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## Letter from Director: Fr. Bambang Sipayung SJ



In Early November this year, JRS Europe Regional Director, Jean-Marie Carriere presented during our meeting about the influx of refugees to Europe and how JRS responded it. For the first time since World War II, Europe again saw a mass movement of refugees in their continent and the people of Europe are divided in their response including within local Catholic Church. Despite this division, he described how JRS continues to emphasise its accompaniment by individually talking, greeting and addressing the need of refugees they meet in the shelter.

While I was looking back at this movement of the people, I saw the quote from Pope Francis in his address during the audience with JRS in its 35 Anniversary which I would like to share with you.

"At this moment in human history, marked by great movements of migration, identity is not a secondary issue. Those who migrate are forced to change some of their most distinctive characteristics and, whether they like or not, even those who welcome them are also forced to change. How can we experience these changes not as obstacles to genuine development, rather as opportunities for

genuine human, social and spiritual growth, a growth which respects and promotes those values which make us ever more humane and help us to live a balanced relationship with God, others and creation?"

These words show the changes that develop human growth as a result of encounter. The shepherds encounter an angel telling them the birth of Jesus and they were terrified. The angel calmed them down and told them the good news that moved them to see Jesus and changed their lives.

As Christmas is near, we need to listen carefully to the good news that may come with a sudden encounter of mass movement rather than reacting to our prejudices. For refugees and host communities, a mutual trust and self-introduction to each other is a process that needs to grow to build a community of mutual respect and care.

## Putting Mercy in Motion – JRS launches education campaign for refugee children and youth



Secondary school students attend class in Kounoungou refugee camp in Guereda, Chad. Only 36 percent of refugees go to secondary school (Christian Fuchs / Jesuit Refugee Service)

On 8 December, as a concrete sign of commitment to the Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) will launch the Mercy in Motion advocacy and fundraising campaign to expand and strengthen our education programmes. Our goal is to provide educational services to 100,000 more refugees than we currently do by the year 2020.

Mercy in Motion reflects the words of Pope Francis: "mercy is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality... We are called to look beyond, to focus on the heart to see how much generosity everyone is capable of."

For 35 years, JRS has focused on education as a means to build peace and foster the development of more resilient and cohesive societies. Funds raised by the Mercy in Motion campaign will implement the JRS Global Education Initiative, which aims to robustly expand both formal and informal education programmes – spanning from primary school to university, and including vocational and teacher training.

Pope Francis has long urged believers to welcome refugees, noting the world is currently suffering from a "globalisation of indifference," ignoring those who cry out for mercy. Pope Francis directed JRS to undertake this Global Education Initiative during an audience with JRS staff and supporters on 14 November, saying "to give a child a seat at school is the finest gift you can give....For children forced to emigrate, schools are places of freedom."

"As human beings, we are often at the mercy of war, of nature, of governments – of forces beyond our control. For this reason, nearly 60 million people worldwide have been forced to flee their homes, constantly moving. But for people living in motion, those who cannot take possessions can bring knowledge and change their world," said Fr Smolich.

A quality education gives refugees the tools not only to contribute to their new communities, but also to rebuild their old ones. Refugees face a variety of barriers trying to access education, from overcrowding in schools to xenophobia in host

communities. Their fundamental right to education is often lost. Among refugee children globally, only 36 percent go to secondary school and less than one percent have the opportunity to pursue a higher education.

JRS focuses serves the most vulnerable, where the need is greatest. For this reason, Mercy in Motion will focus more heavily on youth – secondary and university education, as well as vocational- and teacher-training programmes.

At the 14 November audience, Pope Francis encouraged the more than 100 JRS staff and supporters in attendance to "help refugees grow in self-confidence, to realise their highest inherent potential and be able to defend their rights as individuals and communities." Inspired by his encouragement, JRS teams in cities and refugee camps around the world will expand existing educational programmes and make sure the potential of thousands of refugee children and young adults is not wasted.

"We must show mercy to those who are at the mercy of outside forces," said Fr Smolich. "We must mobilise ourselves for those who are in motion."

