

REFUGE

Jesuit Refugee Service Indonesia

Accompany, Serve and Advocate the cause of forcibly displaced People

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- * I Don't Want To Be Punished Anymore
Just Because of my Looks and Religion

Our Day is Different With Your Presence

Anna Liza

”

Thanks for your visit...

Come next time...

Pray for us

*It's ok even if you don't
bring anything for us*

*Your presence is enough
to whom can we trust?*

We trust in you

please...pray for us

*that soon we'll be out
from this cell...*

“

These are some of the words of the detainees, which I've visited in one of the detention camps in Indonesia. I kept them in my heart though I struggle to take emotional distance, to be objective and remain rooted with JRS' spirit, bringing them into my prayers. There were nights when I awake having thoughts about them with a strong desire to let them feel that I am in solidarity with them and not alien to their sufferings and desires. Hearing those words (above) both console and desolate me in one way or the other. Giving solution to their problem or even answering to their little needs, reacting angrily to the injustices that they have experienced are

some of my temptations. Yet on the other hand, their gratitude, openness and trust have touched me, helped me to be enthusiastic to visit them and yes, it's like: they are the ones giving me hope and I have to admit: they strengthen my faith to God and helped me surrender them to Him in my faith and prayers!

I started to be involved as a volunteer in JRS last July, 2012. I go there ones a week and sometimes twice a week with my community. We were asked to give special attention to the women and children through talking with them and including some informal counseling. During my first visit, I was a bit shocked. First: because it was my first time to be in a detention cell, second: it was like a prison cell since they were locked inside, third: the cell was mostly occupied by man walking around with all sorts of color and "strong" faces, fourth: I saw pregnant women and other women, children and even babies and fifth: the reality as a whole is shocking! Yeah, yeah for first timers like me, really shocking, I heard them in news yet it's different when you're finally there.

During that first visit, we were welcomed warmly by a Myanmar family. We were asked to enter inside their cell; we talked although they don't know well English yet they tried to express using broken Bahasa and English. Time passed swiftly, we didn't even notice that it was almost two hours that we were staying together. It was nice being with them. Then, came the second, the third and the next visits.

Something has disturbed me during those visits: some families would give us two medium plastics filled with food. That thing made me felt ashamed, disturbed and confused: if I reject it, they might feel insulted and on the other hand, if I accept it, it may helped them feel better, they're not that miserable and they still have "power"

because they still have something to give. It was so nice and freeing when in the next visits, I no longer see the family who I usual to visit. Why? Because they were already released!

Stories of women in the history are usually filled with adventure, heroism and love and the same goes with the women in the detention cell. If you've heard their stories, your heart will surely be turn apart and yet you'll be filled with consolation with their capacity to hope, laugh, love and sacrifice. Listening to them and our presence had really made a difference with their day. They felt our care and sincerity for that trust comes naturally and they were more open to some intimate matters like how we see life, parents, families and some private things. Still there are stories left untold and some of which, I kept in my heart.

I am almost six months a JRS volunteer. What I experienced has thought me to open my eyes to a larger reality of the detainees in this small part of the world. They've taught me to hope and to hope, and to pray and to pray, and most of all to stay in solidarity with them. I become part, I mean I also take part of their concerns and in particular of their being...True, It's somehow "stressful" especially now that we see more of the reality and somehow entered into it...

Injustices are slowly unfolded and there is that feeling of being trapped. On one side I see the injustice and on the other side I am "powerless" in the sense that harmony and neutrality must be retained. I can't avoid to be involved although there is a strong call to be emotionally detached and to surrender to it all. I experienced such poverty in being powerless and yet am filled with hope that our presence, JRS presence is not in vain. We're not blind with the truth and yet we choose to spend time with them and to stand in hope with them...Listen, pray and surrender... I just do what we can do and the rest we leave to God.

Our presence as volunteers has made a difference on their day and same goes with me: they've made a difference on my day too.***



Sr. Anna & Sr. Happy visiting detainees once or twice a week. Photo by Silvester

The Courage It Takes to be a Mother

Th. Kushardini

Thousands of kilometers away from their respective home countries two women meet in the Indonesian Red Cross hospital in Bogor giving birth to their second born. Shahnaz* from Pakistan gave birth to a son, while Balqees* from Palestine delivered a daughter that day. Both children have one thing in common, they are born as refugees to parents fleeing persecution,



Playing with Children. Photo JRS Cisarua

violence and conflict searching for a safe place for them and their new born to live in. The childrens mothers Shahnaz and Balqees are two among hundereds of thousands of women in this world forced to flee their homeland in search for safety and a dignified life.

