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Letter from Director

A young Bangladeshi boy I met in Aceh expressed some Bangladeshi words while his hands were pointing out dead fish in Kuala Langsa. With limited English and Indonesian, he tried to communicate with JRS Indonesia staff and I. I asked his name and where is he from. He explained that he and the other Bangladeshi were waiting the documentation process of their deportation, while it was not clear what would happen to Rohingya.

The boy was part of the refugee and migrant crisis in Mallacca Strait in May 2015. From August till now another refugee and migrant crisis takes place in Europe. These crises have shown the desperate lives of people that are forced to embark on dangerous journeys as they look for safety. The crises also show the discrepancies of responses between government and ordinary people, whether in Europe or in Aceh. The government is quick to close the national borders while ordinary citizens show more compassion and openness in welcoming refugees.

Are the governments who claim to represent their people really that distant from the people they represent? Refugees are human beings not just numbers to be tallied. Especially when it comes to responding to the needs of vulnerable refugees.

Like the young Bangladeshi boy who wanted to communicate with people he was meeting for the first time there is a need of real listening. The need for governments to listen so they can understand what their people want as they claim to represent them. Ordinary people have shown compassion and hospitality because they can relate to living in a difficult situation. They do so without putting political elements in their humane response. It is a time for policy makers to listen carefully to people's stories in order to justify their power to rule and govern.

Asia Pacific-Leaving Home and Journeying for Safety



Rohingya and Bangladeshi live in this camp near the port. (Nick Jones/JRSAP)

*No one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well*

-Warsan Shire

These words are part of a poem called "No One Leaves Home" by a Somali – British poet and writer.

Home is typically a place one wants to cling to and remember. It is a place one grows, became accustomed to and enjoyed the people they lived with.

However when home chases you as Shire describes in her poem one will certainly run for safety to any possible place one can find.

Qamariah, an Ethiopian girl, and Mohammed, a Rohingya young man, know well what Shire means in her poems. Both of them had to leave their home because it was a hostile place to live.

Qamariah fled to Kenya in order to escape from sexual violence and murder, as threats were made against her and her people in the area. She belongs to member of a minority clan in the area in Ethiopia. Before fleeing to Kenya, she witnessed helplessly as her father and brothers were killed in a shooting.

Mohammed wants to study in Australia and to become a doctor. Back home him and his fellow Rohingya faced discrimination and persecution with little access to health or education and movements are limited or non-existent. To pursue his dream Mohammed attended schools in the refugee camp and then decided to board boats in hopes to further his education overseas. He was among the refugees floating in the Mallacca Strait earlier this year in May.

The picture of a pleasant home does not apply for them. They faced hardship, discrimination, violence and persecution because of their identity or political association.

They did not want to leave home but it became a hostile place for them and their survival is more important than their home. The choice of leaving home for survival and staying home with hostilities and danger was a difficult choice to make for both of them.

A Journey to a Transit Land

Basic immigration services are often difficult to get for people such as Qamariah and Ali when they are running for their lives. Amidst this difficult process, there is a network of agents that offer to smuggle them through borders for money.

According to the 2007 UNODC Report, human smuggling and trafficking are two of the fastest growing transnational crime activities. Both are considered the most lucrative forms of organized crime after the drug trade. UNDOC said, "migrant smugglers are becoming more and more organized, establishing professional networks that transcend borders and regions." The refugees fleeing for their lives choose these agents in order to bring them to their desired space but often they end up in places they do not know or they did not want to go to.

Qamariah told a story of how her plan to follow her employer in Kenya finally brought her to Indonesia. An arrangement was made for her to follow the employer to Europe by entrusting an agent with her documents and a payment was made. Instead of arriving in Europe, the flight stopped over first in Malaysia and then to Indonesia. She was then left alone without anyone to contact.

Mohammed described the journey with the boat that brought the Rohingya as a terrible experience. The smuggler beat people and did not give enough food to everyone. The captain decided to combine three boats into one boat, which caused overcrowding.

Qamariah found help and survives with other asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia, albeit in constant danger of being arrested and detained. The future is still dim for her.

Mohammed was saved by the local ordinary fishermen in Aceh and was hosted in a temporary shelter with more than 1,500 Rohingya and Bangladeshi. He finally got his strength after days of crisis in the boat. He helps to translate into English and communicate in any he can to the local people. He found local people accommodating, friendly and helpful after understanding the terrible situation on the boat.

