

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

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Welcome to the NBRs Christmas 2006 Newsletter

It has been another busy six months. We have just paid our 932nd airfare. We have assisted 474 people from Sierra Leone, 378 from Sudan, 15 from Somalia, 7 from Rwanda, 3 from Iraq, 1 from Ethiopia, 15 from Afghanistan, 32 from Liberia, 3 from Guinea, 1 from Zimbabwe and 3 from Ghana. We have helped people to each State and Territory. We expect to help close to 600 people this financial year, most of whom will be coming to NSW. This is about 25% of all Special Humanitarian Visas coming to NSW. We are very grateful to the donors as we are only able to help so many due to their generosity.

Miriam's family

A year ago Miriam approached us to see if we could help her family. They had run into some problems with their application. These problems were not of their making and it looked as though the family would be rejected. One of the applicants had died and there was a suggestion that they had tried to substitute someone in her place. This would be an automatic rejection. Corruption is endemic in Africa and it is important that every effort is made to ensure that the process is fair. We were able to get the Immigration Dept. to accept that they hadn't done anything wrong and they had in fact had wrong done to them. The application progressed and the visa was issued. Unfortunately the youngest child, a boy, had a girl's name. The application gave his sex as female; a clerical error that also cost them their visa. His mother died shortly after giving birth and knowing that she was going to die asked that he be called Aminata after her. Sierra Leonean's often mix the gender pronouns; men are often called "her" and women "him". The Immigration Dept. accepted the explanations and the process continued. There were also medical issues and again it looked pretty bleak but once again we were able to convince DIMA to let them progress. The medical clearance is only for six months and by the time the visa was issued there wasn't much time left to get them here. IOM did a great job again and we enjoyed a reunion of real joy when the family arrived.

Miriam was very stressed before the family arrived. The process of granting visas is not easy. She feels a very strong obligation to bring her family. She was supporting them in the camps before they were allowed to come. The granting of the visa makes an incredible difference to them all. Her mother will look after Miriam's children so she can work. Two incomes will dramatically improve the family's finances. She won't need to send the money to the camps each week and those who have just arrived will be safe. Miriam's aunt who she brought has a son in Australia and he was at the airport to meet her. It also lifts a burden off his shoulders. So many of the families we help talk about the burden that is lifted off their shoulders when their family arrives. Miriam told me that she has been going to the same corner shop for a long time. Last

week the shopkeeper asked her what had happened as it was the first time he had seen her smile. She hasn't stopped since!!!

It is impossible for us to understand the pressures the refugees in Australia face. They all have family in dangerous places. They can apply for visas but there 70,000 plus applications for 7,000 positions. You would think that their problems are over when they get here but if your wife, husband or children are left behind it really weighs heavily on you. It is very hard to settle while your family is in danger.

Airport meetings.

Most of the families we assist are reuniting close family members. We try and meet each family at the airport. We give everyone a "Wrap with Love". They are a colourful blanket made up of 28 10X10 cms squares. These wraps are knitted by people all over Australia. We give them out with love.

I met a young man at the airport last month who we helped come a year ago. He is a very happy bouncy young man. I had the wraps with me and asked him if he still had his. He stood very tall and with great dignity told me that it was an heirloom that he would keep all his life. He told me that he would give it to his children. We are very grateful to Sonia Gidley-King, her team and the people who knit the wraps.

Family reunions

We were approached by a Sudanese man who needed help to bring his wife and four children. They had been separated by war and had been apart for 13 years, seven of which he thought they were dead. He had been searching for them and had heard that they had made it to Egypt. He borrowed the airfare and went looking for them. He had a visa but when he got to Cairo the Egyptians wouldn't recognize it and so he couldn't leave the airport. He returned to Australia without the family. He traced them and sponsored them and then approached us for a loan. It was a very happy, very moving reunion. The sponsor is a builder and tailor. He is rebuilding his life with the family. It is amazing how little anger he has. He looks at the future they have together not the years that they have lost.

In the last week we met Junisa's family. We helped Junisa come to Australia two years ago. He came with his aunt and grandmother but had to leave his wife and son behind as the sponsor couldn't afford the extra airfares. Junisa was expected to sponsor them after he arrived. It took two years to get them here. He hadn't seen his son since he was 8 months old. Waiting at the airport he was teased by his friends that he was about to go on honeymoon! He was literally dancing for joy while we waited. He was just laughing and smiling. It was very special. The reunion was what our group is all about. Giving a hand to those who need it and reuniting families.

