



Where is the **queue**?

'The Devil is in the detail' seems to be a fairly recent idiom in the history of the English language, but I much prefer the earlier version of this idiom, sometimes attributed to Gustave Flaubert: 'Le bon Dieu est dans le detail': The good God is in the detail.

I write this a few days after the release of the report of the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers. I would urge all our readers to get a copy of the report – it can easily be found online – and to read it in full. Absorbing all the detail takes time and effort, but we owe it to the asylum seekers and refugees in our region to understand the recommendations and the impact that they will have on Australian policy.

One of the problems in the policy debate concerning asylum seekers is that too many of us get our opinions second-hand from news pundits, or shock jocks, or unprincipled politicians, or refugee advocates, or even Jesuit priests. We allow others to do the thinking for us, and we eventually believe that mere opinion is established fact. We should start with the notion that facts are sacred, and that when it comes to facts, God is in the detail.

I have heard refugee advocates damning the Malaysia-Australia Arrangement because it would involve asylum seekers being taken from Australia to Malaysia where they

would end up at the end of a resettlement queue 100,000 people long. It is true that there are 100,000 asylum seekers and refugees registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia. However, these displaced persons do not all have the same aspirations and motivations. The vast majority of these persons are Burmese, and they often apply for UNHCR registration because it affords them a degree of protection in Malaysia, despite the fact that Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol.

Many of the registered asylum seekers and refugees from Burma do not necessarily want to be resettled in a third country: they are in Malaysia because they are safer there than in Burma, and many are able to work and earn a living; but ultimately they are looking to return to their homeland when it is deemed safe to do so. We do not know how many refugees in Malaysia are waiting to be resettled because we have not done the research. Claiming that all 100,000 want to come to Australia is manifestly false. God is in the detail.

Besides, no one would go to the end of any queue, however long, because there is no queue. Refugees are not resettled according to how long it has been since they were found to be a refugee. The UNHCR makes decisions about resettlement

based on the need to be reunited with family, the needs of women at risk, medical needs, the inherent vulnerability of being an unaccompanied minor and so on. It is not like taking a number at the butcher's counter and then waiting to be served. It is more like being a starving person at the butcher's counter hoping that someone will take notice that you're literally dying of hunger and need some food immediately. God is in the detail.

The Expert Panel has recommended that offshore processing centres be opened in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, and that boat arrivals taken there will not be advantaged with regards to their refugee determination and resettlement over what it would have been if they had chosen to remain in Malaysia or Indonesia and awaited the outcome of processes there. In other words, anyone attempting to come here by boat will now be treated as though they had in fact just stayed put in Malaysia and were waiting to get resettled. The Expert Panel, in formulating this, seems to believe that there is a queue for resettlement in Malaysia, and that the asylum seekers they now want sent to Nauru will go to the back of the queue in the interest of fairness. There is a problem with the panel's reasoning: where is the queue? Please see above. God is in the detail.

Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ

Tragedy at Christmas Island

The Christmas Island community was struck with a deep grief in June when 90 asylum seekers drowned while trying to reach the island. More than 100 people survived the tragedy; Sr Dorothy Bayliss was there to provide pastoral support for them as part of JRS' program on the island:

Accompanying many of the survivors was only a small contribution on my part, as it was impossible to walk in their footsteps and to know their suffering. It has been a draining experience as they relive that fateful day and as they carry those memories and continue to carry their survivors' guilt. They have a long, tough road ahead of

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them. Many are still having sleepless nights and bad dreams, and have not come to terms with the death of their friends.

Most of the asylum seekers are from a minority group from war torn countries where they are persecuted for their religious beliefs or for just being born into a particularly group, such as the Tamils or the Hazaras. They often say to me, 'Either we die in our own country where there is no hope for us, or we die hoping to find freedom and safety and a new life in Australia'. To live without fear and as a human being is our only aim. So, what would you do?

So many say how happy they are to be safe on Australian soil and are grateful to the navy, the government and the Australian people. Every time I hear this I hang my head in shame when I know what is happening in the government and in the minds of the people. My asylum seeker friends have enriched my life in so many ways. Most come with nothing but always offer the little they have; they never ask for anything but are only grateful to be safe on Australian soil.

Tentative steps towards belonging

Eighteen unaccompanied minors have entered JRS' Unaccompanied Minors project in Sydney since it opened in December 2010. The pioneering project, in which JRS, with its partner in this project, Marist Youth Care, became the first agency in Australia to house unaccompanied minors, has reaped a number of success stories.

Mohammad has been granted a Protection Visa, and transition to a Life Without Barriers placement in Brisbane so that he can live close to his friends. He recently obtained employment as a barber and is now looking to rent his own apartment.

Mehdi has also obtained a Protection Visa. His best friend, who was living in another UAM program in Sydney, received a Protection Visa the same week. Services involved worked together to have the two young men transition simultaneously to a Youth Support Pilot Program located in Brisbane. Mehdi says that he is happy in Brisbane and everything is going well for him and his friend.

