



Giving hope to refugees

PHOTOS: JRS SINGAPORE

FLEEING drought, hunger and civil war in Somalia, Amina experienced further horrifying distress. Travelling to Nairobi, Kenya with about 20 fellow refugees, she and her teenage daughter were forced to serve the rest of the group sexually.

Amina (not her real name) and thousands of other refugees forced to leave their homes every year are the reason why the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) exists. It is an international Catholic organisation that is part of the Society of Jesus. JRS Singapore is also an affiliate of Caritas Singapore.

This year, for example, the hunger crisis affecting the Horn of Africa has led to asylum seekers being raped, or left to grieve for children, parents or other relatives who died along the way.

Somalia, in East Africa, is the worst hit nation. Famine has been declared in some parts of the country, and some 12 million people need humanitarian assistance.

Amina and her teenage daughter are being counselled by JRS staff and others.

Mercy Muchai, an aid worker with JRS Eastern Africa, said the aim is to "help the refugees accept what has happened to them so that they can move on in their new environment, otherwise they might get 'stuck' or become clinically depressed or suffer from mental problems".

JRS provides counselling and psychosocial care to help refugees overcome the traumas they have lived through. It does so in the spirit of the Church's social teaching, which calls on Catholics to care for the poor – including

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Catholics are called to express solidarity with others, especially those most in need, by regarding other people and nations as neighbours. The principle of solidarity teaches us that regardless of race, language, religion, nationality or economic status, we are responsible for one another, and should commit ourselves to work for the common good.

For a sense of the scale of human tragedy afflicting East Africa today, take a look at these figures. More than two million refugees have left their homes in Somalia alone. In search of food and safety, some have fled to Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, while others have travelled to refugee camps outside Somalia's borders, or to urban centres in neighbouring countries.

JRS Eastern Africa provides emergency aid – including shelter, blankets, food and utensils – to urban refugees in the capital cities of Nairobi in Kenya, Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, and Kampala in Uganda. JRS has also launched an education project in the refugee camps in Dollo Ado, south-eastern Ethiopia.

Ms Muchai said: "With the famine, the food prices went up. To make sure that we were able to continue providing food in the right quantities and quality, we cut back on the non-food items (such as) spoons and plastic cups and plates."

Mercy Muchai (2nd from right) with members of JRS Singapore at the Church of Christ the King in November.

She was in Singapore recently for a fundraising and advocacy project for refugees in the Horn of Africa. Organised by JRS Singapore, "HOPE for the Horn of Africa" comprised a series of talks and exhibitions at the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Church of Christ the King in November 2011. When it was held at the Church of St Ignatius in December 2011, the fundraiser included a handicrafts sale by members of the parish's Japanese community.

Asked how her work with refugees has helped her Catholic faith, Ms Muchai said: "It always amazes me. They tell you all these things they have gone through (yet) their faith is still very strong. According to them, they know it's just God they're depending on."

That applies not only to refugees who are Christian, but also to Somali refugees who are Muslim, she added.

She has also discerned a spiritual dimension to her humanitarian work, as she has realised that "nobody, or even any organisation, can provide all that is needed: God is really what is needed for the refugees to accept their losses and to have hope. We are all limited, we do the best that we can."

Ms Muchai's work, and that of many others who work with poor and marginalised people around the world, brings them face-to-face with human suffering.

Renowned Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen has reflected on the often "hidden quality of suffering".

In a collection of essays entitled "The Road to Peace", he wrote about the fulfilment he found caring for Adam, a severely handicapped man, while they were living in a community in Canada.

The late writer described how "our temptation is to look at suffering as big, spectacular, noisy and very imposing, the suffering that impatiently screams out: 'What are you doing about it?' But in the centre of all

the hunger, homelessness, violence, torture, war and the nuclear threat, there is a hidden anguish, a silent agony, an invisible loneliness. That nobody wants to touch. Jesus touched it, lived it, and carried it into the grave where he lifted it up to new life."

The hope and resurrection that Jesus brings is enacted in countless lives daily. For JRS, one way to bring hope to refugees is to provide them with education.

Ms Muchai said education, in refugee camps and other emergency situations, "provides a normalising environment for children. It gives hope to the children and their parents. It gives them a skill in another country if they resettle, or when they go back to their own country".

She cited as an example some former refugees of South Sudan, which became an independent country in July 2011. While some chose to stay in the refugee camps they had grown old in, after fleeing a civil war that lasted 22 years and only ended in 2005, others returned to the world's newest nation.

Ms Muchai said it felt good to learn that some former refugees, who had been educated by JRS, are now working in government and non-governmental organisations in South Sudan, helping to rebuild lives in their country.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

The number of people forcibly displaced worldwide – including internally displaced persons and refugees – has reached 43.7 million, the highest number in 15 years, according to the latest statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

There are about 138,000 refugees from Somalia now residing in the refugee camps at Dollo Ado, south-eastern Ethiopia. JRS is planning to build two primary schools at these camps to serve about 3,000 children. JRS is also providing emergency assistance to at least 5,000 undocumented urban refugees in Nairobi, Addis Ababa and Kampala, who do not qualify for government or United Nations assistance.

Prayer and financial aid are some of the ways to help the refugees who are suffering right now. Email hopeafrica@jrssingapore.org, or visit www.jrssingapore.org to find out more.

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– Mercy Muchai, an aid worker with JRS Eastern Africa who was in Singapore recently.

