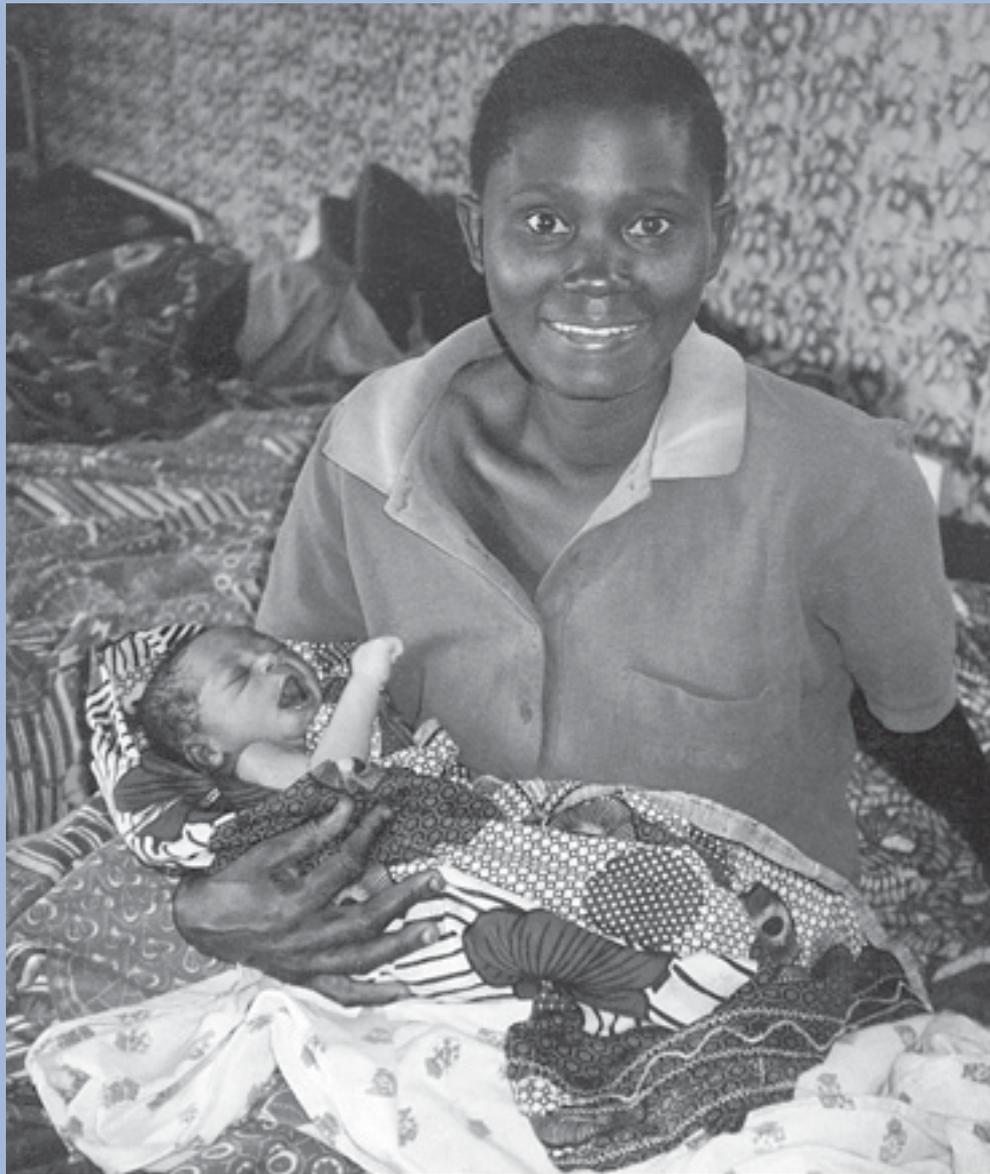


Servir



We are called upon to serve and accompany those people who are in greatest need, in particular those whose plight has been forgotten about by the rest of the world.



The values and mission of JRS

At a recent meeting of JRS Africa Country Directors, we attempted to look at the work JRS is doing in many different settings throughout the African continent and to draw from our experiences some common themes or a common thread that unites all the projects that we are involved in. At first glance this may not seem like such an easy task as JRS is currently working in 16 different countries in four regions in Africa, dealing sometimes with very different situations and projects.