Arriving and living in transit countries is always a struggle and requires effort to adjust to a new neighborhood. The first barrier is typically language as it often limits their access to a job, an education or even to health services. Their lack of documentation makes them often unwelcome and subject to arrest by immigration authorities.

Struggles and difficulties continue even after they are away from home.

Talking about the future is always difficult for Mohammed and Qamariah. In this context, it is a real challenge to keep hope alive because uncertainties are everywhere and it seems there is no protection available for vulnerable people like them.

"Our Common Home"

From an insecure place called home to a secure place, typically development countries, many face a dangerous journey to safety based on the experiences of these two people.

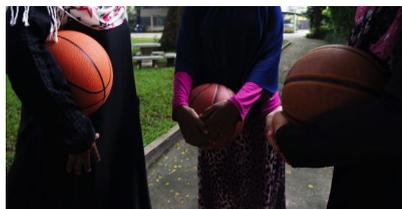
They lost the protection in their original home. While transit countries may offer some possibilities it is still a fact that they do not enjoy as much protection as they want or need.

While there is no doubt a need to create more hospitable and protective policies for refugees and asylum seekers, the need to address root causes of conflict and war in places of origin is urgent.

The interconnection we feel through globalization needs to bring a global awareness of creating our common home. Peaceful coexistence is a need to enhance our lives, and to maintain our common home so there is more secure place for us and the next generation to live.

*Written by Nick Jones & Bambang A. Sipayung SJ

Bangkok: Basketball and Accompaniment



Young women and girls gather to discuss basketball practice. (Jennifer Martin/JRS Thailand)

I wipe the sweat from my eyes, full of hope and gratitude: hopeful that this activity can help her feel stronger to cope with her unjust circumstance, and grateful that I get to

I have been outside for five minutes, and my North American genes already have my face dripping with sweat, my heart depleted from a morning of trauma-focused counselling sessions.

Nine girls fidget in the humid Bangkok air that hangs heavy and humid. They stand silent looking at each other in a misshapen circle: five Somali girls on one side and four Pakistani girls on the other.

I ask, "Raise your hand if you have played basketball before?" Fadumo translates to Somali and Samavia translates to Urdu.

No one raises her hand. Silence.

But nervous smiles emerge as I tease them, saying sarcastically, "I came here with the understanding that you were all professional basketball players who have years and years and years of experience."

After a few more introductions, we start from the beginning. This is a basketball court. This is dribbling. This is passing. Minutes later, the silence is broken.

The balls run from their hands as they learn to dribble. The balls slip through the girl's fingers as they juggle to catch a pass.

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women.

We are running up and down the court laughing and gasping for breath. While not everyone speaks similar languages to one another, the playful and uncoordinated nature of trying something for the first time is universal.

A week later four new faces are in the circle, but three members are absent; they have been arrested and put into the Immigration Detention Center.

In Bangkok, Thai law does not distinguish between an asylum seeker and an illegal migrant. So, for now they are in detention. Their bail may be paid and they may be released. Or they may not.

We are playing in the shade of tall trees at our office, while they likely sit in a windowless, overcrowded room behind a barred door. We are snacking on biscuits and orange juice, while they will only eat rice and cucumber soup today.

This is what these girls risk every day when they leave their small apartments or even when they stay at home. They can be arrested at any point and put in detention. But they still come. They choose to ride the bus, sometimes for an hour or two before arriving, to our game to run, flail, and laugh, even though they risk forfeiting their freedom if they are caught. They choose to live rather than hide.

As a Somali girl leaves, she catches my eye, and says in broken English "Jennifer... today was... the most...fun." I wipe the sweat from my eyes, full of hope and gratitude: hopeful that this activity can help her feel stronger to cope with her unjust circumstance, and grateful that I get to accompany such brave, dynamic, and strong young women.

*Written by Jennifer Martin- Psychosocial Counselor of the Urban Refugee Program

JRS Philippines Staff Testimonial

As a Field Officer in the areas of Lanao del Norte, my main responsibilities are to organize and assist women displacements that are effected by armed conflict. I specifically work in the 6 Barangays of the municipality of Munai and 6 Barangays in the municipality of Tangkal.

In 2012, I started to organize women for JRS's peace advocacy project in Lanao, focusing on raising awareness and understanding of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB). Currently, JRS advocacy is now focused on the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) and my main tasks are to assist in the community preparation and in the actual forum.

