



Sanctuary Northern Rivers Inc.

A community based refugee support group

PO Box 1146 Lismore NSW 2480

ABN 88 782 443 934

July 2006 Newsletter

Welcome to the Newsletter for July 2006.

For those of you who were unable to attend the festivities associated with World Refugee Day here is the address

President's Address for World Refugee Day

Refugees in the Northern Rivers communities: a mutual benefit

Salutation

Elders of the Bundjalung nation, Mr and Mrs King, as representatives of the Lismore people, representatives of the respective agencies and institutions, and indeed, the refugees who have come to call Lismore their home, I thank you for your willingness to celebrate with us today. And what reason we have to celebrate. I acknowledge the honour of this opportunity to speak with you, and acknowledge that we gather today on the land that has been nurtured for many thousands of years by the Bundjalung peoples.

Introduction

Today, throughout the world, people in small communities such as ours, people in the high offices of governments and the United Nations, and people sheltered from war and famine pause to consider the cause of refugees. Consider their plight, and consider their courage. For those of us resourced with security and relative wealth, we consider our response to that plight. How have we ventured to demonstrate our compassion, to share our opportunities, to exercise our own willingness to bring fertility to the barren and troubled lives of countless millions in the world?

It is both gratifying and humbling to consider these matters. Gratifying in that this moment brings reflection on the joy and new prosperity that we witness in the lives of the 40 – 50 refugees who now live with us. Humbling inasmuch that our efforts, while a fine example of selfless generosity, is dwarfed by the enormity of the need in the world. My efforts can never be enough, my comforts always too great, when I consider the pain, the despair, the forlorn nature of the tens of millions in the world who run from their home, who scream for their loss - of spouse, of child, of innocence; who yearn for the stability of family, and future.

I wish today to explore three themes that we of the community of Lismore and more widely, the Northern Rivers, ought to contemplate as the refugee people of the world now knock on our door. Firstly, I consider the nobility of these ones who have come to carve out a new life in Lismore. Secondly, I shall explore the positive contribution that they make, and the opportunities and obligations that we have, as a community, to ensure that the contribution that the refugees are willing and able to make is welcomed. Thirdly, we consider the hope – both that which we have brought to the lives of a few, and the hope that we provide to the many, many more who ponder whether the fulfilment of their life's potential can ever be achieved in their exile.

Nobility

It may be difficult for any of us here to imagine the pain and hardship that has been experienced in the life of the refugee. It is difficult to imagine the echo of gunfire, the decision to leave the frail on the roadside in order to save the children. It is difficult to imagine that fear of rape when simply going out to fetch water, or the daily concern that your husband will not return from a day's hunting, for he himself is frequently the hunted.

Each of the refugees settled in our community have faced these fears. Do we see them revile, and say 'it is too much?' Do we see an anger that overwhelms them, a grief that stifles them? On the contrary. their pain has been taken within. Their pondering hearts have said: I must live for my future, I must live for my family, I must live for I have seen how life can be taken.

What we see is a profound spirit of gratitude. They have been given an opportunity by a people previously unknown to them. These people – the people of Lismore – have taken them as sister and brother, to provide them with the opportunity for life. And the refugees, our sisters and brothers, not only express their gratitude in the spoken word, but even more so in their choices. Each and every one has stated by their actions that

their future, that was once so distant, is now within reach. Anger and grief have not bogged them down, but rather given way to energy and hope.

The nobility belongs to us all. There is nobility in the actions of those who receive them so selflessly, and indeed, in the dignified manner that the received have stood and said thank you. They wear their tradition proud, they emerge as leaders of the wider community, they excel in school and sport, and still submit humbly to the needs of those who remain in the refugee camps that they have come from.

Contribution

In settling refugees in Lismore over the past two years, it is time to consider the positive contribution that they have made to our community. I contend very strongly with the sweeping generalisation not infrequently heard in wider Australia, that such intake is burdensome. That has not been the case in this region. Refugee settlement in the Northern Rivers communities has, and will continue to, enrich us.

(a) productivity

Within months of arrival, a number of the refugee population have secured employment. That has not been without its teething problems, and its success has been in large part due to the commitment of the employer. Yet we have seen willingness and commitment. Just two weeks ago, our Federal Member was publicly calling for the community to be willing to work, and not be reliant upon welfare support. The refugee populations have stepped forward from their earliest days and shown that willingness.

Likewise, in the fields of study, and the development of daily skills. Examples abound of the commitment to their task, their ambition to further their opportunity through ongoing study. In primary school, in secondary school, in tertiary institutions, the Sudanese now stand as examples of what can be achieved when one applies oneself.