The hot afternoon I visited the two young mothers, they had just finished breastfeeding their babies in the room of the hospital. Trying to overcome the heat by fanning their babies and caressing their heads, they looked so content and happy. Of course, their happiness and hopes were the same as these of the other three women who shared the room with them in the hospital. But the situation the two faced was different to the other young mothers here. The other women for sure in a few days would leave the hospital to go home and be in the caring environment of their families. Coming home, reunited in the care of a big family lays in an uncertain future and in an unknown place for Shahanz and Balqeess.

Leaving your home country and family can't be an easy choice to make especially if you are pregnant or have children. I can only imagine what has happened in the past that forced them to leave and what it takes to come this long way. Giving birth to a new life along the way is a sign of hope for a new beginning. Bogor, Indonesia is the place along the way where their children are born, far away from the place once called home with its own culture, traditions, family and friends. They are also far from the possible future home, that Indonesia does not want to be even if they might have to wait here for many years, first for the outcome of their claim for international protection through UNHCR, then again for a third country to accept them to settle and stay and finally build a new home.

Giving birth in displacement, in a country they might have never heard or thought of before, into a life still full of uncertainties, into a community that might not fully understand or welcome you, is a reality they both have to face. In this situation the endeavour to be a good mother for their new born is an inspiration and fills me with hope. Both of those young mothers taught me about the courage that is needed to bring love and peace to the world of their children leaving behind a world where love and peace are rare.

I am thankful for being able to be with them during this time of uncertainty as a friend and sister. Sharing moments of happiness, sorrows and anxieties with them makes me feel close to humanity. I remember last October witnessing the arrival of the good news that Balqeess was accepted as a refugee. It was a happy day full of hope that a brighter future is near for her and her loved ones. I hope that Shahnaz and Balqeess find the courage and support they need to secure the future they long for, a future where kindness, peace and happiness will be on their side.***

Remembering the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, November 24, 2012

** The names in this article are not real names*



Visiting an Assylum Seeker in the hospital. Photo by JRS Cisarua

“

I will not return to Sri Lanka because my mother said that it is not safe there it still happens that many people disappear.

I am still hoping to go to Australia

”

I Can Not Return Home

Silvester Gultom

Valkkai Porattam¹, and I met in the Detention Center one day. He is a Sri Lankan asylum seeker who had to leave his home and family eight years ago to avoid military and police persecution. During our conversation he explained to me why he, a Hindu Tamil from Sri Lanka, can't go back until now.

“In Sri Lanka, we couldn't go anywhere, can't work, can't go to school. The military and the police always asked for money. If we don't give them any money, they would arrest and kill us. We can't do anything about it. My mother, brother and sister would go and work secretly and are not able to travel freely. That is why I fled Sri Lanka”, Porattam said.



Silvester, JRS Project Coordinator at Detention Center

Since the independence from the British rule in 1948 the Sri Lankan government is politically dominated by the majority of ethnic Sinhalese. The minority of ethnic Tamils felt marginalized. The 1956 Official Language Act No.33 declaring Sinhalese national language leads to an increasing of inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts and leads to a number of violent riots. The following long armed conflict between military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has claimed many lives and caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people since 1983.

While the armed conflict has ended in May 2009 suspicions and discrimination by the Sri Lankan military and police against the Tamil population are reported to continue leading to repression against civilians. Limited freedom of the press, threats and intimidation of human rights defenders, torture and ill-treatment, enforced disappearances and even murder of ethnic Tamils are still major concerns.²

“I often read on the internet via my friend's mobile phone that kidnappings still occur, as well as rapes and murders. Government's military and police still hate us Tamils”, he said with fear in his eyes.

During his eight years in search for safety Porattam worked occasionally in odd jobs as a construction worker or selling goods in Malaysia and Timor Leste only earning very little. During his flight he was often depending on financial support from friends and relatives. When entering Indonesia he was arrested by immigration officials and put in to an immigration detention center. All he has left now are dreams of a life in safety in Australia.



Detainees enjoying Yoga at detention. Photo by Silvester

“Every day I wonder why I have been staying here for such a long time. All of my friends have gone out from here, now I am the one staying here the longest time”, the man – who dreamed of studying at a university without the fear of being kidnapped by the Sri Lankan military – said with sad eyes. Surely, it is not easy to see life passing by in a narrow and crowded detention center.

During the last three years he is getting more and more uneasy after his application for asylum was rejected by the UNHCR for the second time. *“My case has been rejected twice. The UNHCR officer said that I made a lot of mistakes in providing information. Indeed, I could not remember all details, especially the exact dates, month and year. I don’t know what else I can do now”,* he said.

Although most of the times he looks calm and is seen participating in many of the activities in the detention center, doing yoga, futsal, swimming and aerobics, sometimes he is depressed and sad, even gets angry when he can’t hold back his frustration. *“Now I want to move to another Detention Center. My Sri Lankan friend who had been rejected twice, was able to be interviewed again by the UNHCR due to the support by the Head of that Detention Center. The Head of that Detention Center really understood the people of Sri Lanka. But I don’t know who is able to*

help me to move there”, he said while referring to one of the 13 immigration detention centers in Indonesia.

