

Message from the Director

I take on the role of director of JRS Australia, as it happens, very soon after Australia Day, a day of barbecues on the beach and gun salutes, but also a day when the contradictions and complexities of this nation are most on view. To a newcomer such as myself, the summer haze of Australia Day can paradoxically seem like a season of mists, when much of Australia's past is hidden and silenced in the cacophony of the celebration of the present. It can be so easy, and tempting, to forget that Australia Day commemorates the coming of strangers to a land that already had its own people, a coming that ruptured the Dreaming of the indigenous and transformed them in their turn into strangers in their own land.

Land - who owns it, who should be allowed on it, who should be expelled and excluded from it - is always a contentious issue. When Abraham first received God's message, he was given a promise of land. 'Go to the land, and take possession of the land. I will give you this land.' What is often forgotten is that God makes another promise to Abraham: 'Through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' No one is excluded from God's graciousness and blessing, and those who consider themselves God's people above all are to welcome the stranger in their midst, on their land. 'You shall not wrong a stranger, or oppress him, for you were



yourselves strangers.'

The work of JRS brings us daily into contact with strangers in this land, people who have come to a new country seeking a better life and a safer existence. Many of them felt vulnerable in their own lands, but coming here they continue to be vulnerable. Many are put in detention, and experience the irony of being incarcerated in a land that seemed to promise freedom. They feel powerless, often unable to comprehend the legal and bureaucratic processes that will determine their future, and bewildered by the length of time it can take for their cases to be resolved. They feel unwanted, aware

of how they are portrayed in the media and how they are perceived by large numbers of Australians.

JRS seeks to serve these strangers, to accompany them, and to speak for them when they have no voice to speak for themselves. In one sense I can bring nothing new to my role as director of JRS. All I can do is pledge fidelity to this mission of JRS: to be bringers of hope to these strangers in our midst who seek the help and protection of Australia, and who often have the least reason to be hopeful.

A mature nation is one that seeks the wellbeing of the most vulnerable in the land. I would hope that the season of mists will one day also be a season of mellow fruitfulness, when those in the land who were themselves once strangers will themselves be a blessing to the strangers in their midst.

Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, our outgoing director, has been a blessing to the many asylum seekers and refugees who have been served by JRS during his tenure. To many people who have found themselves treated as strangers, Sacha has extended the hand of friendship and the bond of companionship. As he moves on to explore further the pilgrim route of Jesuit life, may his constant companion be the good Lord who gathers us all into that Kingdom of peace that has no borders and calls no one stranger.

Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ

Deep appreciation for **Mercy Sisters**

The long tradition of collaboration between JRS and the Sisters of Mercy was renewed more than a year ago in an effort to provide pastoral care to asylum seekers on Christmas Island. Sr Maureen Lohrey arrived on Christmas Island in early December 2009, and, since then, Srs Joan Kelleher, Lizzie Finnerty and Carmel Setford have served uninterrupted for various periods of time.

The presence of the sisters (and the priests accompanying them as part of our pastoral team) has been deeply appreciated and recognised not only by the asylum seekers, but also by the Department of Immigration and detention provider staff, as well as by the local community. Their presence and service, as we have been told, has been a source of great consolation and support not only in the most difficult of times (as with the recent boat tragedy), but also in the day-to-day 'ordinary' but so challenging life in the several detention facilities.

Since October 2010, Srs Jackie Ford and Anne McDonnell have provided pastoral care at Curtin Detention Centre in WA. The detention provider's religious and community coordinator recently wrote: 'I cannot imagine being able to do my job well without the very valuable assistance of the Sisters!' A month ago, Sr Kathleen Moran joined JRS in Sydney to assist in supporting our work with unaccompanied minors in community detention, and Sr Meredith Evans is preparing to work with asylum seekers at Inverbrackie in Adelaide. Sr Maryanne Loughry continues to serve as Associate Director at JRS Australia, focusing on climate displacement in the Pacific and serving on the Minister of Immigration's Advisory Council. Maryanne also spends some of her time as Research Professor at Boston College, and provides support to special projects of JRS International.

JRS would like to thank these sisters for their dedication, commitment and service. We look forward to continued collaboration in 2011.

Shelter Project: visiting refugees in **detention**

It's a typical Australian summer scene: a little boy named Mustafa plays cricket on the driveway, his mother peels mandarins in the shade, his baby sister coos close by. Mustafa's ball rolls under the fence, and he tries to squeeze through the small space to retrieve it. His mother cries out in alarm, for he is not allowed to venture outside alone, even if she were to give him the go-ahead. For this is not a suburban backyard, but Villawood Immigration Residential Housing. Mustafa and his family – two brothers, a sister, and his Hazara parents – have come here from Afghanistan via Christmas Island and Perth. Each week they are visited by staff and volunteers from JRS.



'The presence of JRS pastoral workers and volunteers in the detention centres is very simply a ministry of presence,' says Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ, Director of JRS.

'Asylum seekers often feel bewildered by the complex bureaucratic and legal processes that confront them, and it seems that the trajectories of their lives are being decided in far off places by faceless others. Our presence is meant to give them hope, to tell them that there are people who are interested in them and believe that they have a future, that they are not just so much flotsam and jetsam in a sea of despair.'

For Mustafa, and his family, these visits seem to be working. Although the children are allowed to attend school and go swimming, and the parents to do the weekly shopping, they are mostly confined to their small villa while they wait for the Department of Immigration to process their asylum claim. Their faces light up when we arrive, and when we leave they wave until we are out of sight. 'Please come back and visit us next week,' says Mustafa's mother. She is smiling broadly, but her words carry with them a hint of desperation.