Some of the people that we work with have been driven out of their country because of wars and conflict, such as Burundian refugees in Tanzania, while others have remained displaced within their own native land, as is the case for over two million Congolese. Some have seen their prospects of returning home improved of late such as the many Angolan refugees spread throughout Southern Africa, while others are faced with a more uncertain future.

When we look at JRS worldwide we are faced with ever more diversity of setting and scenario. JRS is also engaged in Europe, Asia and the Americas working with refugees, land mine victims, internally displaced people, detainees and many other victims of war and conflict.

What draws all of these projects together is the mission that underpins and motivates JRS. We are called upon to serve and accompany those people who are in greatest need, in particular those whose plight has been forgotten about by the rest of the world. The people that we work with are usually those who have been driven from their homes because of conflict or persecution. They suffer from poverty, family separation, and as foreigners in a new land are often subject to prejudice, are marginalised and usually have no say

in their future and no voice in the society in which they live.

What does it mean to serve and to accompany these people? For JRS it means recognising them as individuals and not as statistics and numbers. It means acknowledging their worth and value as human beings. It often means just listening and letting them know that we value what they have to say. It is about trying to give a voice to people who have been silenced and forgotten about, and it is about giving them hope for a better future where they will be each allowed the opportunity to achieve their individual human potential.

This mission or core underlying value of JRS unites all our projects around the world, in all the different settings. This issue of *Servir* looks at a number of examples of our work, starting with a new undertaking in the north of the Democratic Republic of Congo, an area that has been devastating by conflict and where thousands of people have been driven from their homes. This is followed by two articles dealing with former conflict zones – Kosovo and Thailand – where JRS is helping landmine victims to rebuild their shattered lives. We include also in this number the story of a young Ugandan refugee living in Kenya, successfully battling against the odds to receive an education with the help of JRS. The final article in this *Servir* takes a look at the pastoral and education services being provided by JRS in Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya, home to 75,000 refugees.



JRS at work in Rwanda

As 2002 draws to a close, I would like to thank all our readers for your support, without which it would be impossible to reach out to as many people as we do. I would also like to take this opportunity to wish you a very happy and peaceful Christmas.



Lluís Magriñà SJ is JRS International Director



Battling for an education

Hugh Delaney

Sofia, a Ugandan refugee living in Kenya, has had to overcome many obstacles in order to receive an education. She spoke to Hugh Delaney about her efforts and her plans for the future.

When I was out of school I used to ask myself why I was being punished. We were staying at home and people used to laugh at us and tease us because we were not going to school.

I listened to Sofia as she spoke these words, but I found it hard to imagine the change that can come over an individual in such a short period of time. Sofia became a refugee in 1990 when she was forcibly displaced by the conflict in her native Uganda. She has been living in Kenya ever since along with her grandmother, brother and two sisters and is currently studying computer programming through a JRS funded scholarship. Her confident manner disguises a troubled past and a long struggle to get an education.

“I had been living in the Thika refugee camp between 1990 and 1993, then I moved to Nairobi”, Sofia continued. “I was staying with my grandmother and my sisters and brother. My two sisters were sponsored to go to school, but my younger brother and I were told that we could not be assisted. Then we came into contact with a woman from Canada who offered to pay for me to go to school. She paid my fees and bought my uniform, though in 1996 her daughter had an accident and she had to return to Canada. When she returned home I had to leave school.

“I spent one year out of school though my luck changed when I met some Jesuit scholastics through the Guadalupe parish that I had become involved in. I explained my situation to them and they enrolled me in the Kahawa secondary school, from where I graduated in 2000. It was during this time that I

became aware of the JRS scholarship programme and I applied for and got one of the places.”

The JRS scholarship programme in Kenya has been in existence since 1991 and at present supports 35 refugee students, 12 at university level and 23 for higher vocational training. The students are chosen from applications submitted by refugees who are living at Kakuma and Dadaab camps as well as in the capital city, Nairobi. The scholarships cover the college tuition fees as well as the rent and living expenses of the students. Computing, information technology, accountancy and secretarial skills are some of the subjects that the scholarship students take.