Aside from this, I am also doing project monitoring of our livelihood assistance provided by JRS to the women organizations of Munai and Tangkal. I provided training and mentoring on simple bookkeeping and cooperative management.

Women-beneficiaries expressed that they are happy because the project is generating income and the livelihood project helped them a lot in taking care of their family's daily expenses.

I observed that the communities are trying hard to understand the BBL, especially the women. Women are confined to their homes and do not have a clear knowledge and understanding of the BBL. The advocacy JRS provides gives space for women to go out from their homes and to learn, listen and participate in the social activities of the community.

Now women are actively participating and are able to say what is in their minds. The men in the community now understand and agree that women need to know about the BBL too because whatever happens will effect everyone in the community.

It is a challenge for JRS to provide accurate information about the standing of the BBL as it is in Congress and it is still under deliberations.

With any setbacks in the passing of the BBL, there is a great chance that another conflict will ensue in the areas.

I am thinking now that if this happens, the people in the community will be affected, as everything that was started by them after the war will be greatly impacted.

*Linang Otto Macarambon

Field Officer- Lanao Del Norte

Testimony of Ma Tin Aye- JRS Thailand Beneficiary



My name is Ma Tin Aye (41 years old). My husband is Ko Myint Naing (46 years old). We have seven children – four daughters and three sons. We lived in a small village in Irrawaddy Region, Myanmar. We came to Thailand in 2008 to seek a job, and now it has been nearly six years working in Thailand.

As transportation cost was high for us, we had to borrow 200,000 Kyat from friends and relatives to cover our costs. We are still paying back our debt to our friends and relatives.

We decided to find a better life in Thailand because living life in our own country was hard. Only three family members worked to

earn 4,500 Kyat (180 baht) per day, where as the rest were learning at school. Often my family had to ask money in advance from work in order to meet our family's daily life. Since we did not possess a piece of land to build our house we came to Mae Sot in search of better life here.

We first lived in Phop Phra Distict in Mae Sot. Our employer provided us a piece of land from his own land to live on. Initially three of us worked with him, earning 240 baht per day. We worked in agriculture and logging. We knew that logging is illegal in Thailand, but we had no other choice and did what our boss ordered to do so. We worked for him for three years when one day my husband was arrested by the forestry authority for illegal logging and put him in jail for six years. Somehow, our employer escaped from arrest.

My husband has been in jail for three years. Since the incident we have faced many difficulties, especially with language barriers, low wages, and financial problems. Since we came here without legal documents, we had to find a way to get a work permit, which also cost us a lot.

With my husband in jail I am the one responsible for the family. Two of my children have to work, earning between 100-120 baht per day. The whole family needs to depend on their income too. At the same time, I have to take responsibility of my husband by seeing him twice a month. That costs me around 3,000 Baht monthly buying his necessities (foods, etc). So I had to ask one of my sons to dropout from school and work. Right now we barely can pay the interest fee to the moneylender and my health and my youngest children's health condition are not great either.

Fortunately, in 2013 my neighbor introduced me to JRS where I sought help from the organization. I have explained my situation and received necessary support from them. At the initial stage, my family decided to start pig raising. I received start-up support from JRS including piglets, pig food, pig medicine, and other essentials needed while JRS also does a monthly monitoring visit to my farming site.

I chose this income generation activity because of my previous experience in this work and my personal interest and motivation as well. This activity is good for a person like me as I can still earn some income by staying at home with my poor health condition.

I have benefits and challenges with this income generating activity. I have learned how to manage my family's expenses efficiently by with training by JRS. I now adjust accordingly my family's income and expenses. I can now pay back the debt I had before and cover the costs of my husband.

My personal views on JRS are that JRS is willing to work together with a beneficiary. JRS is willing to provide me with knowledge and skills to perform well. On top of that, I have also learnt financial management and business planning, which is helpful for my personal development. Again, I personally want to show my gratitude to JRS for helping me through this income generation activity. I wish to continue my pig farming until I return to Myanmar one day.

I wish to see my husband released from prison soon. Within three-years I want to save around 30,000 Baht so then I will be able to buy a piece of land in Myanmar and settle down. Finally I wish to see political, social, and economic change in my country soon too.

* Testimony conducted by Mi Sheh- JRS Thailand

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