



The Refugee Voice

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Jules High School in Johannesburg has classes with both South Africans and refugees. JRS supports about 1500 refugee students in Johannesburg & Pretoria. (Christian Fuchs —JRS/USA)

A Tale of Three Cities: JRS responds to the needs of refugees in urban environments

Separated by a vast continent, Johannesburg and Pretoria in South Africa, and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, are home to large numbers of refugees. Refugees are drawn to South Africa largely due to its reputation as Africa's most successful economy. Ethiopia draws refugees seeking safety and stability after decades of conflict in neighboring countries.

Ethiopia, in the northeast corner, or "horn" of Africa, is surrounded by unrest. It maintains a tense relationship with its northern neighbor, Eritrea, which is the source of many refugees seeking to escape human rights abuses and military conscription. It also receives a constant flow of refugees seeking to escape the violence and political chaos of its eastern neighbor, Somalia. It hosts smaller numbers from Kenya, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. At the same time, Ethiopia is home to over 360,000 persons who have been internally displaced due to conflict or famine.

Faced with limited resources and enormous needs, the Ethiopian response to refugees has emphasized encampment, seeking to confine refugees to remote border areas, and to discourage their migration to the capital city, Addis Ababa. Life in the camps is harsh, however, with the poor living conditions, a lack of security and enforced idleness leading many refugees to defy government policies and to relocate to the capital.

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A NOTE FROM THE NATIONAL DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

Despite heightened international awareness of the issues facing refugees in urban areas, serious barriers remain for organizations such as Jesuit Refugee Service seeking to help such refugees to meet their daily needs and to achieve long-term solutions.

Although all urban refugees share the same needs for legal protection, personal security, psychological and social support and, of course, shelter, food, medical care and education, the access to such assistance varies widely due to the attitudes of host governments and the availability of local resources.

In this issue of *The Refugee Voice* we speak with refugees at the northern and southern ends of the African continent to learn how very different circumstances have led JRS to take different approaches to meeting their needs.

With every good wish and blessing,

Fr. Michael A. Evans, S.J.

Refugees in Addis Ababa generally have little access to local services or to permanent integration, and local groups are limited in the kinds of services they are permitted to provide.

JRS operates two programs in Addis Ababa. The refugee community center — the only one of its kind in the city — offers language courses, library facilities, day-care services, computer classes and psychosocial support. The emergency needs program offers financial support and counseling services. These programs provide not just help but hope to refugees struggling to survive today while maintaining their hope for a better future. That hope can be hard to come by.

Sabir al-Zebeir, a refugee from Sudan explains that he “left [Darfur] because in 2005 the Government of Sudan and the Janjaweed militia attacked my village and burned everything down. ... I tried to go to Chad, but government forces blocked the way; so I came to Ethiopia. When I came here I first went to a refugee camp, and was there almost two years. There was no security there and no services, so I came to Addis.”

“JRS opened the community center because refugees living in Addis Ababa had nowhere to go. Refugees lose many things in their home countries, their friends, and their families. When they arrive [in a new country], they are very frustrated; this center is their home,” said JRS Ethiopia country director Seyoum Asfaw. “They come to us, and talk to us. Our door is always open.”

“From morning to night we don’t have anything, so we come here,” Sabir said, grateful for the services and social interaction he is able to find at the community center. “We want to learn and we want to be in peace. But right now we have no education and we have no job.”



Bethenhem Asrat teaches English at the Jesuit Refugee Service Community Center in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. English language skills are sought-after by many refugees in the region who hope to either resettle to a third country or find more secure employment. (Christian Fuchs — JRS/USA)



Internet access is provided to refugees in 30 minute blocks to allow them to keep in touch with friends and family — and to research job or educational opportunities — at the JRS Community Center in Addis Ababa. (Christian Fuchs — JRS/USA)

“It wasn’t my choice,” Laurent, a refugee from the Congo, said about his decision to come to Ethiopia “but I was trying to find a good safe place to settle. It’s something I cannot explain to you! You know, when you are running away from a danger ... you don’t know how you will go away from it... I didn’t even prepare myself.” He simply fled, and arrived in Ethiopia.

Laurent visits the JRS emergency needs program offices for assistance. “It’s very

difficult to support yourself in this country, because the government does not authorize foreigners and refugees to work ... when I have a serious problem I come here. You know, refugees, we have a lot of problems. There is nobody to advise us, and this is the only place where you can get advice on how to live as a refugee,” Laurent said.

Each Friday the ENP office hosts a pastoral program, which provides group discussion and counseling for refugees. “Almost every Friday, I come here. This program is so helpful,” said Laurent.

“I’m by myself. So I come to pray here, at the pastoral programs. The things in the Bible tell us why to keep our hearts [to keep hope],” added Vincent, another refugee from the DRC.

Because refugees in Addis seldom have access to, or can afford, local schools, JRS provides training programs in such skills as English and computer literacy.

Maano, a young woman from Somalia, is studying English for two reasons. First, she wants to be able to communicate to UNHCR and other authorities directly, without the use of an interpreter who might misrepresent what she says. Second, she told us she sees this as a step toward the future: “I hope to continue my education. I don’t

think staying here would be safe for me. I hope to resettle in another country.”