When choosing a college for the refugees, the main criteria is that the programmes followed offer certificates and other qualifications that are internationally recognised. “Students on scholarships work harder than other students who have their fees paid by their parents. They are more motivated because they realise that they have been given an opportunity which they

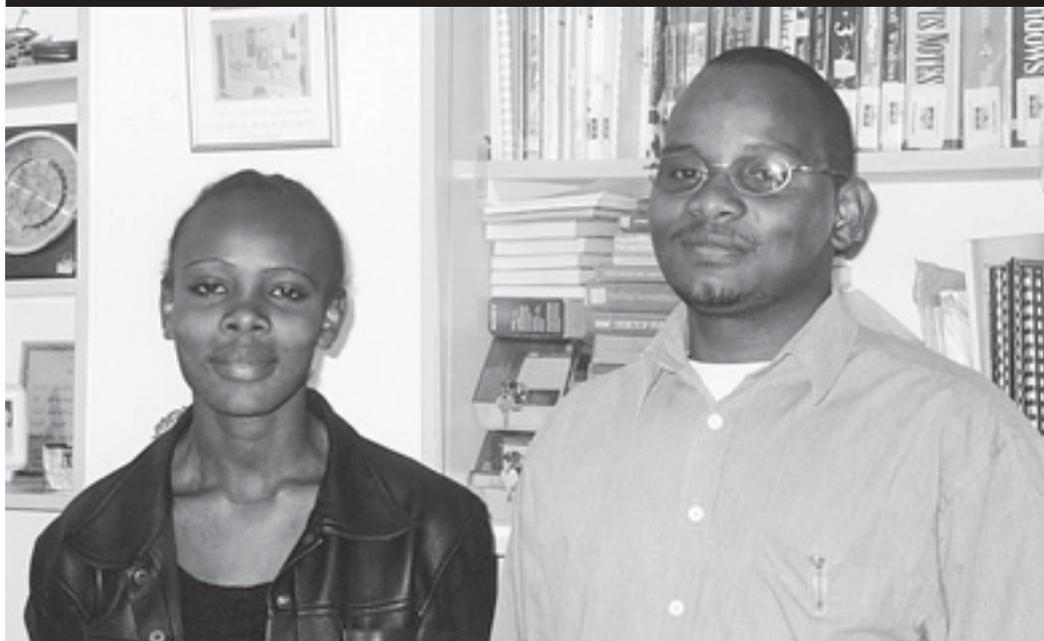
intend to utilise.” So says Laban Gichuri, who works for one of the institutes that JRS sends students to in Nairobi. This college specialises in computing and information technology, and graduates obtain the IMIS certificate, which is recognised in over 60 different countries.

Motivation is the key word for Sofia as she studies for her exams. “The scholarship has changed my life. Now I have many plans for the future. I want to find a job so that I can become independent and support my two sisters who are still at school and my grandmother. The assistance I have received has been great but it will only be of benefit if I can become independent and support myself. The course is the most important factor in the change my life has taken. I now have more confidence in myself and in my abilities. I now know what I am going to do in the future.”



Hugh Delaney is Information Officer for JRS International

Sofia, pictured with John Mwalagho, JRS Kenya Scholarship Programme Director



Rebuilding war-torn lives

Victor Wilondja

The Democratic Republic of Congo is a country that has been divided and devastated by years of conflict. JRS is accompanying the people whose lives have been torn apart by the war.

The Democratic Republic of Congo has been a battlefield for the past four years, in a war that has engaged many of the regions' countries, and destroyed the lives of millions of innocent people. The present conflict dates back to the early days of former President Laurent Kabila's regime in the late 1990s. A rebel uprising backed by Rwandan and Ugandan troops sowed the seeds for four years of violence that have brought about the division of the country into three parts. The northern part of the country is controlled

against the Kinshasa government, depending on where their own national interests lie.

The mineral wealth of the country has ensured that many interested parties have intervened in the conflict with their own economic and political interests in mind: Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia have all at one stage or another taken part in the fighting. It is not just the African countries however, that can be held accountable for the continuing conflict: the western nations, many of which have their own economic interests in the country, have been reluctant to engage themselves in any constructive way to bring about an end to hostilities in the region.

During the past four years of violence, the belligerents have entered into a number of peace talks and put pen to paper on cease-fire and peace agreements. The Sun City talks, the *dialogue inter congolais*, and the recent Pretoria peace accord have all given signs of hope that peace will be found, with the latter providing for the withdrawal of foreign armies from Congolese soil – Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe have all recently withdrawn troops as part of the agreement.