Sometimes the airport meetings are bitter sweet. We were at the airport on October 6th to meet the orphan nieces of our first NBRs arrival. Fatmata had applied to bring three girls from Sierra Leone whom she had mothered from an early age after their parents were killed. Sadly one niece died the day before she was due to go for the medical which is the last step before a visa is issued. Although the reunion was a happy one for us, Auntie Fatmata had tears in her eyes. So too did Hawa when she brought her two daughters to Australia using an NBRs loan. She was disturbingly subdued as she met them after an 8 year separation. Her tears reflected the years they had lost.

Sierra Leone Athletes.

All 14 of the Sierra Leone athletes were granted permanent protection visas. This allows them to work, study and also sponsor close family members. Eleven are living in the Manly area. The youngest is at school and doing very well. The rest are all working. One starts an apprenticeship next year and another two are trying to find apprenticeships. They are adjusting to the Australian way of life. There is much to learn and adapt to but they are doing well. They are starting to sponsor their family members which is a slow and difficult process. Hopefully they will be successful.

Sierra Leone Journalists

We lodged the application forms for the eleven Sierra Leone journalists but sadly we had eight rejections. We were pretty disappointed as we felt their stories were very strong. The other three are through to the next stage. We are very happy for them and are optimistic that they will be successful. We would expect the process to take about a year. We will reapply for the eight who were unsuccessful. It is a traumatic and stressful process. The forms are long and detailed. There is a lot riding on the result so you want to do a good job. Clearly the person's history plays a big part in the process, but it is difficult to capture their story in a meaningful way. If it is difficult for a person educated in English imagine how difficult it must be for those who don't speak or write English well.

We have been working with a group of Sierra Leone Journalists in this process. They have made a documentary called "Darkness over Paradise" about the war in Sierra Leone. We showed it in Manly on November 12th. It is a very powerful documentary. It was not the violence that scared me so much as the fear of the people. Fear was used by both sides to manipulate people and so seek power. Logic and intelligence disappear and mob rule wins. It is a documentary that deserves a wider audience.

The documentary has much to teach us. There was a \$500 profit on the night which the journalists were donating to an orphanage they support in Sierra Leone.

Cultural Issues

There are many funny stories about cultural clashes. One lady from Sierra Leone told us that when she came to Australia she had to transit in Sydney. She didn't understand why they had to wait in a room when the others on the flight were freed. She was traveling with her children and there was another lady from a different country with her. The two of them became very frightened. They finally flew to their new home to be met at the airport by a support group. One of the men had a very long beard. (A sign of the Juju or magic man). He came forward to shake her hand. She was terrified and refused to shake hands! He then took her to her new house. He had the key of course and opened the door. When the welcoming party left she was in a panic. She locked the doors and windows. The Juju man had the key and would probably come back at night to eat them! She got all the knives from the kitchen and kept the children up all night so they could defend themselves.

Tears of laughter roll down her face as she recounts the story. The "Juju" man has become a wonderful friend.

Advocacy

We are assisting more people with applications for visas. We have a lawyer who provides pro bono advice. We also have a law firm that has offered us access to their pro bono department which we hope to take advantage of soon.

We have made a number of submissions to DIMA on improving the program. Australia's Humanitarian program is world class. Those who are granted visas are treated very well. Once people arrive there are a number of Government services that make the settlement easier. Much of our work is referral to services that are available. However we would love to see an increase in the number of visas issued. This is where you can help. Below are the numbers of migrants accepted by Australia in 1996 and 2006. As you can see there has been a huge increase in the migration program mainly in skilled migration. There has only been a small increase in the Humanitarian program.

Unemployment is at a 30 year low and we have an aging population. There has never been a better time to increase the humanitarian quota.

	1996	2006	Increase (Numbers)	Increase (%)
Migration Program	75,000 (approx)	144,000	69,000	92%
Humanitarian Program	12,000	13,000	1,000	8%

What can you do?

Write to your local Federal Member of Parliament and tell them that you think we should have a 50% increase in the Humanitarian program. Ask your friends to write a letter.

The Government is sympathetic to increased migration to ease the labour shortage. Your letter may be the one that convinces your member to take up the issue. Letters don't need to be long or complex. You just need to say that it is an issue that is important to you. Letters do need to be polite otherwise they are ignored.

We will assist about 600 people in the next year. If the allocation for refugees is increased by 50% that would help an additional 7,000 people. An increase in the numbers by the Government will make a huge impact on the refugees who are looking to help their families.

Christmas reminds us that Jesus and his family were refugees shortly after his birth. We celebrate it as a family time with lots of gifts. How about giving someone an Associate Membership? It costs \$50 annually. Your gift can help someone start a new life.

I hope you have a happy and peaceful Christmas.

David Addington

Chairman

1/12/06

P.S. If you received this by mail and have an email address please send it to me, at the above address as it is easier and cheaper to send the newsletter electronically.