

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE GROUP

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

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Welcome to the midyear report of The Northern Beaches Refugee Sanctuary (NBRS), June 2005.

It has been another busy six months. We paid our 317th airfare this week. We have helped people to Perth, Darwin, Brisbane, Hobart, Wagga Wagga, Maitland, NSW Central Coast and Sydney. They have come from Sierra Leone, Sudan, SOMALIA, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

We have had wonderful support from many different groups and people.

On behalf of all those we have helped, both the newly arrived and their sponsors, thank you for your generous support. We are only able to help due to the support of our donors.

The process of getting a visa.

To get a Special Humanitarian Visa you need to have an Australian permanent resident sponsor you. These would normally be family members already in Australia. DIMIA evaluates the application to see if you qualify. This is a difficult process as in 2003\04 there were about 60,000 applications (up 50% in the last two years) for 7,000 positions. The number of applications is increasing as the newly arrived help those left behind. When you apply you get a file number; the first big step. Then if your application is to proceed the Refugees get an interview. DIMIA have officers who travel to the camps for interviews. They check your story and determine if it is true. If you pass this then you have a medical and character check.

Then a permanent visa is issued. The visas are normally valid for a year but some are only for a few months. You have to be in Australia before the visa expires. If it expires you need to go through the whole process again with no guarantee of success.

The sponsor has to pay the travel costs. If they are coming from West Africa it is about \$10,000 for a family of 5. This is a big hurdle for those who are in casual work as the availability of credit is normally restricted to those in permanent work or those with assets. It takes at least a year for a successful application.

All the people who get refugee visas leave family behind. These can be wives, husbands or children as well as brothers, sisters and parents.

If you are one of the lucky ones who has been granted a visa you will feel a strong obligation to help those left behind, not only to sponsor them but also to send them money. The refugee camps are not safe nor is there enough food or medicine.

I overheard a family member telling a new arrival as they hugged at the airport "You are rich now". It was almost the first thing he said to her. He said it like she had just achieved a great goal and they were both so happy at the news. Of course it is a great goal as the average duration of time spent in refugee camps has increased from 9 years in 1993 to 17 years in 2003. Over 7 million people have been in refugee camps for more than 10 years.

NBRS Financial Highlights. (Round figures)

We have raised \$270,000 through fundraising and donations.

We have made new loans of \$360,000 and had repayments of \$130,000.

We are now receiving repayments of about \$14,000 a month.

We have helped about 115 people from repayments.

We don't have any defaults. People sometimes miss payments or stop for a short time; we are as flexible as needed.

Loans are expected to be repaid within two years although we have some that will take longer due to the family circumstances.

Many families repay more quickly. They see their repayments as helping others in need. The dedication and fidelity of the families to repay the loans is very inspiring.

The only expenses we had for 2004/05 were for transaction fees on repayments via Centrepay. We are charged \$1.01 per payment and are not allowed to pass that cost on to the borrower. The total cost for the year was \$519. We received donations from members of the committee to cover this cost. We are still working on having them refunded from the Government. Mary Immaculate Parish Manly covered our postal and printing costs.

The committee members cover their own expenses.

ALL DONATIONS ARE USED TO PAY FOR TRAVEL COSTS.

The Forna Family Story

We fled from Sierra Leone to save our lives from persecution, harassment and intimidation from the current ruling government and its supporters. After the coup of May 25 1997, led by Major Jhony Paul Koroma, President Tejan Kabbah announced in Guinea Conakry while in exile that all those who stayed behind in Sierra Leone are rebel collaborators. Unfortunately for us by that time we had no money to flee the country. When the exile government of President Kabbah was restored to power in February 1998, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) government supporters embarked on a spate of revenge against those perceived as collaborators. This means, many of us who were not able to flee the country were put in this category. Our family members were attacked, beaten up and our properties looted and destroyed. We were constantly in hiding in Freetown and we realised that our lives were seriously in danger from ragtag SLPP kamajor militia's, and their party youths. As the situation continues to get out of hands, we decided to flee from Sierra Leone for the safety of our lives.

All of us had our own different experiences. Alpha had his, when he was a college activist in Freetown and was hated by fellow students who were very strong supporters of the SLPP. He sustained injuries to his head when he was attacked.

Abubakarr who was organising secretary of the Blackhall Road Youths Organisation was hated by the SLPP youths Chairman for his support for the former United National Peoples Party UNPP and he was attacked and labeled as an enemy of the SLPP government. He was beaten up mercilessly by Party youths and was marked with a knife on the side of his tummy.

Baby was organising secretary for the Women's organisation. She also sustained injuries on occasions of physical attacks on her. Her husband was killed by local government militias, the Kamajors, and she was able to escape by miracle to Guinea through the forest after traveling with her kids for several days.

This is the scenario of the Forna story from Sierra Leone. It happened that our brother Sulaiman had also fled the country in February 1999 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels invaded Freetown. All of us escaped from Sierra Leone in different times and arrived in the refugee camps in Guinea where we stayed for nearly three and a half years before we learnt that our brother had been granted political Asylum in Australia.