As a result of the war, the country has been devastated and its people reduced to extreme poverty. The conflict has led to a massive displacement of the population, with hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries, as well as an estimated 2.1 million people becoming displaced within the Congo itself. The refugees have mainly fled to the Countries of Southern Africa or to neighbouring Burundi and Rwanda, while the Internally Displaced People (IDPs) have tended to make their way towards the large towns and cities in the DR Congo.

A JRS income generating project in Kinshasa, DR Congo



by the rebel *Mouvement de Libération du Congo* (MLC) group; a region in the east of the country is held by the rebel Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD); with both rebel groups fighting (separately) to overthrow the Kinshasa government, which still has control of the third part of the country. The situation has been further complicated by the presence of a number of foreign armies who entered the DR Congo on one pretext or another, either in support of or

Life is extremely precarious for those who have been forced to leave their native region. The town-dwelling displaced people have found it very difficult to integrate into their new environment and there is a severe lack of adequate shelter and facilities to cater for their basic needs. Though there are some NGOs working within DR Congo, their number is woefully inadequate to deal with such a pressing need.

It was against this background that JRS first became involved in DR Congo back in 1998. With the aid of the local church, JRS began working with the IDPs in Lubumbashi, in the south of the country, supporting an education programme as well as conducting pastoral work and distributing much needed food. Now JRS works in five different locations throughout the country – Kinshasa, Bukavu, Goma, Baringa, as well as the original project in Lubumbashi.

For all of the projects, education is a vital element of JRS' work. When a volcanic eruption hit Goma last January, most of the city's schools were destroyed or damaged. As well as supporting a number of schools in the city, JRS is currently building a new school to provide for some of the children in Goma who have been deprived of schooling since the volcanic eruption.

The most recent project for JRS is Baringa, in the north of DR Congo. This is an area that has been caught up in the front line of fighting between the government forces and the rebel MLC. The clashes caused the entire population of the region to flee their villages, though as relative peace was restored, the villagers made their way back to their places of origin. For the inhabitants of Baringa, the homecoming was less than joyful: they returned to find their entire town burnt to the ground. In an area of 16,000 square km, there are no hospitals or schools, no means of communication, running water or electricity supply, though there is a population of 80,000 people. At present they survive through some farming and fishing, though they are in desperate need of medicine, clothing, shelter and nutritious food. The locality has been marked as a no-go area and is considered by NGOs as too dangerous to intervene. This has denied the local population the support they require.

In August and September 2002, JRS conducted an evaluation visit of Baringa and decided to initiate a health project there to meet the basic needs of the local community. The project is already up and running and involves refurbishing and equipping the local hospital, recruiting local staff, providing medical training, conducting a vaccination programme, and re-establishing a number of health clinics. It is our hope that this initiative will encourage other NGOs to work in this region. The war has destroyed everything for this community but we have to think of giving life and hope back.



Children living in Baringa, location of JRS' newest project in DR Congo

The people of the DR Congo crave peace. Until the conflict is brought to an end the government will not begin to embark upon the necessary reconstruction process that the country so badly needs. The reconstruction will be a long process that will require great political will and effort, but most of all it will have to be underpinned by peace. For the people of Baringa and the rest of the DR Congo, their lives have been torn apart for long enough: their only desire now is a return to their homes and the chance of a better future.



Victor Wilondja is JRS DR Congo Country Director

Kosovo: Between peace and

Alberto Saccavini

The legacy of war and ethnic tensions looms large over Kosovo. As the region embarks on a more peaceful and hopeful future, JRS is working with some of the young victims of the conflict.

During the past three years the people of Kosovo have faced a number of challenges as they have attempted to renew and rebuild a region torn apart by ethnic tensions and violence. Since the end of the war between the Serbian National Army and the rebel Kosovar Liberation Army (UÇK), the region has been administered as a United Nations Protectorate.

The UN interim administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) has been running all aspects of the civilian administration, while responsibility for security has been placed in the hands of a NATO-led force known as K-For. The security presence and international control is in the context of continuing ethnic divisions in a region where almost 90% of the two million inhabitants are ethnic Albanians with the other 10% divided mainly between Serbs, Roma, Bosnians and Turks.