Please see the Mercy in Motion website [mercy-in-motion.org](http://mercy-in-motion.org) and check out the page on facebook/MercyMotion

## Asia Pacific: JRS voices caution on Voluntary Repatriation of Myanmar refugees



Participants from the Karenni Refugee Committee, UNHCR and Thailand's Ministry of Interior joined JRS staff for a group photo after the workshop. (Yonal/JRS Thailand)

Since the historic elections in Myanmar there has been a wave of optimism for national reconciliation that may allow for voluntary repatriation for the people JRS serves on the Thailand-Myanmar border. Only eight ethnic armed groups have signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and there is still uncertainty regarding security in some areas of the country. Refugees we accompany express this uncertainty. At the same time, JRS believes that life in a refugee camp is not a durable solution. Prolonging life in the camp can lead to dependency and JRS seeks to counterbalance a culture that does not lead to resilience and empowerment. This dilemma keeps JRS in a state of discernment and we also seek to help refugees in their own discernment.

In the first week of December The Karenni Refugee Committee, UNHCR, Thailand's Ministry of Interior and World Education joined JRS staff as part of a 4-day workshop on Voluntary Repatriation

hosted by JRS in Mae Hong Son, Thailand.

The JRS framework of response and principles of action is shaped by the hopes, fears, and aspirations of the people we serve, matching with the international standards of return: voluntariness, dignity and safety.

The aim of the workshop was to help participants to understand better and deeper the principle of voluntary repatriation of refugees and its operationalization so that JRS Thailand – Myanmar can develop a framework of accompaniment, service and advocacy in collaboration with Refugees, NGO's, Governments and UN agencies to address concerns and needs of the refugees JRS serves. We are working in education on both sides of the border to be ready to accompany people when voluntary repatriation occurs.

A basic international standard guiding returnee protection is the principle of non-discrimination. JRS seeks to balance the aid provided to returning refugees and to the receiving and returning internally displaced persons. JRS works under the humanitarian principle of impartiality and will adopt responses based on needs and that support initiatives in the areas of capacity and trust building.

Within the international standards of return JRS has identified three components of action: Communication to refugees to help them make an informed decision on their repatriation; Education, especially youth development programs; and Trust-building. JRS Asia Pacific has addressed each international standard of return below.

### Voluntariness of the decision to return:

"We love our country but our villages were burnt, we do not want to go back to that situation" - Female Refugee

Refugees must be involved and consulted in every part of planning and execution of voluntary repatriation. A well-informed decision by the family or individual is vital to all returnees and they must be made aware of the situation in the location of return in Myanmar through objective information.

### Dignity:

"Most camp refugees come from remote areas where there is no access to social services, there are schools but no teachers, clinics but no medicines." -Refugee leader

Refugees express that they would voluntarily repatriate if they had access to basic provisions of food, shelter, health and education in their communities in a safe environment. The locations of return may not have these basic services and the lack of access of humanitarian organizations to these locations, while improving, is not yet sufficient. JRS has a role to play to ensure that education is provided in the camps until repatriation takes place and to facilitate the future education of returnee children.

### Safety:

"In the future, I would like to be a teacher and improve the education of our Karenni children, but only if the situation back home is safe"- Refugee student.

Refugees should not be sent back to a place that is still unsafe. The return itself should be safe; not situated in potentially disputed areas; paths should be cleared of mines. The areas where they go back to should be at least demarked of

landmines. JRS is at both sides of the border and will monitor that speed and sustainability do not breach international standards of return.

## The Story of a Montagnard Refugee



One year and one month later I finally moved and have a new life in the US after being in Thailand for almost 7 years!

My name is Trang\*, I am a Montagnard refugee. I fled Vietnam in 2007 and was granted resettlement to the US in 2015. This is my story:

### Vietnam

I am from Central Highlands, Dak Lak Province, Vietnam. I left Vietnam in 2007 because the police arrested me many times before I left. The police arrested me because they thought I want to help support those rioting against the Vietnamese government.

In 2001 and 2004, I was arrested both times because in my province they had a big protest against the communist government so they really wanted to control the people. They were concerned about my family having connections with the US because my family members had moved there. They thought I was getting money from them in the US to help the protesters. They kept asking me if other people were giving me money to help support the people who were protesting.

But I wasn't helping the protestors, it was money from my brother and I owed money to my teacher. I got arrested 5 times and they took my ID so I could not get money anymore. The government made it really difficult to get money from the bank so I went the last time with my teacher, as my brother sent the money to her

because I did not have any ID, and they arrested my teacher and I.

They kept me in the station for one day. They made my teacher sign an agreement saying she would not help me anymore or teach me anything else. If she helped me again then the police would arrest her so she decided not to help me any more. After this I fled to Cambodia because the police came looking for me again at my house and my father told me I needed to run away.

