

## WORLD REFUGEE DAY

ON JUNE 20, UNHCR commemorates World Refugee Day. This year is also the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), and the fifth year of JRS Singapore's existence. What sets JRS apart from bigger international aid agencies is the personal and pastoral nature of its work with the refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). **Teresa Cheong** explains why.

## A COMPANION TO REFUGEES

# JRS

## JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE



SAMUEL SAW\*, A willowy teenager of 18, was eager to make conversations while the other refugees stood outside their thatched huts, their eyes transfixed by the rare sight of visitors to their mountainous home. The year was 2001 and it was JRS Singapore's first visit to a Karen refugee camp. The Thai-Myanmar border camp was heavily camouflaged by a thick blanket of teak forests. The only telltale signs of human life were the earthy smell of burning firewood and flickering kerosene lights

Hungry for contact with the "outside" world, Samuel gamely approached us to share in halting English – his hopes for a better education, and of becoming a leader for his people. His parting words: "Your visit gave us hope. Please do not forget us." That short visit sparked our exchange of letters and Christmas cards. Three years later, he is back home in Myanmar, this time as a seminarian. Samuel has realised part of his dream.

Samuel's story tells us that the refugee problem is not just about numbers but lives of real people whose dreams and ambitions have been shattered by war, conflict, persecution or natural disaster.

No doubt material aid would alleviate the refugees' grim existence but no less vital to their survival is the psycho-emotional needs of being heard, understood and affirmed.

The personal approach of befriending and listening

to refugees has been the *modus operandi* of the JRS for the past 25 years. Helping refugees is not regarded merely a work of charity but as a pastoral mission to restore the human spirit and dignity.

### Contributing where need is greatest

From one office in Rome in Nov 1980 which is the same building where St Ignatius and his companions had used to feed famine victims in 1538, JRS has expanded to over 50 countries. Among the more than 500 staff are 100 Jesuits, 85 religious from other congregations, and more than 300 lay people.

The growth of JRS is a response to the rising number of refugees and IDPs worldwide. In 1980, there were about 6 million refugees, and another 4-5 million IDPs. JRS estimates that there are about 45 million refugees and IDPs today.

For 25 years, JRS has focused its work in the education, livelihood training and pastoral care of refugees and IDPs.

JRS actively seeks out areas that are least attended by other aid agencies, and where there is a greater need. For example, JRS was the first international NGO to return to war-ravaged Liberia in 2003. It has since started six educational projects that are now benefiting 13,000

refugees and IDPs. It also chose to remain in Aceh and Moluccas even at the height of conflicts there, working in partnership with local NGOs and employing Muslim staff. JRS educational, orphanage and income-generating programmes in Sri Lanka are all centered in the North and Northeast where most of the displaced Tamil population live and where help is wanting.

### God's presence in human suffering

JRS' emphasis on pastoral accompaniment differentiates it from other humanitarian agencies.

Said Father Mark Raper SJ, former JRS International Director in JRS publication *Everybody's Challenge*: "Our accompaniment affirms that God is present in human history, even in its most tragic episodes. We experience this presence. God does not abandon us. As pastoral workers, we focus on this vision, and are not side-tracked by political maneuverings and ethnic divisions, whether they are among the refugees or among the agencies and governments who decide their fate."

Pastoral accompaniment establishes a caring and personal relationship with the poor and outcast. It restores hope and gives succour to the refugee in need. The fear of being abandoned and forgotten by the world is a very real

fear for a refugee.

Being a companion of refugees is to listen attentively to their stories and hopes, and acknowledge the pain of their experience. Very often, refugees (and asylum seekers) are stripped of their right to speak, and are at the mercy of their host countries.

Pastoral accompaniment is about responding to the needs of the whole person, both spiritual and material. As Christians, we are called to be like Jesus who accompanied his dejected disciples on the road to Emmaus. Their dejection was transformed into hope and consolation at the "breaking of bread" towards the end of the journey. The etymological meaning of companion is "the one who shares bread" – and in all the refugee camps where JRS is present, the Eucharist is celebrated regularly for Catholic refugees.

The giver (as superior)-recipient (as inferior) mentality is common in aid giving. The giver offers material aid and often decides where help should be disseminated. The refugee is seldom asked or consulted. The spirit of JRS is not about amassing and rushing emergency aid but to consult and learn what should be brought first.

This is the reason why JRS recruits refugees to be its teachers, health educators and programme coordinators. By actively involving the refugees and IDPs in programmes that

affect their lives, it frees them from helplessness and dependency. JRS refugee teachers in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu attend leadership courses conducted by JRS. Meetings are also held with war widows to listen to their stories and needs first before drafting any aid programmes.

