

*Mariano Griva and his wife Fernanda arrived in the small town of Kiunga, Papua New Guinea, in early October 2008 to take up his role as Information and Advocacy Project Officer in collaboration with the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga in the Western Province. Mariano shares some of his early impressions.*

When we first arrived in Kiunga four months ago, we were both enthusiastic about this opportunity to work with West Papuan refugees, and the issues and people we have met in PNG so far have not failed to meet our expectations. There are approximately twenty refugee settlements in the border area of the Western Province. Most were settled in and around 1984 when asylum seekers fled the then called Indonesian province of Irian Jaya. Some arrived even earlier.

Part of my work for JRS involves providing the refugees with reliable information of events pertaining to West Papua in order to enable them to make more informed decisions about their future. Other activities involve strengthening the capacity of both the staff in the diocese and of the refugees themselves to advocate for their rights, and providing information to relevant government, church and other international refugee organisations so that improved changes in policy can take place.

There are many issues which affect adversely the lives of these refugees. One example is a multinational large mining company which began operating a few years before 1984. Its dumping of poisonous tailings into two of the major rivers in this Province—the Ok Tedi and the Fly—has had a profound impact on the livelihoods of people dwelling on the banks of both these rivers. In fact, both refugees and non-refugees living in the affected areas will most likely have to abandon their current settlements because of the environmental hazards involved. Yet, for the refugees it will be their second displacement: initially because of the political turmoil in their homeland, and now as a result of environmental degradation of the habitat giving them refuge.

We hope that through a better awareness of circumstances such as this and of the plight of West Papuan refugees in general more durable solutions to a history of more than 25 years of displacement will be found.

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