(b) Diversity

Over recent decades, the broader Lismore community has slowly come to appreciate the cultural wealth that has existed within the Bundjalung peoples. The diversity of cultural mix has further slowly expanded. The introduction of African people to the Lismore community deepens the richness of this mix. And as I come closer to this community, I am increasingly aware of the depth of culture that exists, and how much it has to offer us.

It is a sensitive balance that we must walk in ensuring that people of a new culture integrate into the broader community, while maintaining the beauty and strength of their own culture. It is a privilege when we can allow this culture to be shared, and, in my experience, enhance the way in which we live our own lives. For example, the value placed upon family, and the respect bestowed upon the roles within the family. The inclusiveness of family- so graphically demonstrated last week as six young adults and children were fostered into a family – because they need security and shelter.

This difference in paradigm was poignantly pointed out to me recently. Our western society, our intellectual and individualist society, has developed a capital based upon wealth. And just as the indigenous populations from around the world have been painfully telling us for so long, Sudanese value is based upon 'capital of the heart'. Their equity is not their goods or their parcel of land, but rather the pride of their kin, and the traditions that have enriched those very hearts for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years.

Are we willing to consider a change from a spiral of isolation within our communities, to a place of celebration of diversity that bridges our separation, and deepens our experience of family and community?

(c) Community reciprocation

Perhaps we are. I am constantly surprised and delighted by the interest and the generosity that is offered by the community to assist in the settlement of refugees. The local media has been outstanding in its efforts, showing compassion and enthusiasm in its reporting. The community – through individuals and through the organisations of churches, service groups, non-government and government institutions – have welcomed, and continue to welcome and support the passage of refugees to our community. In speaking to many groups over the last two years, I find this interest and support transcends political or historical affiliation, and is mostly driven by compassion and the humanitarian need that exists.

It is heart warming, to say the very least, that in spite of difference of educational status or political view, of heritage or wealth, there is common ground here. Where there is need, our community has responded in an extraordinarily generous manner. I urge that we be given the chance to continue, to show the measure of this community as it can be. The settlement of refugees in our midst has a unifying potential, one that our leaders must recognise and respond to.

Hope

The theme of World Refugee Day in 2006 is *hope*. It is a theme that resonates in many ways. When we speak of hope, it is very easy to see the hope that has been brought to those who have now made their home with us. Their life, for so long filled with fear and stifled ambition, is now one of opportunity. Their hearts are brimming with hope, impatient to play, to laugh, and to sing. Impatient to carve out a new life that for so long, they had not even dared to dream of.

The hope, however, reaches much further than those who settle here. Their settlement provides a light for those in the camps – of Kenya, of Uganda, of Ethiopia, of Guinea, of Thailand – throughout the world where masses of people are seeking refuge from persecution and war. That they see that their own people are able to attain a life of new opportunity is an enormous source of hope for their own lives. Each refugee settled here in Lismore lights the flame of hope in the hearts of tens or perhaps hundreds more in the camps that they come from. We must not diminish that hope, but rather reach more, and allow that light to penetrate into the corners of the world where darkness seems to be the only future.

I invite you to place yourself in the shoes of the refugee for one moment as they flee from their village in the screaming of night – just as our refugee sisters and brothers here today have done. Reflect on what we have achieved here in our small way, and what we may continue to strive to achieve.

*I hope they won't kill me
I hope nobody's following me
I hope I don't step on a landmine
I hope I find some water soon
I hope I don't die out here
I hope someone will find me
I hope the UN can help me
I hope they've got food and shelter
I hope they can help me find my family
I hope we'll be able to go back one day
I hope we find a place to call home
I hope we learn to fit in
I hope we can build a future here
I hope we never, ever, have to run again!*

UNHCR, 2006

Conclusion

In responding to refugee concerns as we have as a community, we grow as a community. I thank you and congratulate you for what you have done. Yet I urge us to reach further, to find the resources of our minds and hearts to take more, to do more, to be more for at least some of the tens of millions of refugees. This requires that ongoing welcome and support for new refugees amongst us, and it requires the commitment of the leaders in the community. Refugee settlement stands to benefit us all, and build the community capital – 'the capital of the heart'.

Thank you! Michael Douglas

Arrival of the New Sudanese family

It was with great joy and relief that we welcomed the arrival of six Sudanese children at Ballina airport four weeks ago. The five young men, Abraham Maciek Thiongkol, Gabriel Matur Thiongkol, Joseph Inidri Bathuel, Makur Ariop Gudi, and Bathok Thiongkol Ring, aged 12 – 20 years, and an eight year girl Yomjima Thiongkol Ring, arrived. These young people left their troubled past behind them and look forward to a new future. This opportunity has emerged from compassionate and tireless commitment of many in the local community.