Accompanying the refugees as equals, and allowing them to voice their feelings and views restores a modicum of dignity to their pared-down existence.

Among the trips I had made with the JRS Singapore to the refugee camps, Archbishop Nicholas Chia's visit to Mannar, Vavuniya and Jaffna in Sri Lanka last December stood out. Our visit brought jubilant celebrations in every refugee camp or temporary shelter. Hundreds turned up to watch the elaborate welcome of song and dance which they had practised for weeks. Mothers and children formed spontaneous queues, and asked for the archbishop's blessings.

The celebrations seemed at odds with their grim reality but visits like these gave them hope that they have not been abandoned by the world.

The act of being present, and humbly accepting the refugees' invitation to their mud huts, and partaking in the meal they had prepared "humanised" their bleak existence. In my conversations with refugees,

I came to realise that it was not the lack of material comforts but the stripping of basic human rights that caused their greatest grief. As refugees and IDPs, they have no place to call home, no access to education, employment, information or legal protection.

### How Singapore Catholics can accompany refugees

How can we heed Jesus' call in Matthew 25: 31-46: "For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me into your house. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to see me"?

Singapore Catholics are in a unique position to serve refugees and IDPs in a wider geographical region.

On a practical level, Singapore Catholics can pledge support to ensure continuity of refugee projects in the region. The massive aid that went to aid tsunami victims caused a drying of funds for other non-profit causes, and JRS Asia Pacific (AP) was no exception. It appealed to JRS Singapore for help in March. A total of S\$90,000 of donations has been sent to JRS AP. JRS AP funds programmes in Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia. But Singapore Catholics could also go beyond "donating" to "being" and "accompanying".

## Volunteers

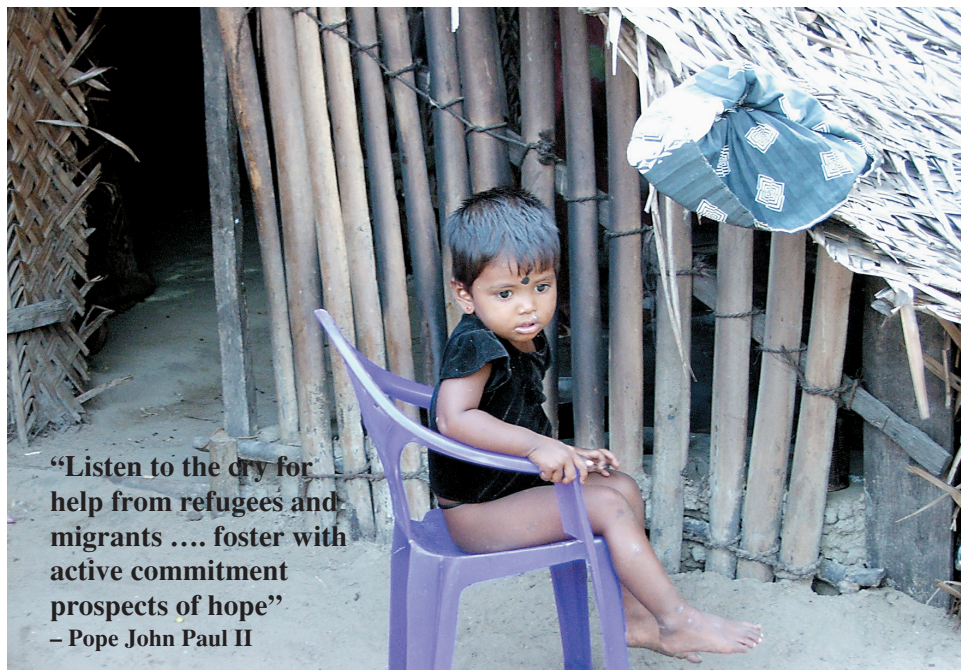
JRS International volunteers are required to have specialised skills, and serve a minimum of two years. However, there will be opportunities for short-term volunteer work in the future. The Archdiocese Crisis Coordination Team (ACCT) and JRS Singapore are currently exploring ways to help Singapore Catholics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

## Adopt refugee projects

More Catholic schools and parishes can be involved in

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 fundraising 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 twenty-five 18-foot small 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. □



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 participate in practical and

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 “Jesus Refugee Service Singapore” to JRS Singapore, 8 Victoria Park Road, Singapore 266492. For enquiries, email [jrs@jesrefsg.org](mailto:jrs@jesrefsg.org) or call 6463 6022. □

## “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.