



# To Serve, to Accompany, to Defend

Louise Zanre

Marking the start of Refugee Week, Louise Zanre, Director of the Jesuit Refugee Service in the UK, describes its mission and work, and the issues and challenges faced by JRS – and by refugees themselves – in Britain today.

*Different Pasts, Shared Futures* is the theme for Refugee Week (15<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> June) this year. I was reflecting on the theme recently in the context of the lived reality of the refugees that Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) works with in the UK, and found myself asking, *what about the present?*

JRS is a small, faith-based organization working with refugees in over 60 countries around the world, with a mission to serve, to accompany and to defend the rights of refugees and forcibly displaced people.

Practically speaking JRS attends to the needs of “forgotten refugees” – those who are largely or completely unattended to by other organizations, whether the Bhutanese refugees in camps in Nepal, urban refugees in Nairobi, or detained or destitute refugees in Europe.

In the UK we work mostly with detainees and the destitute, with asylum seekers and with those who have received a final refusal in their asylum claims. However, we refer to them as refugees. This is for several reasons, but first and foremost is that the refugees refer to themselves in this manner. Other reasons include consistency with church social teaching on refugees and with the spirit of the international legal framework.

All of the work we do is modest and often low key, but hopefully always with the refugee at the heart of that work.

## **TO SERVE:** *Detention*

Immigration detention in the UK is not time-limited, though it is supposed to take place “pre-deportation”



(if a crime has been committed by a foreign national and deportation is ordered for the end of the sentence served in the UK) or “pre-removal” (an administrative process that returns immigrants to countries of origin or to a third country as they have no permission to be in the UK but have not left voluntarily). Detention can last from a few hours or days to many months and years. It is ordered by an immigration official and there

is no automatic court review of a detention order. A small number of individuals may be held during their asylum claims, either on a fast track process (because the government has decided that their claims for asylum are not credible) or because they have been stopped in an immigration control exercise and not had documents with them to prove that they are here legally waiting for decision in their asylum claims. Most detention centres (known as immigration removal centres) are operated and managed (for profit) by private security companies. Detention centres are prison-like; and new centres have recently been built to Category B prison standards. Currently there are around 2,700 bed spaces in detention centres, and a few hundred more immigration detainees held at any time in the normal prison system. The government has recently announced that they will expand the detention centre estate to 4,000 bed spaces. To our undying shame as a nation, around 2000 children a year are detained.

It is difficult for any of us who have never been detained to imagine what it is like, but perhaps this will give some idea. One ex-detainee described the experience in this way: “A prisoner who has committed an offence and is serving a prison sentence knows how long he has to wait before he is released. He counts down the days. A detainee has

no certainty in his life. He counts up the days. Yet another day in detention. With the constant anxiety that the next time a guard calls him, it may be to send him back to his country, where he will be killed”.

JRS mainly visits two detention centres: Harmondsworth and Colnbrook, both in West London, close to Heathrow. We are lucky to have Harry Elias SJ on our team, who is part-time Catholic chaplain at both of these centres. He fulfils a pastoral role for detainees and staff, including listening to and praying with those who approach him for assistance, celebrating the Eucharist and organizing or speaking at prayer meetings and information meetings. In addition, staff members or volunteer visitors make social visits to detainees who may have no one else to visit them or who may be especially vulnerable, through ill health, isolation, trauma or anxiety. JRS attempts to find solicitors to act on behalf of those who have none, makes referrals onto medical charities on behalf of detainees who are torture-survivors or who have health needs which are not being met within the detention centres, and provides telephone cards so that the detainee can keep in touch with legal representatives, friends, family and, of course, with us.

### *Destitution*

Many refugees come to the UK hoping for peace and security, just like the Rwandan refugee who has shared her story with us in this issue of *Thinking Faith*. Unfortunately many of them find destitution waits for them here. Refugees can find themselves destitute because of an administrative error (support not starting in a timely fashion or being interrupted erroneously); or because they have been granted permission to stay in the UK, but their documents do not arrive in a timely fashion, so they cannot get access to the benefits system nor can they work in the interim. But by far and away the largest group of destitute refugees are those who have had a final refusal in their asylum claims. One might think that if their claims have been refused they should just go home. It is not quite that simple. Most people in this situation, because of the failings of the asylum process in the UK, often feel that they have not been given a fair hearing and often think that they will be killed if they return. So they do not want to return

voluntarily. This means that they wait for the government to remove them. However, some refugees are from countries such as Zimbabwe or some parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo and of Iraq, to which the government cannot remove them because it is too unsafe. It would be a breach of their human rights to return them forcibly, given the conditions of political unrest which exist there. However they are not given any status in the meantime and have no right to benefits or to work. For example, forced removals to Zimbabwe were stopped in 2002 and, apart from a couple of months since then, have not been able to take place. We know some Zimbabweans who have been destitute since 2002. They are reliant on charity and on the kindness of friends and strangers.

In addition there is a further group of people who, whether they wish to return or not, are not documentable. Some countries, including Eritrea, will not issue travel documents to allow the UK government to return people. So, again, people are left in limbo for years.

The refugees in this situation speak often of feeling worthless, of being in a prison, of not being able to move forward with their lives. They are very much like travellers on an interrupted journey, unable to resume, not welcomed where they are, so they cannot settle, but unable to go back either. They are waiting endlessly. It is unsurprising that some work illegally and that some prostitute themselves.