More than 800 international organisations established a presence in Kosovo in the months directly following the war, but already by the second half of 2000, many of those same development agencies and humanitarian organisations had begun to scale down or bring to an end their

operations in the region. However, not all of the problems associated with the recent conflict and the previous ten years of ethnic tensions have been dealt with and resolved, though the relative peace that Kosovo has enjoyed since 1999 is a cause for some encouragement.

A considerable amount has been achieved in terms of reconstruction and reorganisation of society; it is quite unusual to find villages that still bear witness to the physical destruction of the war, at least in the areas that are populated by an Albanian majority. Most of the houses still damaged or in ruins as a result of the war are found in the Serbian enclaves or are isolated cases that have not yet been reached by the massive village-to-village reconstruction programmes.

Kosovo still has many challenges to face: an unemployment rate of more than 60%, a school system that hasn't received new trained teachers for more than 15 years, a health system run on the tightest of budgets with little technical equipment or sufficient infrastructure. What recent growth there has been in the economy has been very small and its effects on the people of Kosovo almost invisible.



Children taking part in the JRS summer camp

d development

Since February 2002 Kosovo has had its own locally elected government in which all ethnic groups are represented. However, the fledgling body is limited in power and any decision taken by the executive has to be validated by the Special Representative of the Secretary General – the head of the UN Mission in Kosovo.

UNMIK has prioritised the need for repatriation, especially for the Serbians who fled to either Serbia or Montenegro during the war and for other refugees from the region who are now living in various countries throughout Europe. This repatriation process has already begun with the support of many European governments and UN organisations, but only on a very small scale so far, as security conditions have given rise to concerns about the safety of returning Serbs, who were the minority group previously in control of Kosovo. Furthermore, the prospect of returning to a region without many job opportunities is not a very attractive one at the present moment for many of the refugees.

It was in January 2001 that JRS first developed a presence in Kosovo, beginning work on a Mine Victims Assistance Programme (MVAP), dedicated to children who had been injured by mines or Un-Exploded Ordinances (UXO). The JRS programme is now working with around 200 children spread throughout the region, with the focus placed on reducing dependency of mine survivors and helping them with their reintegration into society.

This requires a comprehensive approach with four components: medical assistance, mainly done through referrals to the local health system and through financial contributions; material support, for the families of victims in real need; psychosocial help, concentrated mainly on education; and legal assistance, informing the victims and their families of their rights, and through lobbying. The main focus of attention is towards the needs of the individual, with visits to the houses of victims forming a very large part of the service. However, one of the main challenges that the programme is facing is the almost complete absence in Kosovo of local psychologists. This has forced the slowing down and sometimes has even blocked completely the psychological support for victims in great need.

Many of the young people who are taking part in the project have established a very close relationship of trust and friendship with JRS. At the beginning of the summer, in collaboration with Caritas Kosovo, JRS organised a ten-day summer camp in Montenegro catering for 26 chil-



Most of the war-damaged buildings have been repaired

dren, all mine survivors and war victims. The participants came from all over Kosovo and were provided with the opportunity to meet other young people with similar problems, to play, to have fun and to enjoy some days out from their day to day lives in their home villages.

The success of the camp was due to the presence and hard work of eight animators from different parishes and villages throughout Kosovo, together with two JRS staff members who engaged the young participants in sporting events, art drawing, swimming and other activities. It was a fantastic and important experience for the children, many of whom had never been outside the village in which they were born. Others found it a totally new experience to live with so many other young people, and for some it was the first time to see the sea – simple pleasures and experiences that are never taken for granted in Kosovo.

The MVAP is the only project of its kind working with mine victims in Kosovo, and will continue up to the end of 2003. The work will continue with lobbying the local government to legislate for the needs of mine victims, and to create a social welfare and health system that looks after these vulnerable people and allows them to play their full part in the new society. Along with many other people in the region, the young mine victims have been deeply affected by the conflict: they deserve to have their dignity respected and to be given the chance to lead full lives in the new Kosovo.



Alberto Saccavini is JRS Landmines Project Director in Kosovo

Living with landmines

Emilie Ketudat

The legacy of conflict in Thailand's border regions has left in its wake a littering of landmines that the country is working hard to overcome.

Picture exquisite temples, sunny palm-lined beaches and exotic elephant rides and you have the image of Thailand as depicted in the tourist brochures. Undeniably, the country is very rich in beauty and has much to offer, in terms of heritage and culture, to the increasing number of visitors it attracts each year. But speak to Methee, a 7 year-old double amputee survivor, or Wiboonrat, a single mother of two young girls who tends to her rice fields and orchards though she only has one leg, and you have a clear picture of the other face of Thailand – a country contaminated with landmines.

