

Volunteering

JRS International volunteers are required to have specialised skills, and serve a minimum of two years. However, there will be opportunities for short-term volunteer work in the future. The Archdiocese Crisis Coordination Team (ACCT) and JRS Singapore are currently exploring ways to help Singapore Catholics volunteer at Archdiocese-funded tsunami-related projects in Sri Lanka and Aceh. These include an orphanage in Mannar and tuition centres in Jaffna, Tincomalee and Batticaloa in Sri Lanka.

Adopt refugee projects

More Catholic schools and parishes can be involved in

participate in practical and effective action by “adopting” and financing a refugee project for a period of time. The project could be a tuition centre for refugee students in Tamil Nadu or Sri Lanka, an orphanage or an income-generating programme. This will free the JRS staff from the burden of fund-raising to concentrate on their pastoral work. Parishioners can “accompany” the refugees through friendships and regular exchanges.

In his message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2005, the late Pope John Paul II exhorts Christians to “listen to the cry for help that comes from a multitude of migrants and refugees, but they must then foster, with active commitment, prospects of



“Listen to the cry for help from refugees and migrants... foster with active commitment prospects of hope”
- Pope John Paul II

A closer look at refugees in the region

By Teresa Cheong

Bringing hope when all seems lost – accompanying the Karenni refugees in Thailand

THE SOUND OF sporadic gunshots and bomb explosions could be heard again at the Thai-Myanmar border – as soldiers from the Myanmar military and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNNP) renewed fighting since the stalling of peace talks last October, following the ouster of former Myanmar Prime Minister Khin Nyunt.

To the ordinary Karen or Karenni refugees who have been in exile inside the Thai border since the 1980s, these events could only mean one thing – another protracted wait, another hope of return to their country – crushed. Father John, a JRS pastoral worker regularly visits the 6,000 Karenni Catholics in the refugee camps. His work includes celebrating Mass, caring for his 90 orphans and ministering to the elderly, sick and handicapped.

His greatest challenge however, is how to inspire hope when hope has lost its meaning for many of his flock. Saddened by the dispiritedness in the camps, Father John said: “The feelings and attitude of the refugees have gradually changed over the years. The spirit of love and unity is

deteriorating... Because of poverty and insufficient means for daily survival, they struggle for their own and their families. The spirit of community that they had in the past has become more individualistic.” But he conceded “the refugees are not to be blamed in such a situation.”

Father John recognises that without a strong belief that God is present in every human suffering, and that “prayer can change things”, the grim situation would have been intolerable. “It may seem hopeless but in my spirit of faith, I do put my trust in God. I always ask the refugees to pray for peace whenever I say the Mass with them,” he added.

He sees his pastoral accompaniment as a positive sign to the refugees that they have not been abandoned. “I offer my presence and help them in their spiritual and moral life in my priestly ministry,” he said. His message for Singapore Catholics: “Being alone I cannot fulfill these dreams for the refugees here in Thailand. I need your total support. The refugees need your love and concern.”

Sri Lanka: emphasis on education and training for a livelihood

FATHER VINYL JOSEPH SJ, JRS Sri Lanka Director, spends most of his time travelling from his small office in Colombo to the north and northeastern towns

of Jaffna, Mullaitheevu, Batticaloa and Trincomalee, areas most badly hit by the tsunami.

In five months, JRS Sri Lanka has built about 140 temporary shelters, and 150 permanent houses are being planned. In Mullaitheevu, on the northeastern coast of Sri Lanka, JRS is rebuilding multi-purpose halls for nursery schools, evening study centres, training centres as well as two libraries.

While the reconstruction work is essential to physical survival, JRS is also challenged to bring hope to a suffering people. In a country torn apart by 19 years of inter-ethnic civil war, and recently, a devastating natural disaster, the refugees and IDPs still cling onto a hope for a lasting peace.

To have hope is to believe that there is a future. JRS channels its resources on building a future for these refugees and IDPs. Its projects include education,

vocational skill training for youths, financial aid for war widows and income-generating projects. An example would be the fishermen of Duchbar and Vallachanai – they have started fishing again after receiving 25 18-foot boats and nets from JRS. JRS also recruits, trains and pays refugee teachers to teach in the evening tuition centres, giving them a chance to earn a living and build a future.

Aceh: being present in their hardships

IN THE AFTERMATH of the tsunami, JRS Indonesia staff and volunteers spent a lot of time talking and listening to the refugees. It was during these conversations that the refugees from Pulo Aceh shared their desire to return to their devastated island home.

The tsunami had wiped out 15 of the 17 villages, killing two-thirds of the population. Without help, the Pulo Acehnese will only languish in the crowded camps. Pulo Aceh is a remote island of fishing villages separated from mainland Aceh by a three-hour boat ride.

After consulting the refugees, JRS Indonesia decided to rebuild 300 homes in four villages which are receiving the least attention. Rebuilding of homes has gone ahead in May although only a fraction of the S\$1.7 million budget has been raised. The Singapore Archdiocese Crisis Coordination Team (ACCT) has given S\$270,000 and JRS Singapore hopes to raise the remaining S\$1.4 million.

JRS staff often stay on the devastated island for one to two weeks to accompany the returning refugees and clear debris. This personal accompaniment offers refugees great consolation.

See “A REFUGEE WRITES” in page 18

“HOPE FOR A BETTER TOMORROW”

World Refugee Day Mass

Church of St Ignatius

Main celebrant: Archbishop Nicolas Chia
June 24 at 7.45 pm

Highlights of this year’s WRD Mass: personal messages from various JRS offices, a youth sharing and updates on the refugees’ situation. As a sign of your solidarity with the refugees, be present. Reception after Mass.

All are welcome.



A young refugee learns to write. Singapore parishes and schools can help children like her by adopting a “refugee project”.

the pastoral accompaniment of refugees and IDPs.

Last year, JRS Singapore organised visits for Catholic Junior College students and Church of St Ignatius post-confirmation group to the Thai-Myanmar and Tamil Nadu refugee camps.

For CJC student Livia Chng, the visit to a Tamil Nadu refugee camp “was a heart-rending and enriching experience”. Said Livia: “You sense a spirit of humble gratitude when you realise that you do not suffer their misfortune – as victims of circumstances. Gratitude compels me to give thanks to our good Lord for all that he has provided for us but more importantly that we were his instruments in alleviating their sufferings.”

Besides camp visits, parishes and youths can

hope that will herald the dawn of a more open and supportive society. It is up to them in the first place to make out God’s presence in history, even when everything still seems to be enveloped in darkness.”

We can make God present in the lives of refugees by offering a compassionate and listening heart; by walking with them as companions in their journey; by offering a glint of hope and friendship in a world that has turned its back from them.

If you wish to support JRS refugee projects, send cheques payable to “SJ Kingsmead Hall” or “Jesusuit Refugee Service Singapore” to JRS Singapore, 8 Victoria Park Road, Singapore 266492. For enquiries, email jrs@jesrefsg.org or call 6463 6022. □