### Cambodia

I went to Cambodia in November 2007. I went to UNHCR and they took me to a camp, camp number 3. I stayed in the camp with nothing to do. Not enough food and water in the camp.

UNHCR told me that no one would accept the Montagnards in a third country anymore. I was told us that they would deport us and we were afraid they would not visit us if we did go back to Vietnam. Even UNHCR interviewed us but they did not tell us we would be resettled and said we should not stay long. I saw them deport people back to Vietnam so I then decided with 8 people to go to Thailand. I was in Cambodia for 7 months.

### Thailand

I left Cambodia around June 2008 and went to Bangkok. I went to the Poi Pet border and had to walk three hours through the jungle. We had no passport so how could we go through the immigration? So we, the eight of us, had to pay a man about 3,500 US dollars to get from the border.

UNHCR told me when I got to Bangkok that I was registered in Cambodia so to go back there and they would not help me with my case here in Thailand.

We said we could not go back to Cambodia because we saw UNHCR had deported many Montagnard asylum seekers which is why we needed their help in Bangkok because we are to scared too go back to Cambodia and definitely too scared to go to Vietnam.

The Thai people who were wearing the yellow shirts [People's Alliance for Democracy] were protesting outside UNHCR and I stayed with these protestors because they gave me food and water.

I lived like that for 3 days until the group leader of the eight of us had some contacts with the Church, we found a small room and lived here almost 3 months, after that my group leader had contact with some one in the northwest and these people had a foundation in Thailand that helped pregnant women and children. I was 22-23 around then and they have me a job for 2 and a half years. I worked for these people in helping them with agriculture, taking care of pregnant babies, women, and learned English and Thai.

### Immigration Detention Centre

I was arrest in the Northwest and was put into jail for 3 months. I was still staying with my group, about 12 of us now, but the Thai police arrested me. The Chiang Mai IDC conditions were not good. Dirty wood floor, no holes for air, big rats- a big one bite my face! We could barely breathe because there were too many people. There were so many mosquitos and cockroaches. I got scabies while there and it was terrible. I did not get any medication either even though I had scabies!

After a few months, in 2010, they moved us to the Bangkok IDC. I was in Bangkok IDC for almost 2 years. There were not many places to sleep. They put us all together, mentally ill people, people with HIV, there was not enough food, and many were fighting over food and water and a place to sleep. We had to stay in the room the whole time and couldn't do

anything.

One day, a woman from England came to visit a Nepali man and the police made a mistake and called my friend's name so my friend went and spoke with her and told the British lady her story and my story. After that the British lady came every week to visit us.

### Bangkok

When I was released I started working as a babysitter and did some translations for people who needed to go to the hospital. I did not have any documentation or asylum seeker certificate from UNHCR or anyone. My lawyer, from JRS, helped me find my registration number and told me UNHCR had rejected me but they did not tell me!

Since I got out of IDC I wanted to reopen my case and JRS and AAT provided legal counsel to me. They were able to help reopen my case with UNHCR and in 2014 through the appeal process I got my asylum seeker certificate. I did my interview with UNHCR in 2014 and UNHCR gave me my refugee certificate in 2014.

UNHCR gave me no money during this time. They said too many refugees are in Bangkok now, lots of Pakistani's, so they only gave me rice and cans of fish every month. They told me about how the Pakistani children cannot go to school so I was ok with their decision.

I worked in a preschool for children not allowed to go to Thai schools after that I worked on arts and crafts with the children, did translation and cooked food for the children. I practiced my English with services provided by BPSOS.

I did not have a bank account because it is illegal so my livelihood opportunities in Bangkok were limited [while I waited for resettlement]. One year and one month later I finally moved and have a new life in the US after being in Thailand for almost 7 years!

\*Names have been changed to protect identity.

### Philippines: Women an integral part of JRS initiatives



Women gather in a circle to discuss issues of peace and reconciliation in Mindanao. (Darlene/JRS Asia Pacific)

Mindanao, Philippines- Women have been an integral part of JRS initiatives in the Philippines. JRS works and promotes an inclusive process where women's experiences and perspectives are recognized, accounted for in discussions and policies that promote peace and reconciliation in their communities in the midst of violence and conflict.

JRS also believes in highlighting peace and reconciliation practices in diverse communities through a research project that will document narratives, stories and experiences of women on peaceful co-existence in their own communities. The need to promote experiences of peaceful co-existence and understand the role of women— as a force for peace — is deemed essential in the peace building efforts here in Mindanao.