The scale of the problem is enormous. A Landmine Impact Survey of Thailand completed in May 2001 revealed that there were 934 mine-contaminated areas or over 2,556.7 square kilometres located within 27 Thai provinces – along the Cambodian, Laos, Myanmar/Burma and Malaysian borders. Among the approximately 3,500 landmine victims the survey reported on, 1,500 had lost their

lives and over 2,000 had been injured or disabled. To make matters worse, most of the mined areas are no longer marked, though information based on public knowledge has led to a significant increase in the total amount of suspected landmine-contaminated land.

The western part of Thailand along the border with Myanmar remains littered with mines buried by both ethnic minorities and the Burmese junta during years of fighting. The area is now a battle zone between

the Karen National Union and Yangon-backed Democratic Karen Buddhist Army. Survivors from Burma/Myanmar seeking assistance in Thailand receive medical care from hospitals in refugee camps and public district hospitals in the border provinces of Tak, Mae Hong Son, Kanchanaburi and Chumporn.

Despite the risks, civilians are using Thailand's mined areas for farming and firewood collecting activities. Alternative job opportunities are few; consequently the pressure on land cultivation is high, leading farmers to take high risks in their daily lives. All categories of anti-personnel (AP), anti-tank (AT) mines and bobby traps are present and abandoned munitions caches can also be found in jungle areas.

Thailand is a state signatory to the Ottawa Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and their Destruction (3 December 1997), which spawned the Mine Ban Treaty (MBT). The Mine Ban Treaty (MBT) came into effect in Thailand on 1 May 1999, a main element of which is the principle of assisting landmine victims to lead productive lives. Other tenets of the Treaty are that countries would:

- Desist from production, stockpiling, transfer and use of landmines,
- Destroy stockpiled landmines within 4 years, and
- Carry out humanitarian de-mining of all contaminated territory i.e. clear landmines from the ground within 10 years.

JRS has been a key player in the campaign to ban landmines and in assisting survivors in Thailand, mainly through its participation in the Thailand Campaign to Ban Landmines (TCBL). The TCBL has been very active in trying to rid the country of mines by acting as a monitor in the de-mining process and being present at all “hand-overs” of



Methee Yenknan, a seven-year-old who lost both his legs to landmines on 28 March 2002. He was playing with friends under their house in his own village in Sa Kaeo province, when he detonated a mine. He is attending grade 2 at school.

land declared as safe, a process that began in 2002. Authorised by Landmine Monitor, JRS Asia Pacific is also involved in conducting research on Thailand's implementation of the Mine Ban Treaty, and has contributed to all four global Landmine Monitor Reports between 1999 and 2002.

JRS is also active in implementing landmine survivor projects, and along with the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, initiated a community-based victim assistance and empowerment programme in Surin and Buriram provinces. The project also involves raising awareness about mines and the creation of a database of survivors to complement the "incident based" national database held at the Thailand Mine Action Center (TMAC).

Currently there are three active Humanitarian Mine Action Units, all involved in de-mining along the Thai-Cambodian border. Donor countries have provided in-kind training and equipment support, though on a very small scale. The majority of stockpile destruction and humanitarian de-mining costs are being met by the national budget, which means that the process is progressing very slowly.

There is a great need for many more deminers, properly trained in humanitarian de-mining and working in integrated teams with technical equipment and mine detection dogs. De-mining priorities stress civilian needs, i.e. access to schools, agricultural land, and water sources. In addition to data collected by the Landmine Impact Survey, provincial and district officers and concerned villagers have also been asked to prioritise the contaminated areas in their locale so that future de-mining efforts will be concentrated on the most appropriate target areas.

To mark the entering into force in Thailand of the Mine Ban Treaty on 1st May 1999, TCBL organised a five-day Bicycle Rally. The 250-km ride from Sa Kaeo Province to Bangkok included the participation of 16 landmine victims who had been fitted with prosthetic legs, as well as members and friends of the Campaign to Ban Landmines. The rally stopped along the way in the various villages en route to distribute information and raise public awareness about land mines. From a publicity point of view, the

event was a great success with Thai media attention, especially Television, focusing on and giving large coverage to landmine victims during the week. Inspired by this success, a second "Stop Mines – for Peace" Bicycle Rally was organised the following year, this time a 259-kilometre race from Sa Kaeo to Surin Province. At the closing ceremony, landmine victims who had lost their lives were commemorated in a solemn inter-religious prayer service.

