JRS

Refugee Voice

December 2006

Produced by Jesuit Refugee Service Singapore—for private circulation only.

Buildings and homes destroyed and burnt

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THE CRISIS IN TIMOR LESTE

As part of JRS' efforts to raise awareness on the plight of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPS), we have been working with different parish churches in Singapore annually to help refugees and displaced people in this region. For this year's Advent/Christmas project, JRS is working with the Church of the Holy Family to raise funds to help the tens of thousands made homeless in Timor Leste. Below is a summary of the present crisis in Timor Leste.

After 25 years of conflict, Timor Leste became independent on May 20, 2002. This predominantly Catholic nation is one of the poorest countries in the world.

Senseless Killing

On March 1 this year, about 600 soldiers were dismissed from the Defence Forces. This resulted in riots which turned violent in the capital of Dili. Many buildings and homes were burnt and destroyed. More than 150,000 people fled from the capital to the surrounding countryside. They have not returned to their homes as the situation is still unsafe despite the presence of foreign troops.

Tens of thousands are now staying in makeshift camps or sought shelter in convents, schools, seminaries and churches. In Dili alone, there are over fifty-four campsites, each holding thousands of displaced people.

Living in Convent corridors

Cramped Living quarters

In the region of Balide, the Canossian Sisters are providing refuge to some 14,000 homeless people. By nightfall, the number of people seeking shelter at the convent would double the amount. Despite the squalid and cramped conditions, they feel more secure and safe than returning home. They feel that the convent could provide them with 24-hour security without guns. Such is the fear and plight of these homeless.

Let Us Pray…

Dear God, please help the people in Timor Leste. Give strength to the homeless and the hungry so that they have the will to survive. Keep the JRS workers safe and give them courage and strength to serve your people. Amen.

People waiting for their daily rations

'My lunch and dinner'

Sr Marcal Guilhermina explaining the plight of the people

Fr Joaquim and Sr Marcal

THE CRISIS IN TIMOR LESTE contd.

Flimsy shelters—can they survive the rain?

However, with such a vast number of homeless and jobless, not only is there a severe shortage of food and drinking water, there is also an urgent need for tents, blankets, medication, clothing and other essentials. There is also a dire need for funds to improve the facilities as sanitation and hygiene at these campsites are becoming a major problem.

With the rainy season approaching and the violence and unrest far from ceasing, the number of homeless seeking shelter looks set to be on the rise. Until these Timorese can return home and fend for themselves, they will continue to need humanitarian assistance.

- Leong Seey Seey, JRS Singapore

ADVENT/CHRISTMAS PROJECT WITH THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY FAMILY

For this year's Advent /Christmas project, JRS had the privilege of collaborating with the Church of the Holy Family to help the thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs), who had lost their homes in the recent riots in Dili, Timor Leste.

Fr Joaquim sharing with a parishioner

With the theme of "Our Christmas Gift to Timor Leste", the objective of the project was to raise awareness amongst its parishioners of the plight of the less fortunate and much forgotten people in Timor Leste; and to make a sacrifice during Advent to help them. Help would be in the form of financial assistance for the purchase of basic necessities and essentials, such as food, tents, blankets and medication; to be sent to Timor Leste in time for Christmas.

Handicraft items on sale

Jesuit priest, Father Joaquim Sarmento SJ and Canossian Sister Marcal Guilhermina were invited to Singapore to give a talk at the Church of the Holy Family on Oct 26. Both of them are from Timor Leste and have been helping the thousands of homeless Timorese who sought refuge at the churches and convent. They spoke of the plight of the IDPs in Dili and also shared some of their heart-wrenching experiences at the Church's masses on Oct 28 and 29.

An exhibition was also held at the Church's premises to raise awareness. As part of the fund-raising activity, handicrafts made by the Timorese IDPs were sold and the support was overwhelming. In addition, a documentary "A Hero's Journey" produced by Grace Phan on the struggles of Timor Leste's President Xanana Gusmao and his people, was screened on Oct 29 to a full-house audience of supportive parishioners.

- Leong Seey Seey, JRS Singapore

A Muslim boy cries as he and thousands of civilians are evacuated from the Muthur battlefield in Thoper village.

Produced by
Jesuit Refugee Service
Singapore
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Thank you for making our work with refugees possible.

JRS Sri Lanka Report - Oct 2006

The following is an excerpt of a letter from Fr Vinny Joseph, JRS Country Director of Sri Lanka.

Deepavali and Ramadan heralded in two significant optimistic events with the Geneva peace talks between the government and the LTTE on Oct 28 and 29. The second was the historic signing of the MOU between the SLFP and UNP, sealing the consensus between the ruling party and the opposition to resolve ethnic issues. However, the many attempts to restore peace continue to be unsuccessful and violence around Sri Lanka persists.

A recent event in Jaffna showed that the violence has put many Sri Lankans in dire situations amidst the crisis of food and money shortage. A drunkard father and his wife were willing to sell their three-year old child for a mere 11,000 rupees (which is only S$160) to save their own lives. A parish priest gave them 15,000 rupees and took the child lest they tried to sell him again.

In another event, a major in charged of the army of Vaharai, Valaichennai division was genuinely interested in alleviating the plight of the suffering. He was instrumental in helping me and Bishop's trip to Vaharai for the delivery of emergency relief items such as rice, flour, dhall, sugar and tea to refugees there. He had plans to admit his daughter into a convent school in Kandy and wanted to seek the help of the Bishop. Unfortunately, a week later, the Major and 36 of his men were caught in an offensive and lost their lives in the battle. We were shocked and saddened by the loss.

Despite the violence and amidst precarious situations, JRS continues its management of the camps in Batticaloa and Trincomalee. It will be starting its work in Muthur from Nov 1. In Jaffna, emergency relief operation was limited due to non-availability of food items in the market. Temporary housing for the IDPs is under construction in Killinochi and Mullaithevu.

Please continue to pray for peace in Sri Lanka, and for the thousands of homeless, who are facing a shortage of food and other necessities. Also please pray for the JRS priests and staff.

Check out our New Website:
www.jrssingapore.org

We welcome your feedback!

About Our Organisation

JRS is an international Catholic organization with a mission to accompany, serve and plead for the rights of refugees and internally displaced people. JRS was founded by the Jesuits in 1980 and our priority is to be where the need is greatest or where no other organisation is present.