During the focus group discussions in the research locales of Datu Piang, Maguindanao and Kulasihan, Lanao del Norte, 160 Muslim

and Christian women participated and shared their experiences of the armed conflicts that affected their communities and their lives. Despite age-old biases that surrounds the relationships of Muslim and Christian people all over the country, these women have managed to set that aside and co-exist peacefully in their own communities.

Experiences of co-existence shared by the women includes participation of both Muslims and Christians to community-related gatherings such as fiesta celebrations and Ramadan which fosters cultural understanding and awareness of the diverse religious and traditional practices followed by both communities.

Experiences of pain and loss from decades of conflict and violence do not change the fact that they are of one community, as they grow up together in the very place they are living now. A few Moro women even have Christians as their closest friends. A 70-year old Moro woman said, "I'd rather have a Christian neighbor than have a Muslim neighbor who has guns."

Intermarriages between Muslim and Christian also play a crucial role in fostering goodwill among them. Both Muslim and Christian women expressed that marrying someone from another religion resulted in having extended families on both sides. These extended families also provide greater awareness and understanding on traditions and practices outside of their own.

Women and girls' experience of conflict and peace building is different. Recognition of these experiences has been largely lacking in conflict resolution and peace building processes. Placing women in all efforts related to peace building is an important factor in ending violence and ensuring sustainable peace. The research aims to know women's thoughts and narratives about peace and reconciliation and to establish women's role as essential in peace building. Research findings will aid JRS in providing sound interventions that will hopefully result to positive change in the lives of the women in conflict areas of Lanao and Maguindanao.

-Written by Darlene, JRS Philippines

## Thailand: A Renewed Future and Life



Zaw Min Naing, right, at an OIA agriculture plot. (Mi Sheh/JRS Thailand)

The landslide victory of the NLD (National League for Democracy) under the leadership of Aung San Su Kyi makes Zaw Min Naing very happy. He really hoped that Aung San Su Kyi would win so the country could move forward to a more democratic country. He knows the realities of living under the military regime in Myanmar and in fact had to flee the country because his life was under threat as he was involved in the democratic movement in Myanmar. He has been living in Thailand over the years and could not stay away from social activism so he joined the Overseas Irrawady Association to advocate, represent, and defend the rights of migrants in Thailand.

He presented OIA's work in the area of protection for migrant workers in Mae Sot and integration to bridge the migrant and local communities. I asked him, "What does the meaning of Aung San Su Kyi's victory for the country mean for the future

of OIA?" He smiled and explained that it is a positive impact for OIA. Now he expects a new model of seeing the civil society movement, not as illegal organizations but as critical partners working together for the country and for the people. He sees the needs of the country to look at reconciling with people who are in exile and to continue advocating and protecting the values of humanity for all communities.

OIA has been actively involved advocating for the rights and protection of migrant communities in Mae Sot, Thailand. Together with JRS, OIA collaborated to organize and to promote socio-cultural events of migrant communities among Thai communities. One was the initiation of children to monkhood which is a well know cultural event for Myanmar Buddhist communities that is also shared by the Thai Buddhist communities. While it introduces the uniqueness of Myanmar culture, it also helps to provide an awareness of the presence and difference of migrant communities to local Thai communities. It gave a platform for better understanding of social cultural insight of migrant communities and to not only look at the economic side of working migrants.

Besides these activities, OIA and JRS also organized an awareness training of labor rights in Thailand, human trafficking and procedures to report labor issues to the local authorities in Thailand. While these trainings help to raise awareness of the migrant workers' rights, it also helps them to learn how to organize and help their communities on labor issues. For Zaw Min Naing, the migrants will need their community to accompany them to go through specific cases and especially for advocacy support in preventing and protecting their rights.

The estimated number of Myanmar migrants in Thailand is around 2.5–3 million people who are spread out all over Thailand. Since 2009, these migrants have entered a national verification process (NV) involving the Thai/Myanmar government officials, in line with a 2003 MOU on Cooperation in Worker Employment. After they completed this process, the migrants will be regularized where they will be issued a temporary passport and a two-year Thai visa and work permit. However, there was a lack of transparency in terms of policies in the implementation according to Migrant Workers Rights Network (MRWN) that put migrant workers in vulnerable positions.

The presence of community based organizations (CBO), such as OIA, that provide service and advocacy for the rights of Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot is crucial for ASEAN Economic Communities. For Zaw Min Naing the incoming government led by Aung San Su Kyi will give hope for transparent policies that protect migrant workers and their rights.

-Written by Fr. Bambang Sipayung

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