In June 2006 the government announced that they thought that there were 450,000 people in this limbo situation, and promised that they would resolve things by June 2011. While some of the people we know have since been granted permission to stay in the UK under this case-resolution exercise, many of the refugees we work with at JRS are still waiting to hear what will happen to them. We see around 130-150 refugees a week at our two drop-in centres. The majority of them are in this limbo situation. We have met women with very young children who have been sleeping rough at least for a few nights each week, and men with very serious mental or physical health problems who sleep rough because they have run out of friends who can put them up. The majority of the others tend to “sofa surf”, i.e. spend a

few nights with one friend, a few nights with another.

Given the numbers and the limited financial and other resources we have, we have had to cap subsistence grants at £200 per person. One of the most difficult things I have to do is to tell someone that, apart from that, all we can do is make grant applications on their behalf to other small charities to meet some of their living needs. Other than that, they have to use drop-in centres to get at least one meal a day, and to get clothing.

We are fortunate that we also have a separate transport grant budget. We are able to reimburse a one-day bus pass in London (£3) so that the refugee can attend a legal or medical appointment or can fulfill reporting requirements at an immigration reporting centre. However, because of demand we are no longer able to help with transport costs so that a refugee can attend college to learn English or a vocational skill, or study at university.

Apart from this very modest financial assistance we also give out basic packs of toiletries once a month (toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, deodorant, sanitary towels, body lotion). In addition we try to help refugees to find a solicitor to reopen their asylum claim, and find a doctor.

For those who are able to reopen their asylum claims, or who are able to take forward a judicial review (to deal with an error in the way their claim had been treated), or indeed who decide that they want to return to their own country, they have the possibility of accommodation and financial support from the government. However, the financial support they are offered is in the form of supermarket gift vouchers. So we also administer a small scheme to exchange these vouchers for cash at face value of the voucher so that the refugee can buy a bus ticket, make a phone call and also exercise a degree of choice about where they shop.

## To Accompany

I have described above the very modest way in which we try to be of service to the refugees we come into contact with. At the same time I hope I have been

able to convey a little of the reality of their lives, the difficulties they face and the problems our asylum process causes.

The grace of the work is that because JRS is a small organization – and because we deal with relatively small numbers of refugees – a relationship can develop. One of the worst things about being a refugee must be to have to leave everything behind and in some sense at least to lose everything. One refugee in the past described to me that being a refugee meant losing everything – country, family, friends, employment, possessions, sometimes religion, and also a way to express herself. Each country has a different way of expressing ideas culturally. A refugee often has to learn a new language – but also a new way of thinking which may be culturally appropriate. For example, in African countries, talking about God in daily life is not unusual. It is here. Many of the refugees I have got to know over the last eight years have enjoyed being able to talk about God to us. Not all of them have been Christians. Refugees have a lot to offer us as a nation because their own cultural values sometimes include things we have lost: a sense of family, for instance, or of community or hospitality.

Not everyone who comes to JRS wants to be accompanied. But for those who do want to get to know us, and who want to be known, we try to develop a friendly relationship, based on mutual dignity and respect. We listen to hopes, fears and dreams in a non-judgemental way, offering advice or opinion only when appropriate or when asked, as in any good friendship. Together we celebrate achievements such as passing a course, the announcement of a pregnancy or the birth of a baby, or getting permission to stay in the UK. These are all good news items which are shared on our good news wall in the office. I often see refugees standing reading, to see if there is more good news they can share in.

We build up a depth of relationship with individuals that allows us then to try and involve the refugees as much as we can in the work. Some offer help in the office; some make themselves available to share their stories or to talk at meetings and events; some visit and phone detainees; some help with the

administration of the transport and subsistence grants. In this way they feel that they contribute and help others, and we can work in partnership rather than in some sense just doing something 'for' or 'to' a refugee!

We hope in this way to grow together in dignity and respect and to achieve our full potential together – refugees, volunteers and staff.

### **TO DEFEND THE RIGHTS OF REFUGEES AND FORCIBLY DISPLACED PEOPLE**

None of the work described above would be of much value if we did not also try to change the inequities in the system. Keeping the refugee at the heart of what we do, all of our advocacy work (lobbying, awareness-raising, campaigning) is based on the lived experience of the refugees we work with.

Again much of this work is modest and much of it is done in collaboration with other groups and organisations. We are members of various networks, campaigns and coalitions. While we do undertake some direct lobbying work with politicians, some of the most valuable work we do is in schools, parishes and in the community, redressing misconceptions about refugees and encouraging others to work with us to change society for the better.

Going back to the first question I asked right at the

beginning of this article – what about the present? We have different pasts from the refugees – our countries are different, our cultures, our experiences. The present, though, ought to have much more in common. After all, we are now in the same country, the UK. The present here is not shared fully, though – our experiences are very different. Refugees have their own welfare system and there are rules that govern health care and education (ESOL classes for example) which apply to them alone. Once they get permission to stay in the UK, moving from one system to another causes some administrative problems which then create havoc again in their lives. However the fact that they have not been part of the normal workings of society makes integration very difficult, as does not being allowed to work. In effect we have been de-skilling all the teachers, doctors, nurses, businessmen and businesswomen and others who have sought asylum here. Working also allows for more connection with native or better English speakers, which in turn helps with integration. As a consequence, our future may be shared, but it is not as equal as it should be.

I – like many Christians, people of faith and others of good will – have a vision of a better society. Part of that shared future is working together to create the better society.

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