Anna Aring Kothea and her husband Andrew Kok, her brother and three children arrived in Lismore in June 2003, as part of the Commonwealth Government Humanitarian intake. Their settlement in Lismore was supported by Sanctuary Northern Rivers. Anna and Andrew had themselves been supporting a number of families in the refugee camp.

Anna and Andrew hoped to bring those that they helped to also gain a visa and a chance of a new life. One family was Ajuk, widowed and her four children. In March 2005 Ajuk succumbed to tuberculosis. The children were then supported in the camp by 18 year Abraham and his brother Gabriel (also orphans).

Anna worked closely with Sanctuary Northern Rivers to secure the visa for these six children. St Andrew's Anglican community in Lismore provided financial support to the children in the refugee camp, for food and basic needs. Others in the community provided for the airfare.

The following is a special story written for the newsletter – reminding us all why we support refugees.

I escaped danger and death by some luck – by Gabriel Majok Madit

The war started in 1983 in Sudan. Our village was attacked by Arabs. 2.1 million lives were lost. Ongoing fighting killed innocent civilians including three of my relatives, my sister Nyibol and brother Amou and my uncle's son, Deng.

The Arab militia came to our village at four in the morning. They captured men, women and girls. They carried out sexual abuse and raped many victims. I had hidden in the corner of the house. All my body shook. I was in shock. I felt like I had dropped into hot water. And I felt like a cat on hot bricks.

These massive atrocities and burning of houses by the Sudanese army were the result of allegations and accusations by the Arabs on innocent civilians supported by the rebels SPLA and SPALM, stands for Sudanese People Liberations Army and Sudan Army Liberation Movement.

They said native civilians were helping the rebels. In addition we were accused of refusing to be forced to convert to Islamic religion by the central government who have power in the northern part because of our race. Islamization had their 'red top' that they wouldn't be ruled by Christianity.

In my village I was so very patient and waited until the coast was clear because if they saw men and boys they killed you immediately. Many people from our place were killed including my sister Monica's husband called Moker. I was still hiding in a corner. I got a slight chance to escape and ran into the bush. I was pursued by the Sudanese Arab troops. In the sky a helicopter was hunting me and other civilians were running too.

While we were in the bush, the only way to live because there was no food was to eat wild fruits, roots and the leaves of trees. People also ground the leaves or bark of trees for other people who were wounded as treatment for there were no doctors or medical assistances. People went like animals scattered in the bush. I give thanks to Almighty father who saved me from that very dangerous situation that I will never forget all my life.

Afterwards, wild animals ate many people at night and lots of bullets were fired after us. It was like falling rain. I departed my home town Malek because of the ongoing fighting in Sudan. I was forced to run as a refugee. I feared for my life. I ran to Ethiopia. I stayed there for four years. In 1991 when the government was overthrown I ran back to the border of Sudan. On the way many civilians were killed by the Ethiopian army. Others were drowned while crossing the river Giro. Many were killed on the bank of the river and many people still lucky like me were forced to run into the bush and trek thousands of miles on bare feet to a place called Magose on the border of Kenya. Many people died on the way from starvation, others were killed by wild animals because they were not able to walk at that time. It felt like my doomsday or the end of my life. I was lucky to escape the anger of death. I was like a kangaroo in her mother's pouch thank God for my life!

I am thankful to the government of Australia to collect people like me. Come to their home and their community in Lismore Sanctuary Northern Rivers for their great commitment resettle here.

May God bless Australia for their generosity! I feel good and thankful for my life.

Support required for new refugee families arriving soon!

Sanctuary Northern Rivers Inc. is expecting two new refugee families, with children, to arrive in Lismore over the next few months. These families do need to be supported during at least the first six weeks of their arrival.

Are there any people who would like to assist with the resettlement program? We will provide information and training to those who are willing to generously donate some of their time to this very worthy cause.

To discuss ways in which you would like to help please phone Denise on 02 6686 7131 mobile 0428 228 500

The next general meeting of Sanctuary Northern Rivers Inc. is

Tuesday 12 September 2006 at the Lismore Workers Club from 5.30 pm.

The next Annual General Meeting of Sanctuary Northern Rivers Inc. is

Tuesday 17 October 2006 at the Lismore Workers Club from 5.30 pm.

ALL INTERESTED PERSONS ARE MOST WELCOME TO ATTEND.