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Diakonia, meaning literally 'to serve' has been the quarterly publication of JRS Asia Pacific since 1983. The Jesuit Refugee Service is an international Catholic Organisation established in 1980 by Father Pedro Arupe, SJ. Its mission is to accompany, serve and advocate for forcibly displaced persons around the world.

Letters from the Director: Stories to Keep Hope Alive

The current crisis in the Strait of Mallaca brings us back to a crisis in the 1980s with the Vietnamese boat people, but with a more compelling question, what have we achieved to address the issue of refugees and internally displaced people? Looking deep into the current state of our world, we have yet to see a prospective solution to this global problem. In the context of the Cold War the positive response to the Vietnamese refugees happened perhaps due to the bipolar political world of the times. The recent crisis of Rohingya raises a critical argument, especially in the context of globalisation where borders matter less, about the lack of coherent policies creating lack of action which leaves those most in need with a dimmed light of hope.

As JRS Asia Pacific now tries to respond to this crisis, we also want to bring to attention some stories where people we work with continue to keep lit the hope that is left. This publication contains articles from; JRS Philippines and projects on women IDPs aimed to enhance women IDPs in returned communities for sustainable peace and reconciliation; an interview with staff from JRS Indonesia with the Urban Refugee Project; A story from a Refugee on his experiences in Bangkok; and the JRS Myanmar (JRSMMR) Teacher Training Programme focused on building skills for teachers.

These stories are not merely stories to tell, but also a way to communicate and to keep up hope and a call for solidarity. It is also a call for policies and actions where people can feel that they are not left alone. It is also a call for prayers which may keep alive the future hope of our humanity.

JRS Philippines Livelihood Project



JRS Philippine Project Director and Field Officer conducting a Livelihood consultation to 81 women IDP's in Matampay, Munai, Lanao del Norte

In 2014, JRS was present in the provinces of Maguindanao, Lanao and in Zamboanga city in Mindanao. The places were identified as conflict areas and had a nest of IDPs for many decades. JRS assisted livelihood projects in Maguindanao and Zamboanga city while advocated peace in Lanao del Norte.

JRS projects were centered on women IDPs and aimed to enhance women IDPs in returned communities in order to have sustainable peace and reconciliation. Through livelihoods JRS aimed to develop sustainable opportunities of returning or returned female-headed IDP households and through peace based advocacy sustained participation for returning or returned IDPs about the peace process in the context of the Framework Agreement on Bangsamoro between the Philippine government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

During the implementation and monitoring stages challenges were always part of JRS programmes in Mindanao. By and large, the challenge was unstable peace situation in the areas being served and restricted access to field sites hindered activities. Recurring fighting or threats from uncontrolled groups who tried to sabotage the peace process like Bangsamoro Independent Freedom Fighters, Moro National Liberation Front and other uncontrolled evil forces responsible for kidnappings and killings hindered JRS implementation. "Rido" or a clan feud was the other factor that hindered the mobility of either JRS staff or people served in the areas.

Despite the challenges JRS was able to assist 460 households in the livelihood programme and in the advocacy programme. JRS also established links with other local NGOs particularly in Lanao. JRS Philippines has gained the trust of the people served and their local leaders through relationship building allowing JRS to work in their critical and vulnerable situations.

Going forward JRS will advocate for fair media coverage based on positive interactions of those based in Mindanao from multiple religions, so Muslims and Christians alike, can help build on a grassroots campaign for women's rights and awareness raising of the BBL & Strategic Framework.

"When we stay" – a conversation with Taka Gani, Project Coordinator of JRS Indonesia's Outreach to Urban Refugees Project in late 2014



Asylum seekers listening during one of JRS Indonesia's Information Sessions

"It is really, really important to have reliable interpreters to share this information effectively" - Taka Gani

not permitted to work in Indonesia, it is very hard for them to support themselves. Also this lack of activity has a strong detrimental effect on the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of women and men, girls and boys alike. Therefore, I feel psychosocial and education needs are very real, especially for the children, otherwise they miss so much of their education. Fortunately, there are some great examples of community-based organisations coming together to meet these needs. It would also be great if there could be more focus on increasing the Bahasa Indonesia skills of the children so they could be bridged into local schools one day, since waiting times in Indonesia are getting longer and longer.

Can you tell me a little bit more about the RSD information sessions? How are they run and what kind of information is shared?

The Information Sessions are usually run for about 5-15 people at a time, just in someone's room, though we have done a couple of bigger sessions at an English Education Centre in the community. Both women and men are encouraged to attend to understand more about the RSD process, including the steps in the process: registration; written statement; RSD interview; delivery of decision; application to resettlement country or countries; acceptance and pre-departure training as well as the estimated duration of each stage, so that people have more realistic timelines in mind and can make their savings last longer, if possible. It is really, really important to have reliable interpreters to share this information effectively.

So you have a good team of community interpreters to help local staff in their visiting and when offering support to community members...who are the others on your team who help with the different aspects of JRS work, like health and legal referrals?