Hossein moved out of the JRS house and into a Vulnerable Adult Male Program in Auburn, and was granted a Protection Visa. He is now receiving support in finding his own accommodation and has obtained work as a painter.

Ali left the JRS House to live with his cousin in Epping. The very same day, he was granted a Protection Visa. Ali is very happy to be living with his cousin; he continues to attend school at Chatswood Intensive English Centre and is expecting to graduate next term. He hopes to obtain his learner driver's licence, and to start an electrician apprenticeship upon completion of his schooling.

Working with the unaccompanied minors has been both challenging and rewarding. While each young person's story is different, each of them has fled their country with serious concerns for their life. Each of them gravely misses their family, has been in a detention centre for several months and has numerous mental health and physical health issues.

I am constantly surprised to see how resilient the young people are and how quickly they can adapt to a new culture, school, language and way of life, all without their families and especially given everything they have endured. The rewards have come from supporting the young people and watching them gradually become more settled, happier and healthier throughout the time they are at the JRS house.

Kim Smith, JRS caseworker

Struggling to survive **on an atoll**

The coming months will see the resettlement of the first 40 families from the Carteret Islands onto the mainland of Bougainville. This process has been closely followed by JRS Australia which, in collaboration with UNHCR Port Moresby, designed a data-collection process to be used by the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) in this resettlement process.

The 40 families are being relocated because their islands can no longer produce sufficient food to feed its population. For decades families have struggled to survive on the atolls, but population size, land degradation due to salt inundation and land erosion and severe climate events have finally overwhelmed many families and forced them to consider relocating to the mainland of PNG.

This is not an easy decision when you have been born and bred on an atoll. Short-term solutions, such as supplementary rice supplies, have helped postpone the inevitable, but budget constraints have prevented these supplies being delivered in 2012.

The main purpose of the data collection was to obtain sufficient data for the ABG to plan for the needs of those to be resettled as well as data on the neighbouring host community. In practical terms the data collection was quite a challenge: the data collectors had to travel to the Carteret Islands by banana boat, a trip that usually takes

three hours and can also be much longer depending on the weather. All of the food and equipment for the data-gathering had to be taken on the boat because the islands are without stores and electricity.

The data collectors were recruited from a local community organisation headed up by Sr Lorraine, a Nazareth sister. The data collectors were on the islands for three weeks.

In recent months we have been analysing the data and writing a report for all of the relevant government departments. Our next step is to conduct a similar study on the 'impacted community' at the planned resettlement site which is a former plantation called Karoola.

A similar but smaller relocation project is currently underway from the Carterets to another relocation site called Tinputz. This is an initiative of a non-government organisation called Tulela Peisa. In this project, land has been donated by the local Catholic diocese. A total of five families have moved to Tinputz at this time.

Those being relocated are sometimes called 'environmental refugees' in the media. This is a term that is neither accurate nor welcomed in Bougainville. What is clear is that refugee agencies, like UNHCR and JRS, who are familiar with forced displacement, have insights to offer those striving to relocate families so that their future can be more secure.

Dr Maryanne Loughry, Associate Director of JRS Australia

Refugee Week: **Having a ball**

The plight of refugees and asylum seekers was recognised during this year's Refugee Week, with events in Melbourne and Sydney filled to capacity with supporters of JRS.

More than \$12,000 was raised at the 2012 Melbourne JRS Winter Ball, which was held during Refugee Week and attended by over 350 young people. Co-organiser Ryan De Cruz said that there was a strong affirmation among attendees of their country's responsibilities towards refugees. The guest of honour was Zamera Shariffe, a refugee from Afghanistan who arrived in Australia in 2007. She shared the story of her family's flight from the country, how her father had arrived in Australia by boat, and how they were reunited with him more than three years later.

In Sydney, JRS commemorated Refugee Week with the



The Melbourne JRS Winter Ball Committee

theme 'Restoring Hope'. Artworks produced by refugees and asylum seekers were sold at the event, and money was raised for the JRS Shelter Project through a cake sale managed by students from St Vincent's College Potts Point.

Shelter Project:

I now call Australia home

We are proud to announce that a long-time friend of JRS, Antoinette, has finally become an Australian citizen. She first came to Australia from Rwanda some years ago, seeking asylum, and then applying for citizenship at the very first available opportunity. Louise Stack and Cecilia Silva from JRS joined the celebrations at Antoinette's favourite local restaurant, where she was joined by many friends who had accompanied her throughout her Australian journey.

Antoinette was so proud to have reached this milestone and expressed sincere thanks to those who had offered support to her along the way, assisted her in obtaining her protection visa and finding work, and, perhaps most significantly of all, in locating her three sons who had been lost to her for many years. 'You have been there for me, and may almighty God bless you in everything you do. Words cannot express my deep gratitude,' she said.

With a passport Antoinette can now visit her sons in France without impediment, which means the world to her. Congratulations Antoinette! We are so proud to have walked this journey with you.



Antoinette with JRS volunteer Tony Travers and the former Director of JRS, Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ.

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