

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A project of the Manly Catholic Social Justice Group

Patrons: Thomas Keneally and Des Hasler

NEWSLETTER EASTER 2004

Welcome to the second newsletter of the Northern Beaches Refugee Sanctuary

The last four months have been very busy. The group, with your help, has managed to help another five family groups. We have now helped 31 people start a new life. Each person is a victory; each person is a new life and a new chance.

New focus for NBR

We agreed to focus on refugees from Sierra Leone, although we will help others if we have the funds.

We chose Sierra Leone because we felt we would achieve more focusing on one country. We then can build a strong relationship with a community in Sydney. This means that we offer hope to a people and not only help the families migrate but also build strong support systems. The local Sierra Leone community will help with the settlement and integration of the new arrivals into the Australian way of life. To get a Special Humanitarian Visa you will have suffered major trauma. You need the support of others to help you adjust to the freedoms we have here. The Government offers support through the STARTTS program. This is a health service for those who have suffered torture or trauma. You also need friends who can help you settle.

Why Sierra Leone?

The United Nations ranks its member nations based on the quality of life index. There are 175 member nations and in last place is Sierra Leone. Life expectancy is 34 and child mortality is 31.6% for child under 5. The airfare from Guinea, where most of the refugees have fled to, is about \$10,000 for a family of five, a huge amount if you have nothing. Who could be more in need? We approached the Sierra Leone groups in Sydney and asked if we could work together with them to build an airfare loan scheme. A committee was established to set out the procedures. NBR had representation on the committee. The selection criterion was agreed on. It tries to help those most in need with the limited money we have. This selection committee reports back to the Sierra Leone community.

Visas issued in Conakry.

One of the problems we faced was that the visas are only issued after a visit by Immigration officials to Conakry. They visited in November to interview those who had applied for refugee visas. The visas are then offered subject to a medical. This process can be very slow. The visas are only now being issued after the November visit.

It is very frustrating to have the money available but no visas waiting to be used. We had offered hope to a community and encouraged them to apply for visas. We couldn't use the money elsewhere. The visas were expected at any time. Each week we were expecting new applications. The waiting seemed to go on forever.

One of the great difficulties for the sponsors in Australia is that they don't have access to credit as they are mostly new arrivals themselves. They are placed in the invidious position of not being able to borrow money without a visa issued, but when the visa is issued they only have three months to arrange the finance.

Three new families.

While we waited for the new visas to be issued to families from Sierra Leone we decided to use some of the money to help three families from Sudan. They didn't need big loans and are able to repay over a short time. We worked with the Sudanese loan scheme in Sydney. They selected and helped settle the families, we lent them the money.

The families were paid for by St. John the Baptist Parish Harbord, Our Lady of the Rosary Waitara and a very generous family who donated \$10,000 to NBRBS. We are very grateful to them for the wonderful help.

These three families are settling well. They are attending the English language classes. The children are in school.

One of the Sudanese parents, Garang, has spent 20 of his 25 years in refugee camps. An extraordinary waste of a person's life. Now he has a chance to build a better life for his family.

Long distant help.

We helped a Sierra Leonean family of 5, from Conakry, move to Perth. We had an emergency call asking for help. The family had only 6 weeks to use the visa or they would lose it. The father had been told that he had a heart problem and needed to get treatment quickly. We lent the airfare and they are now very happily in Perth. The check up showed that the father's problem was with the lungs, not the heart, and would be corrected with treatment. This will take about 6 months. Two of the children also had problems, one was anaemic the other had malaria. After a short stay in hospital they are also in good health.

The family have just welcomed a new born baby boy who is doing very well. Our first Australian born family member!

The sponsor of this family in Perth is his brother Amadu. Here is what Amadu wrote about his brother's struggle to escape.

"My brother was a security officer with the National Diamond Mining Company (NDMC) in the diamond rich town of Yengema in Kono District in the Eastern province and had support within the then ruling party- the All People Congress party (APC).

With his influence growing among the youth base, he came into a head on collision with one of the local chiefs- a strong and ardent supporter of the current ruling Sierra Leone Peoples' party (SLPP). Kono was the first of many targeted cities for capture by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) whose main objective was the removal of the APC from office.

Every faction has vested interest in Kono and the holding of any form of authority, like that of a security officer, can be a risky business, hence his opposition by the powerful traditional chief.

When the SLPP won the 1996 general elections the writing was already on the wall for my brother! He was sacked and only to be reinstated after the ousting of the SLPP by the notorious Armed Forces ruling Council (AFRC) junta. This was the period that heralded the most destructive period in the decade-old war second only to the 6 January 1999 rebel invasion of the city of Freetown of which they (AFRC) played a bigger role. The traditional chief and some of his associates went in to hiding just after the removal from office of their party.

My brother was forced by one of the junta representatives to disclose lucrative diamond plots and he ended up showing under duress some spots that are sacred and had been set aside by the traditional rulers.

His decision to disclose the sites was the last straw that breaks the camel's back! Less than a year after the SLPP was reinstated in office militarily, a group of secret society members and the government militia (Kamajors) attacked his residence, raped his wife and carted all his belongings away before burning his house. He was tied and was about to be taken away to the secret society as a sacrifice to their gods before EOMOG (Regional peace keepers) forces rescued him. His wife died the same day of the attack on their home.

With the help of the peacekeepers he and his remaining family members were escorted to the Guinean border and finally made it in to Guinea in 2001. I bet his story is nothing unusual about life back home.

What I am not sure of is whether his health deterioration is connected to the beatings, mines exposures, poor sanitary environment, etc. although the Australian High Commission in Athens, Greece has asked on the advise of their Post doctor in Guinea that he be ferried as soon as possible to Australia to undertake full medical examination.