Well, we are lucky to have a great team of five at the home office – Onie is our finance officer and a key caseworker too, sometimes she is the one who accompanies people to the hospital and helps them explain their symptoms in Bahasa Indonesia. Pius and Peter help with this and other basic needs too whilst Gading is our legal liaison officer who runs most of the information sessions. I help with the information sessions too, as well as providing a bit more in depth counselling when people are really struggling, usually I will go together with another member of the team, to the homes of the refugees to provide a listening year and to see if there is anything else JRS can do to support the family through their hard time.

How many people do you serve?

We serve people in several different ways, since January this year we've supported 162 people to meet their basic needs, between 40-50 have received health referral support and more than 200 have benefited from our RSD information sessions. For those who need extra support with RSD (about 40-50 so far this year) we have been able to refer them to a local refugee legal service providers network but its services are really overstretched since they are all volunteers.

Where do the people you serve come from?

The majority are Hazara people from Afghanistan, but we also journey with Sri Lankan, Iranian and a few Somali and Eritrean people.

How long have most of them been living in Indonesia?

The majority of them have been living here for around two years. Some of them are newly arrived but a few have even been here almost three years, having arrived in early 2012.

So how long has JRS been working there?

We have been present in the community since 2009, some of our first friends have left Indonesia already but most of them have been moved into the city, which is not as safe for them but closer to some other service providers.

What needs have you seen amongst the refugees and asylum seekers trying to live in Indonesia?

Well obviously information and assistance with progressing through the RSD process is very important, in the meantime survival is the main concern. As asylum seekers and refugees are

My Refugee Story in Bangkok



A URP Bangkok Caseworker talking with a Refugee

"Some people have gone crazy because of being in detention for a long period of time"

It was mid-2009 when things started changing for us, we had to flee our country on religious basis, despite being very well settled and content with our lives. I had not heard much about Thailand and also I never ever thought of leaving my country at any stage in my life. I still remember that in 1996, after the matriculation, my uncle suggested that I might be sent abroad for studies but my parents did not accept the idea, as I was an only child. Anyway, as I said, in 2009 I was told that being an Ahmadi Muslims I have no rights to live and earn in my country. I tried my level best to control the situation and keep living in the country, but saying briefly, I was compelled to flee and look for refuge. If I hadn't fled, I might have been in jail or even dead. My parents who wanted me to grow with my family in front of their eyes, advised me to leave my country as soon as it was possible.

After arriving in Thailand, the biggest issues were of language and accommodation. The first few months were too hard to live on, but in time we learned the ways to survive according to the flow of the situation. Those first few months were so different compared to my life before, that even a person like me who never knew how to fry an egg, learned cooking. The reason was that I had to stay in most of the time, and the only outing was when I with my family and we would go out to Tops Supermarket or Tesco Lotus for buying the

necessities of life. That was the only entertainment for us at that time.

Half of the year passed and money was running out. It was in my mind that UNHCR might help regarding finding a job, but I learned in the first half year that it was impossible, and we have to arrange all the things ourselves. At that moment, I had to sell gold bangles, bracelets from my wife that I gifted her on our marriage. Selling those gold ornaments was only possible because of JRS, and the reason why I'm saying this is the legal aspect of a refugee in Thailand.

The money I got from selling the gold ornaments ran out in few months. During this period, twice the Thai police arrested me, once when I was alone, and the second time when I was with my family. Luckily on both occasions I managed to avoid the Immigration Detention Centre.

The first incident took place on December 14th, 2010, when I was waiting for the bus to get back home near BRC. I was with another friend and we both were arrested, put in the immigration van and were headed towards IDC. Fortunately, as suggested by the officers, one person intervened and got us released. But it was not for free, we both had to pay some money to be released.

The second incident took place on December 24th, 2010. It was a bright sunny morning in December. My wife was preparing breakfast when the door knocked. Once I opened I realised none of our neighbors was at door, and it was police asking us to present our passports. After I told them that we are registered with UNHCR, they asked all of us to sit outside of our room, in the corridor. Shortly after we were taken to the station but were lucky to be released because of one Thai Ahmadi lady who intervened and spent hours with the superior of the station explaining our problems back in our country and the status of our prolonged stay in Thailand.

This experience made us scared because whenever we went out after this my kids would grab my hand tightly when seeing any cop and tell me we should go back home. But I would tell them that not every single policeman is going to arrest us and they believed me. Eventually, we moved out from that building and started living in an apartment where there were no refugees living, only Thai.

I started working with JRS in June 2010. Now I felt better and spending time in a positive way. With the help of JRS, my son was enrolled in a Thai school and we were confidently learning how to keep surviving in Thailand. Finally. On 14th June 2012, we were recognized as refugees and the hope that we will start a new life really flourished. We kept on going through the process, though it was tiring and not timely defined. At last, the time came when we were ready to be resettled and start a new life.

