documents and the payments were made but instead of to Europe Qamariah was brought to Malaysia and then to Indonesia.

“Out of my understanding, the plane transited in Malaysia and the next day we flew to Indonesia. Arriving in Indonesia, the agent was gone, and I did not have any contact numbers of the family. I could not do anything,” Qamariah said regretful.

In her young age of 23, Qamariah has already encountered much suffering and loss. Women who are forced to leave their homeland in search for safety and security are vulnerable and need of protection. Living as woman and asylum seeker in displacement does not provide the safety or security needed. In constant danger of being arrested and detained, never knowing what the next day might bring in a life without a clear future or any guarantees, Qamariah is expecting to become a mother.

About the father of her child, also an asylum seeker, she says *“We both fell in love and I became pregnant, before he disappeared. Now I am confused and in panic.”* As asylum seeker and refugee, women and men are not able to get legally married in many places of the world including Indonesia, children born to them have difficulties to secure birth certificates and a nationality. Will Qamariah’s child continue to suffer?

Qamariah, born to a family or clan experiencing persecution, is bound to continue her journey through the world, enduring the suffering, threats and uncertainties until finding the people and a country that is willing to accept her for what she is, a human being, giving her the rights that she deserves and long yearned for – the Right to Freedom of Physical Harm, the Right to Education, the Right to a Nationality, the Right to form a Family and the Right to Work.

Rights we take for granted every day.

*** For the protection and security, all names in this article are fictive.

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