The littering of landmines is a tragic and ugly scar on what is otherwise a magnificently beautiful and charming country. The work to rid the country of mines is underway and progressing, though the path to its final completion will be long and will require the continued commitment of the Thai government and the various organisations working on the ground. When we imagine the future of Thailand, we must be careful not to forget about the many landmine survivors who have experienced great hardship and suffering. Events such as the bicycle rally for mine survivors are expressions of hope that normal life can continue for those who have fallen victim to the tragic legacy of conflict and instability in the region. The challenge for those of us who are working to overcome this legacy is to continue to accompany and assist survivors in such a way as to facilitate their reintegration into society and to encourage them to take their lives forward.



Emilie Ketudat is a member of the JRS Thailand team and is active in the Thailand Campaign to Ban Landmines

A landmine survivor taking part in a bicycle rally to raise awareness of the problem of mines



Refugee in the desert

JRS provides education and social services to refugees in Kakuma camp, located in the desert lands of North-West Kenya. Hugh Delaney writes about his recent visit.

The short flight from Nairobi touched down on the airstrip at 9.15 a.m. The aerial approach had revealed very little of our destination, apart from an endless sea of desert and accompanying gusts of dusty winds. “Welcome to Kakuma”, cried a voice as we stepped from the plane into the already considerable morning heat. In front of me stood Sr. Christina Mc Glynn, JRS project director and my host for this visit to Kakuma Refugee Camp.

Kakuma is located in the desert lands of Northern Kenya, a beautifully rugged though uninviting and isolated location. A very warm welcome I received; September is the cruelest of months – just the worst time of year here. The morning and afternoon temperatures are an immediate shock to the system and are punishing even on those who have spent many years here. Dust storms bring a constant reminder of the inhospitable and hostile nature of the barren desert, wherein we find Kakuma – home to 75,000 men, women, and children refugees.

The majority of the camp’s refugees have come to Kenya from neighbouring Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda, having fled their countries of origin because of war or fear of persecution. They are unable to return home to their own unstable regions and are thus

compelled to live in the camp; an existence that has its own perils and hardships for the refugees, many of whom have been languishing in Kakuma for as many as ten years.

“I describe this place as a sea of sorrow”, Sr. Christina told me during my stay, “though in that sea of sorrow there are islands of hope”. One doesn’t need a guided tour of the camp to understand what Sr. Christina meant: life can be tough for many of the refugees, particularly the women, who find themselves vastly outnumbered by the male population in the camp. Domestic violence, forced marriages and abductions are a daily threat for many of the camp’s female inhabitants – problems that Sr. Christina and JRS are working to address. One of the services offered by JRS is the ‘Safe Haven’ for victims of gender and sexual abuse, a quiet and secure centre where women and their children can be housed and counselled, away from the people in the camp who menace them.

We met one very young and visibly distraught woman in the Haven who was fearful that her newly born baby would be abducted by her estranged husband’s family, an all too familiar story in the camp where children are sometimes viewed as assets or merchandise, to be stolen or secured as payment for some alleged debt or as part of a ‘dowry dispute’. The consequences for mother and child are devastating, with the added possibility that the children might be forced into becoming child soldiers in the war-torn regions from whence they fled in the first place.

Counselling plays a major role in nearly all of the projects that JRS is involved in in Kakuma. The deep psychological trauma and stress that many of the refugees have suffered either before, during or after flight has left deep scars that are difficult to heal. In response, JRS has established a Community Counselling Service as well as a project of Day Care Centres for young traumatised refugees.

“If you listen to a person and their problems, you can actually heal the wound that is inside of them”, says Sammy, a refugee from South Sudan who acts as a supervisor at the Green Counselling Centre in Kakuma, a project which involves 42 counsellors who cater to the needs of around 900 clients on a weekly basis. Set up by JRS back in 1992 the centre’s counsellors are themselves refugees and have been trained in the techniques of counselling and treating the problems of their fellow refugees.

