

## **The human faces of Christmas Island**

The Director of JRS Australia, Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, has urged the Australian public to place itself in the shoes of asylum seekers and try to imagine and understand their plight, as 78 Sri Lankans languish onboard an Australian customs ship, the Oceanic Viking.

The asylum seekers have refused to leave the ship, which is docked in Indonesia, and have asked instead to be taken to Christmas Island where they would be processed by Australian immigration authorities.

Following a recent visit to Christmas Island, Fr Bermudez-Goldman said that while Sri Lankans would be better served at the 'state-of-the-art' Australian facility, the offshore processing of asylum seekers constituted a heavy burden for overstretched government and other staff providing services to the detainees.

'I was heartened by the level of compassion and care that many of the Department of Immigration staff and other service providers had for the asylum seekers, but the reality is that unfortunately we are asking too much from them.'

Fr Bermudez-Goldman said that the planned extension of the facility to almost double its size will compound the already difficult conditions faced by staff and asylum seekers.

'The more people that arrive, the longer the refugee status determination processing will take. One of the simple reasons for this is that there are not enough qualified interpreters on the island to conduct the required interviews within the proposed period of three months. Also, the larger numbers of asylum seekers will affect the standard of care that staff can provide.' Consequently, said Fr Bermudez-Goldman, refugee advocacy groups continue to call for the closing down of the Christmas Island facility and for the relocation of processing to the mainland, where many more resources are available.

As outlined recently by the Refugee Council of Australia, asylum seekers and refugees must be entitled to reception arrangements that meet minimum standards and respect their dignity and human rights, fair systems of refugee status determination, a system of return for those found not to be in need of protection, and access to durable solutions, including resettlement in Australia.

Fr Bermudez-Goldman said his experiences with asylum seekers on Christmas Island reinforced the acute danger in which these people place themselves in the bid for freedom. 'One of the Afghani asylum seekers I met was very anxious because he hadn't been able to make his 'alive call' – a phone-call that every asylum seeker is allowed to make within 48 hours of arrival to inform their relatives that they are safe. A busy phone line had prevented him from reaching his family, and he feared that they believed him dead.

'To me that was striking, firstly, because it reminded me once again of the fact that getting on those rickety and unsafe boats is a huge gamble which only truly desperate people, escaping hopelessness and persecution in their home countries, would be prepared to take. Secondly, it reminded me of the families these asylum seekers were leaving behind, and the fact that the risk they had taken was not only for themselves but also on behalf of their whole families, in the hope that their survival would assure their families' survival as well. It is hard for us to understand what it must be like, but try to imagine saying goodbye to your wife and your children knowing that you might never see them again or that it might take several years before you are reunited with them.'

Fr Bermudez-Goldman said that the families left behind were very much in the thoughts of these men, as they worried for their safety and well-being.

'During one of the masses we celebrated together, several of the men—mostly Sri Lankan Catholics—took out their wallets and showed me photos of their children and then asked me to

pray for them. Some could not hold back the tears as I held the photos in my hands and recited the prayers. There was so much emotion in the room. Earlier we had prayed for those who had been lost at sea, for those who had not made it. At the end of the mass, one-by-one first, and then in groups, all of them came and knelt before me and asked for a blessing. As I placed my hands on their shoulders and prayed for them, I was struck by their deep faith: they had placed all their trust in God—there was no-one else to trust—and they truly believed that God held them in God's hands and would answer their prayers.'

Fr Bermudez-Goldman said that this faith—shared also by others of different religious traditions—as well as the emotion and the love expressed for families left behind, convey the human reality and pain behind the numbers, statistics and polls which pervade the current refugee debate.

'Perhaps instead of asking how well the government is doing in managing asylum seekers and refugees, the polls should be asking "how well or not do we think the asylum seekers are being treated"? If we found ourselves in their shoes, would we want to be treated in the same way?'

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