Because Thai Immigration Laws declare refugees as illegals and aliens, I had to go to IDC for a week before leaving Thailand, and that was compulsory. The seven days I spent in IDC Bangkok before our departure, because I had no legal status, are unforgettable and I'd like to share some of my experiences.

There were around 70 detainees in the room. Among those 70, 15-20 were clients or registered with UNHCR and all others were from different countries. In that room, I have seen people becoming friends, becoming enemies, smiling, crying, playing together, helping each other, bargaining and many more expressions of life at their best. There is a lot of diversity in that room.

Some people have gone crazy because of being in detention for a long period of time. They talk to themselves loudly and in their native languages, they sometimes start crying or laughing and never notice what's going on around them. I noticed there are some people who never go out of the room and keep to themselves in the cell all the time. The sad

aspect is that there is no realisation of their poor physical and mental state by the authorities. The medical facilities are nearly nonexistent.

The most interesting thing is that when someone's visitor comes, one of the officers comes and opens the locks of that room. It makes a large sound when those big door-locks are opened, and when the detainees hear the voice of that lock so many run towards the door to find out if by chance they have a visitor or not!

I must say that it makes sense that IDC is for people who overstayed their visas and violated Thai law... but what about the asylum seekers and refugees who are registered with UNHCR? They are only staying in Thailand for the completion of this process with UNHCR and detaining this category of person is an abuse and will continue unless Thailand signs the 1951 convention.

I would like to put up this matter...when Thailand is going to sign the treaty? I have no answer to this question!

JRS Myanmar (JRSMMR) Teacher Training Programme



Children at graduation ceremony

After all, these young people are the ones who will be shaping the future of Myanmar” - Irene

The seven month long JRS Myanmar (JRSMMR) Teacher Training Programme is focused on building skills. Some of the learning the trainees undertake includes personal values “formation” which helps them to know their own identity. This has already afforded some of the students from IDP backgrounds the time and space to process their post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms in a safe environment, as well as to dream big for their own futures and that of their country.

The main focus of the curriculum is, of course, teaching skills – including: lesson planning; classroom management; and group work; as well as integrating sustainable practices into everyday life – organic farming, designing clean burning stoves and promoting both in local villages. Human Rights awareness, anti-human trafficking awareness and advocacy skills will also be developed during the course.

The 14 female and 3 male trainee teachers begin their day by cooking breakfast together in the tidy kitchen and dining room they share. Their training then takes place in a nearby multi-purpose hall on Monday to Friday from 9am – 11:30am, when they return home to cook lunch. They are back in the classroom or attending

English lessons in their communal dining area by 2pm each day, the afternoon session lasting for at least one and a half hours.

Moses, the JRSMMR Project Director who delivers English lessons three days per week explains, *“So far we have only had a few sessions but the trainees are responding well to the English curriculum which is of my own design after ten years of practice in the Kachin context. It covers the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) as well as plenty of vocabulary and pronunciation in a way that is relevant to the students here”.*

Between 4pm - 6pm every evening the trainees can be found working on chores or lesson review, after which they disagree about what to watch on TV, listen to music, play on their phones and hang out together – much like many other 18-29-year-olds around the world.

Even with this demanding schedule, the group have found the time to take two high school drop outs under their wing. *“When she first came here and we asked her to prepare an onion, the most she could do was find one and hand it to you. Now if we ask her to prepare an onion she takes it from storage, peels it and slices it nicely, ready to go into the pan. She has become a great help and is participating well in lessons too”*, shared one teacher trainee living in the group house where they also support two young people who did not qualify for the course (did not graduate from High School) but came to them under emergency circumstances. One of these, described above, is now well on her way to becoming a teacher aid and maybe one day having a chance to re-sit her high school exams.

As if all this were not enough, the trainees have also been making their community safer by asking the elders to help organise night patrols around the village. But creating a sense of community is not restricted to the immediate geographical area. JRSMMR recently invited local orphanage tutors and boarding house supervisors from a nearby IDP Camp to join the teacher trainees in a workshop on ‘Teaching through Games to Assist all three Learning Styles (visual, auditory and kinesthetic)’ which was run by Junita Calder, the previous JRS Asia Pacific Regional Advocacy and Communications Officer.

After the session, the young people decided to get together again, possibly monthly, for meetings of a local ‘teachers and youth workers support group’ – *“That would be really great”*, agreed Irene, JRSMMR Education Director, *“it will be wonderful if they can support each other and share resources, no matter if JRS can continue here or not. After all, these young people are the ones who will be shaping the future of Myanmar”.*

If the energy and generosity displayed by this group of young Myanmar teachers-in-training after just two months together

is anything to go by, that future will be bright indeed. At the end of March our 15 trainees completed their training and are eager to start teaching young children. They are calling themselves the new generation of Myanmar.

**If you think encouraging this group and others like it is worthwhile and would like to join JRS in this important work, please consider sending messages of support, donating through our website and/or circulating this news article to people you think might like to do the same.*

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