The Safe Haven for women and their children



“At the beginning the refugees didn’t know what counselling was and it took a long time to establish, to gain the trust of the communities and to build a reputation”, Sammy informed me. “Now we work in all the communities, offering counselling in all the languages of the refugees. It is actually helping to reduce violence in the camp, making the place safer and removing some of the causes of conflict.”

Violence and conflict is a theme that flows throughout the camp, barely under the surface, emerging on a regular basis as a constant reminder to the refugees of just how vulnerable and insecure their lives have become. For some of the younger refugees the strains and psychological tensions have become too much to bear, resulting in serious trauma, depression or even mental imbalance. What happens to a child who has witnessed so much suffering and violence, who has lost one or both parents, suffered abuse or who has had to live in a climate of fear and dread? The answer can be found at the JRS Day Care Centres in Kakuma, a service that caters for the needs of over 100 severely traumatised and troubled individuals, mainly children, by offering them special attention and rehabilitation counselling. Most of the young people who attend these centres are without parents, supported by friends, though unable to cope without special attention and care.

The Day Care Centres are staffed by a group of very committed and enthusiastic refugees, who have been trained by JRS to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable and disturbed children in their care. When we visited the Centres we were treated to a great and vibrant display of song and dance, a welcome that was both lively and impressive, for the energy and joy displayed demonstrated the tremendous strength of will and joy of the refugees, despite all the trauma and hardships that they have had to endure. It was a very moving experience to behold such a celebration and to witness what appeared to me as an expression of the determination of the human spirit to overcome the darkness that is imposed upon the lives of the suffering.

Some of the young in the centres were visibly disturbed; their faces and eyes bearing the marks of painful and unspeakable experiences. I was led all this way to witness the terror of that life and was allowed a glimpse of the world in which these young refugees are living and with which they are learning to cope. The care that they are afforded in the centres offers them a lifeline, and is the key to their rehabilitation, offering them the best chance to overcome their traumas, to enter back into the schools of the camp and to continue as best as possible with their shattered lives.

Despite the understandable fear that they will never be able to leave the camp, the young refugees are anxious to secure an education and to equip themselves with the nec-



Song and dance at the JRS Day Care Centre

essary skills for life should they ever be able to return home or exit Kakuma. JRS sponsors thirty students as they complete third-level diplomas through the University of South Africa distance learning programme. The scholarship funding covers registration fees, material expenses, transporting of assignments and books as well as tuition costs. The current batch of undergraduates are studying a variety of subjects such as Commerce, Social Sciences, the Humanities, Administration and Public Relations.

The obstacles and challenges to overcome are numerous. One student told how he was studying geography but that he was unable to leave the confines of the camp to conduct a fieldtrip and that he didn’t have access to the internet, enough books, or relevant people with whom to conduct interviews. Another student said it was like being in a prison here in the camp, studying away for a degree but with hands tied because of the disadvantages that they were faced with. Many of the students have no light with which to study in the evening, and because they all teach in the camp schools during the day, their actual study time is limited. The frustration among the group was clear: all this work and learning, all the hurdles to overcome, and at

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the end of it all perhaps a degree, but then what? Some of the students have been in the camps for years and wonder what difference such a qualification will make to their lives if they are to be continued here in the stifling prison-like isolation of the camp.

Such thoughts are ever present but not defeating. How could a student who puts so much effort into his work and succeeds against all the odds here in Kakuma not question where it is taking him? The dedication and motivation to succeed remain however, and so does the hope: the programme's first graduate is expected later this year. Such an achievement will serve as an inspiration to the rest of the students and as a milestone to the programme in general, acting as an example of how the very many obstacles to learning encountered in a refugee camp can be faced and overcome.

Where the qualifications take the students may depend a good deal on events and circumstances beyond their control. What is more certain is that they will provide the graduates with a greater belief in themselves and their own abilities, a sense of achievement, and given the opportunity, empowering skills that will allow them to plan for a better future.

Empowerment of the refugees is the focus of JRS in Kakuma, the thread that binds all of the projects together. From Income Generating Activities (IGAs) such as the breeding of pigs, chickens, ducks and turkeys, and the maintenance of vegetable and herbal gardens, to counselling training and the provision of education and skills, the projects aim to give a little bit of power and autonomy to the refugees, empowering them to take charge of and bring about change in their own lives, to the benefit of their communities.



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JRS, an international Catholic organisation, accompanies, serves, and advocates the cause of refugees and forcibly displaced people.

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