English language skills are sought-after by many refugees in the region who hope to either resettle to a third country or find more secure employment. Teacher Bethenhem Asrat said 50 to 60 people come to English classes at the JRS center.

“I need English because I will not always have this life. Sometime I may be living in another country,” said Kimbareta Lissouba, a refugee from DRC who studies English at the JRS community center. “I like the center because if you are alone, or stuck at home it is very bad. But if you come here, and you can use the internet and ... talk to others, it is very good,” he added, echoing the feeling of many of the center’s clients.

More than 3,000 miles away from Ethiopia, South Africa is also a hub for refugees seeking a new life. Both its circumstances and its policies toward urban refugees, however, are very different, as JRS Regional Director David Holdcroft, S.J. explains:

“South Africa has the largest economy in Africa, and that means ... refugees perceive that they have the best chance of survival, that they are most likely to be looked after in some way. It doesn’t always happen that way, but this is often the perception,” he said.

“At the moment there are about 50,000 registered refugees in South Africa, and about 250,000 people who are asylum-seekers awaiting refugee determination. There are probably many, many more people, particularly from Zimbabwe, who have come as a result of starvation and the collapse of the economy there and they will never get refugee status under present international law, but JRS has chosen to treat the vast majority of these as if they were refugees; we regard it as a forced migration. So it’s a huge population of forced migrants in South Africa,” he said.

There are no refugee camps in South Africa, and South African law stipulates that refugees should, at least in principle, have access to employment as well as to basic services such as schools and hospitals. Those fortunate enough to get legal refugee status will even be allowed to stay and become a permanent part of South African society. Given this very different environment, JRS’ work on behalf of refugees in South Africa centers around helping refugees obtain access to the benefits that are theoretically available to them, but which are often difficult to obtain.

JRS operates programs in South Africa’s two major cities, Pretoria and Johannesburg. Since refugees in these cities have the legal right to work, JRS helps them to find employment through assessment, skills training, and small business grants.

Stephanie, a refugee from DRC, told us of her journey to self-reliance: “The struggle that we went through [at the beginning] was very hard. We were working as volunteers ... and our children were in creches [daycare centers], but ... the [daycare] fees were very high. Then we ... asked, ‘Why can’t we open one for refugees?’”

After taking classes with JRS and receiving a small business grant, Stephanie opened her own daycare center. “We found ourselves with a huge demand. We care for 200 children now. Now we are 15 women in this business. We no longer have to receive help from JRS because we are self-reliant.”



Stephanie, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the daycare center she opened in downtown Pretoria, South Africa. (Christian Fuchs — Jesuit Refugee Service/USA)

Although access to services such as education and healthcare is legally available to refugees, institutions often refuse to accept refugees due to ignorance of the law or the inability of refugees to provide acceptable documentation. In these circumstances, JRS works to educate hospital and school administrators and employers about their obligations, and to make sure that refugees get the essential care to which they are entitled.

“When refugees go to the hospital and they have an asylum document, they find that the hospital will deny them ... and will tell them that ‘you must have a South African bar-coded ID,’” said JRS Advocacy officer Jeanette Lesisa. JRS works to inform such hospitals of the Department of Health policy requiring acceptance of refugee documentation.

Refugees in Pretoria and Johannesburg face similar problems in obtaining access to education for their children. Schools often refuse to accept refugee documents as evidence of eligibility. Furthermore the cost of schooling is well beyond the reach of many refugees.

JRS responds by negotiating waivers or reductions of school fees for refugee children. “We help them with stationery and uniforms, and we pay fees for them. Currently we are supporting 800 students in Johannesburg and close to 700 in Pretoria, said JRS social worker Sehorane Lehlomela. “Sometimes the schools don’t recognize their asylum seeker or refugee papers, so we negotiate with the school to accept that. The response of the refugees makes this effort well worthwhile.”

“If you are not a refugee,” says refugee and mother Esther Itela, “you can’t understand how it feels! Having children who can attend school is like hope coming back, and JRS is giving us that hope.”

“Our future is our children,” she adds. “We ran from our country, from a war; we need to see a future through our children.”

The tale of these three cities — Addis Ababa in Ethiopia and Pretoria and Johannesburg in South Africa — illustrates that urban refugees have similar needs but require very different responses tailored to the limitations and opportunities they face in different urban environments. JRS seeks to listen to and respond to urban refugee needs and to develop programs that provide immediate support and help refugees meet their long-term aspirations.

Recommendations

All governments should provide refugees within their territories the basic human rights enshrined in the UN Refugee Convention and other international human rights instruments, such as the right to freedom of movement, the right to documentation, the right to work and the right to seek an education. These rights should apply equally to those who choose to live in camps and to those in urban areas.

Governments must both recognize refugee rights in national legislation and policy, and also ensure that governmental and non-governmental institutions understand and respect the rights of refugees to live in both urban and non-urban environments and to obtain access to basic services.



The pastoral program at the Jesuit Refugee Service Emergency Needs Program in Addis Ababa allows refugees to speak openly with one another about common problems. (Christian Fuchs — JRS/USA)

Refugees residing in urban areas typically share all the needs of the urban poor, but face additional needs arising from their status as refugees. Non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations should recognize and respond to the special needs of refugees living in urban settings in order that they may fulfill their aspirations to become self-sufficient and contributing members of their host communities.

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