In times of uncertainty any possibility that gives hope of a positive change is important for asylum seekers especially after an eight year journey. Living in uncertainty for a long time with many experiences of rejection the profound longing for a final arrival is essential for keeping a positive attitude to life. The only compass leading through this uncertainty are messages from loved ones back home.

“Many people said that Sri Lanka has been safe, but my mother tells me not to return because I would be killed by the military or police”, he said with an anxious expression on his face. *“Although I had registered with IOM for a return to Sri Lanka, I will cancel it. I will not return to Sri Lanka because my mother said that it is not safe there, it still happens that many people disappear. I am still hoping to go to Australia”,* Valkkai Porattam said with tears in his eyes.***

 1. It is not a real name
 2. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/10/29/sri-lanka-address-rights-rollback-review>

I Don't Want to be Punished Anymore Just Because of my Looks and Religion

Indro Suprobo



rejected his resettlement application. He started to suffer from extreme fatigue, confusion and from insomnia.

Rejection in Myanmar

In Myanmar, most of the Rohingya people would not be able to get education. *“Rohingya people, like myself, would have to struggle in order to be able to enjoy school. I only went to school until the 4th grade. Even that started when I was 10 years old,”* he said. As a Rohingya teenager one has to face difficulties and discrimination. *“When I was 15 years old, I was forced by the government to work as an repairman in an office building with no pay,”* he recalls with a sad face. *“During the week, I was forced to do that for 4 days, starting in the morning till the evening. The*

break time was only half an hour, and whenever they found me resting between the work due of the tiredness or found out I was being less productive, I would get hit.”

“When my body is tired from the labor during the day, I was still often forced by the head of the village to night-guard at a security post in the borders until morning,” Mohammad Amir complained. It is the responsibility of the security forces to keep the border of Myanmar and Bangladesh clear, but they often forced the Rohingya people to replace them to guard the border. *“There was one night when I was so tired. I fell asleep during guarding shifts. I got caught and my entire body was beaten with wood. They even hit me in the face and my head was bleeding. It was really painful,”* he said with sadness and anger. *“I do not want to be treated like this anymore. Therefore I decided to leave. I can't return to Myanmar. There are only two choices for me if I return which are*

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I really long for the life that people have in general and to have a safe future ”

That afternoon my cell phone rang. *“Hello sir, at the moment the situation in Myanmar has become worse. Rohingyas are experiencing many more difficulties. The latest news is very bad. When can we meet?”*, Mohammad Amir said in worry. The 27 year old Rohingya refugee had left Myanmar almost 8 years ago.

Mohammad Amir's life was never easy but during the last months he is growing more and more concerned and sad. Since the violence in Myanmar last June, Mohammad has lost contact with his family. *“I do not know whether my family is still alive. One thing for sure is that one of my siblings was able to reach Bangladesh,”* he explained. Then the Embassy of Australia

getting killed or be imprisoned for the rest of my life," he said. Mohammad feels lucky to be in Indonesia even though his biggest wish is to find a country that is willing to accept him as a citizen. "I have fled to several countries such as Bangladesh, India, China, Thailand and Malaysia. I took the boat, bus, and even walked to cross these countries. In all of those countries, I have always felt threatened even though I could get a job secretly. If I were ever to get caught by the security, I would be put into prison or be banished. I feel better in Indonesia. Indonesian people are good-natured, they care for the Rohingyas, they sent help to Myanmar, and are willing to talk from heart to heart", he states.

According to the United Nations, the Rohingya's are one of the world's most persecuted minorities. They are part of 12 million people that are not recognized, as citizens of any country in the world after Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law did not include Rohingya as an ethnic group in Myanmar. With no citizenship status it is impossible for people like Mohammad Amir to obtain a passport, travel or work legally in their own or other countries, it is as if they are denied to be living in this world.

In the anxiety, confusion and fatigue that saddens him after his resettlement application got rejected by the Embassy of Australia, Mohammad Amir keeps trying to rebuild his hope. "I've written a letter to the UNHCR stating that I want to live in New Zealand." This process of course will require an uncertain amount of time. While waiting in uncertainty, he tries to protect the only hope of living his life in dignity. "I really long for the life that people have in general and to have a safe future." In order to make the best of his time in waiting he learns English as a preparation for his future. I hope the near future will give him the chance for a safe life and the opportunity to hope and dream again.***

The name in this article is not a real name

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*Everyone has the right to a nationality.
No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality
nor denied the right to change his nationality.
(Article 15 Universal Declaration of Human Rights)*

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