My brother has vast experience in diamond mining and we won't be surprised if he decides to move in to Kalgoorlie on arrival.

To say that I am happy about your long, long, long, ... hand of rescue is nothing short of an understatement! Give my love your family and friends and to those of the crewmembers in your organisation.

I look forward to meeting this group of humanitarians."

Their airfare was paid for by a family's donation of \$10,000.

The next families.

Last week the selection committee proposed four family groups comprising of 22 people. These airfares have being paid and we eagerly await the new families arrivals. (The first family is arriving on May 14th.) The families we help have saved some of the airfare and we pay the balance. These 22 airfares will cost approx \$27,000.

Rwandan family.

The Manly Catholic Social Justice Group has sponsored a family from Rwanda. We sent the forms off in August and have heard that they have been accepted for visas. They are a family of 7. Their family was destroyed by the genocide of 1994. Nearly all the extended family was killed. We hope to have them here very soon.

Peter and Sue Hallam

We welcomed Peter and Sue Hallam to Sydney last month. They are the couple who started the sanctuary movement. They were our inspiration to start NBRIS. They came to visit their son and spend some time with us. They have been helping refugees settle in Australia for 16 years. They have helped hundreds of people start new lives. There are 70 Sudanese children at schools in Coffs Harbour as a result of their efforts. They are a real inspiration.

Different Sanctuary Groups are now working in Coffs Harbour, Lismore, Armidale, Manly and a new group is starting in North Sydney later in the year.

Government policy change.

The Government has increased the number of refugees that we accept each year from 12,000 to 13,000. They are also increasing the number of category 200 visa holders (The Government pays the travel expenses) from 4,000 to 6,000. This is good news. The sad news is that according to the latest African Newsletter issued by DIMA there are 1,500 visa holders in Kenya alone whose visas are in jeopardy as they haven't paid for the medicals. Can you

image the pain of being offered a visa and then not having the airfare to use it? It would be like winning lotto and not having the bus fare to be able to collect the prize.

We have much work to do if we want to ensure that everybody issued a visa is able to use it.

We are holding two Trivia nights.

Manly May 1st 7.30 pm Cost \$20 Tickets Rosemary Ashton 9977-4434

Waitara June 5th 7.30pm Cost \$10 Tickets Parish office Tel 9489 3232

If you would like a fun night out come and join us. If you had a prize or something to auction we would love to hear from you as well!!!

The St. Faiths Quilting group in Narrabeen has given us a quilt to raffle. We will raffle it at the Manly Trivia night. It is really beautiful and will prove very popular. We thank them for the support.

Fundraising is a slow process and hard work. Maybe you could help us.

The Friends of the Northern Beaches Refugee Sanctuary membership is \$50 although we would happily accept a larger donation! Could you try and get one new member. What about membership as a birthday or other special gift? The bigger the supporter group the more people we can help.

Administration costs. .

We are proud to say that we have not spent any money on administration. Every cent donated has been used for airfares. The costs are covered by committee members. Centacare have been a terrific support. Thank you to Norm Chapman and his team.

Thank you to the Friends of NBR.

The support over the last year is inspirational. It is through the donations and work of the members that we have been able to help so many. We will have assisted over 60 people in our first year. We are hoping to be as helpful in the next year.

When we started we didn't have any real goals. We thought we could help a family or two. Now, nine months after we started up NBR, 31 people have arrived and started a new life here in Australia and another 22 will be arriving in the next two months. We have been more successful than we ever thought possible. This has only been possible through the incredible support of many people in particular the friends of NBR.

We have brought joy to many people. The phone calls from families here in Sydney or new arrivals are filled with laughter and happiness. It is difficult to express the joy they feel. Every group is so happy to have escaped. One of the sponsors told me after we had paid the airfare "I am so happy I just want to dance".

On behalf of all those we have helped a big thank you.

You should be very proud of your contribution

David Addington

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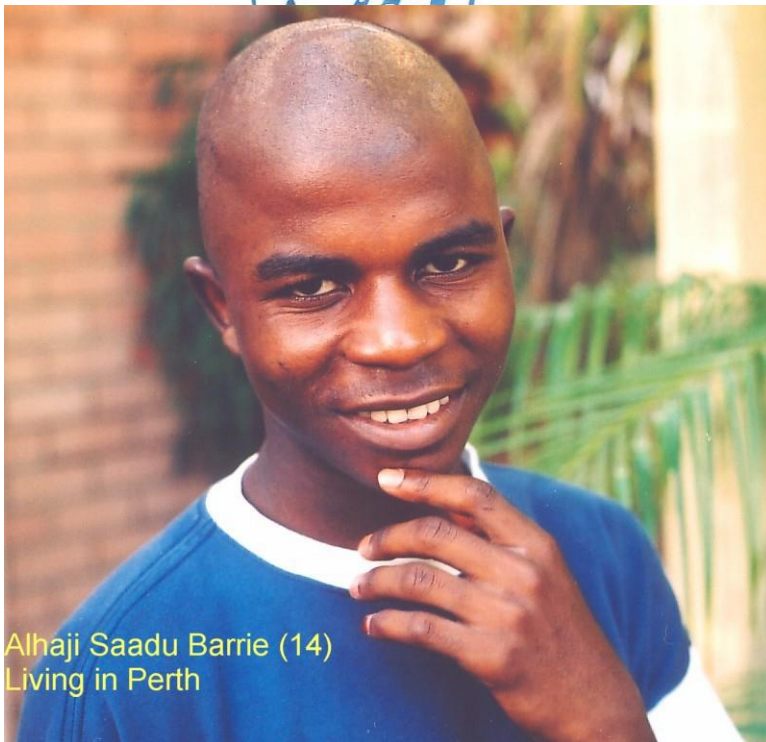
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