Our lives in Guinea were very terrible. The Guineans are very xenophobic in nature and they have a socialist tradition. We were constantly been harassed, intimidated and on many occasions beaten and even locked up in prison accused falsely of being rebel

collaborators, more so when there were several rebel cross Border raids by Sierra Leonean and Liberian rebels.

We got in contact with our brother in Australia through a friend who informed us that he had traveled there. He organised us to come to Conakry, capital of Guinea so that he can be able to support us and make an application for resettlement to Australia.

Submitted by Baby Alpha Abubakarr & Sulaiman.

NBRS helped them come in November 2004. We supported them, met them at the airport, one of our members put them up for the night in transit to Cairns. They have settled in Cairns and one of our NBRS supporters will visit with them in August 2005.

There was great joy when they recently had five more members of the family granted visas. We agreed to help with the airfare and they will arrive soon.

Reflection from Africa by Sylvia Winton

Outside I hear the noise from the roosters and the call to prayer from the mosques. It is 6am, still black outside and it is a candle that I light to shower and dress by. Soon there will be the smell of the morning cooking fires. From my three months of observations, Guinea is a harmonious mixture of faiths: the Muslims are obvious by their dress, mosques are busy; but the churches are packed, 'Gospel singing' is loud and services long.

Often I mentioned the wonderful work of Northern Beaches Refugee Sanctuary (NBRS) group, as I provided Australian Cultural Orientation (CO) to Liberian refugees bound for a new life in Australia. There were common questions: will I ever see my family again? How will they know where I am? My children are missing since we were attacked in Cote de Voire, Gueckedou or "When they are found, will they ever be able to join me?" "It will take a very long time, and it depends who your family members are, but if they are granted a visa through Department of Immigration, you will need the help of something like, NBRS" I would reply.

Before I left Australia, there were suggestions from well meaning people on what should be covered in CO: discipline of children; hygiene, cleanliness and safety in the home. They did not include the Australian Immigration concept of family or the difficulties of reuniting family.

My challenge to anyone who offers to assist people from a refugee camp situation in West Africa, many of whom have lived 3-14 years in Camps – take off your Australian lens: recall those films we've all seen of refugee camps in previous wars and imagine what would be foremost in our minds if we had to survive without income, health care and separated from our loved ones. Many health cards stated 'malnourished'. Not because the parent neglected or wanted it that way. The camps are closing; new ration cards are not being issued; children are born, but they are not added to an old card. Six or more people living in one room that adjoins your neighbour's room. No privacy, no space to calm down before you 'discipline', no deprivation you can threaten with – 'you cannot watch TV for the week' or 'you cannot go out with your friends on Friday' or 'no pocket money' or 'go to your room', my Aussie trusted and true techniques.

An overriding question was the concern of reuniting family. Refugees will have to struggle with DIMIA when they want a brother or sister to join them – even if they have lived together and cared for each other for many years in Camp. In Australia, an adult sibling is another independent adult, many not included in the refugee application. To members of NBRS group, congratulations on your work. Never forget how vital your role is in the refugee process. People torn apart in fleeing war, live wondering how, or if ever they will

see their families again. To assist them financially to reunite is such a practical step in the 'resettlement' that Australia offers.

Sylvia Winton worked in Guinea, West Africa, in a refugee camp some 1000KM East of the Capital Conakry. She was sent there as the Program Manager to run the "Australian Cultural Orientation" pre-embarkation course.

Sylvia spent four month working with some 900 refugees from Liberia, who are currently settling in Australia. These are her reflections of her time in Guinea.

How does NBRIS select those we help?

We work closely with the Sierra Leone community. There is a selection committee which looks at the applications. Children and single Women get preference. We have been able to help almost every Sierra Leonean who has applied.

NBRIS also has a close relationship with the Auburn Migrant Resource Centre, covering an area from Liverpool to Blacktown.

When we started NBRIS we were deeply concerned that some people were granted visas and unable to use them through lack of funds. We wanted to identify those most at risk of missing out. We have spoken to DIMIA and asked them to refer people to us whose visa is nearly expired. They have referred five families so far (They had less than a month left of the visas) and would expect this number to grow. It is estimated that 500 people were offered visas which won't be used last year. Some people may get a visa to another country or return to their homeland, some will die before they can travel here (We had another young person die between the visa been issued and when the family could pay for the fare. This is the second time this has happened to us.), the others will miss out through lack of funds. We would like to get to the point were everyone who is offered a visa is able to use it.

Future Directions

NBRIS is reviewing its structure in the future directions paper. Details will be on the website soon.

OUT OF AFRICA GALA DINNER

We are having a major fundraising night on October 15th. We would love to you to join us. Details on the website and enclosed with this newsletter. We will email you a flyer soon. Enquires or Booking Phone Del 9971-8401

I would like to say thank you to those who have helped us. You have brought tears of joy and laughter to many people. The families you help reunite have a chance to live in safety and love. The children have a life where than can expect to live to 79 not 34 as in Sierra Leone. Parents can watch with pride as their children going to school, TAFE and university.

So many people have helped us; School children with fundraising in their classes, Churches and families. We had a couple marry and ask that instead of presents could people send a donation to NBRIS. We have people who make donations each month. To each and every one who has helped a heartfelt thank-you. What you have done it truly good.

David Addington
Chairman