The Shelter Project is in urgent need of refrigerators and a washing machine. Please contact JRS on 02 93563888 if you are able to assist.

Letter from **Cambodia**

One of the most difficult challenges I have faced is trying to manage the expectations of refugees and asylum seekers. Most, if not all, of the individuals seeking asylum in Cambodia have come with the mistaken hope that once they have received refugee status they will be resettled to a third country, namely Australia, Canada or America. Despite advising refugees as early as the initial interview that resettlement is not an option, many still cling to this hope, learning English rather than Khmer and approaching embassies. This makes the process of integration much more difficult to achieve.

Widespread poverty in Cambodia serves to limit employment opportunities for uneducated refugees, and even for those with skills, the pay is extremely low. I have found that those who came from nothing have been more successful in achieving some sort of self-sufficiency. The situation is much harder for those refugees and asylum seekers who enjoyed some affluence or a comfortable lifestyle in their home countries before they fled to Cambodia.

JRS has started a pilot project aimed at helping the more educated asylum seekers and refugees gain employment. So far, we are sending a handful of students through a culinary course so that they might be able to work in a Western or international restaurant, where the conditions and pay may be more reasonable. The students are yet to complete the course, but if they are successful in finding stable employment upon completion, this will be a small achievement.

Lian Yong is an Australian lawyer. She recently completed a year-long placement with JRS in Phnom Penh. She will be replaced by Nikola Errington from Brisbane

Christmas Party

JRS celebrated Christmas last year at its annual party with refugees, volunteers, staff and friends. The outgoing Director of JRS, Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, thanked the supporters of JRS for their ongoing commitment to the organisation and the people it serves. He expressed solidarity for refugees and asylum seekers, particularly those still waiting for their asylum applications to be determined, and those who were separated from family.



Project Assistant Cecilia Silva pictured with two of the refugees supported by JRS.



JRS Youth Award

'If you found yourself in the footsteps of an asylum seeker, how would you like to be treated yourselves? What kind of welcome would you like to receive?' This is the question asked of school students around Australia as they prepare to enter the annual Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Youth Award, an event held with the aim of raising awareness of the plight of refugees and stimulating debate around asylum seeker policy.

Now in its third year, the award offers students in Years 9-12 the opportunity to meet and interact with refugees, learning about their stories and coming to an understanding of the impetus behind forced migration. The award will be judged in September this year. Schools and individuals who wish to enter can download the relevant information at www.jrs.org.au.

Letter from **Africa**

I recently stayed with a couple of refugee friends at a guest house in Lilongwe in Malawi: we were attending a meeting together the following day and Bijou and Veronique had been given passes to leave the camp for 48 hours. They both told me how they get up in the morning and pray for an hour for their family members, both living and dead, for their friends and also for me in my work. With faith such as this I feel we have a great strength at JRS. I know too that they deeply appreciate and greatly rely on the huge support we receive from our friends in Australia. I thank all of you for this support and pray that you will join me in continuing our vital work in 2011!

My work at JRS in Australia which as you know is urban based, in many ways prepared me well to direct the operation in South Africa. But one thing that I was completely unprepared for was the sheer size of the situation we were dealing with here. One way to get an idea of this is to imagine the two largest refugee camps in Africa, Dadab and Kakuma, both in northern Kenya. Dadab holds upwards of a quarter of a million people while Kakuma presently holds around 75,000. Combine them and then add another half million Zimbabweans and you begin to get an idea of the size of the refugee population in the twin cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria.

In Johannesburg, Pretoria, Luanda (in Angola) and Harare, JRS runs programs aimed at enabling refugees to live with some dignity by helping them into jobs, through the provision of micro credit and grant schemes, helping their children into schools and their families into some kind of meaningful social and religious connection with the local populations.

In Malawi and Zimbabwe we also work in the last remaining refugee camps of the region, running a school system which educates 4,000 mostly young people. In Zimbabwe we also work with young people uprooted by extreme poverty from their homes searching for work and money to feed their families.

The heart of our work is always the human person, a person like you or me seeking the safety of a home, a job, a place to bring up their children. As one refugee recently told me 'JRS is our family: they are there when we have none'. May I invite you to continue to be part of this family by your generosity and support: it is absolutely vital.

Fr David Holdcroft SJ is JRS' Regional Director for Southern Africa.

If undeliverable return to:

Jesuit Refugee Service Australia
PO Box 522
Kings Cross NSW 1340

Upcoming Events

Hawthorn Parish in conjunction with the Australian Jesuits will present 'Who is welcome at our table? Australia's response to refugees', on Tuesday 8 March at Kooyong Tennis Club, 7.15am for a 7.30am start. Guest speaker is Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, former Director of Jesuit Refugee Service Australia. The breakfast will launch the Jesuit Lenten Podcast Series. Cost \$40 pp. For tickets, contact Beryn on 03 8862 4020.

The first JRS Melbourne Ball will take place on Saturday 25 June at MAIA, Central Pier, Docklands. www.jrs.org.au

The annual Sydney Winter Solstice Ball will be held in July, with the date still to be advised. www.jrs.org.au

Refugee Week 2011 will be celebrated from Sunday 19 June 19 to Saturday 25 June to coincide with World Refugee Day on 20 June. For more information visit www.refugeeweek.org.au

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