IRAQ
WHAT LIES AHEAD?

AFGHANISTAN
FR PREM HAS BEEN RELEASED
**IN THIS ISSUE**

**EDITORIAL**
We are overjoyed by Fr Prem’s release .................................................. 3

**ITALY**
I was a stranger and you invited me in .................................................. 4

**MALAWI**
Telling a tree by its fruit ........................................................................ 6

**FOCUS ON THE MIDDLE EAST**

**NORTHERN IRAQ**
Where does the future lie? .................................................................. 9

**APPEAL**
You can help the JRS team in Iraq ......................................................... 12

**SYRIA**
Let’s not celebrate a 5th anniversary of the conflict ......................... 13

**SOUTH AFRICA**
 Xenophobia: a crime against South Africa ........................................... 14

**FRANCE**
Inside the border .................................................................................. 16

**DRC | REFLECTION**
Traces of resurrection ....................................................................... 19

**SOUTH AFRICA | BACK PAGE**
Refuge .................................................................................................. 20

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**COVER PHOTO**
Hanaa and her baby daughter, Maryam, who was born on 14 December 2014 in a refugee camp on the parish premises of Mar Eliya in Erbil, northern Iraq. (Peter Balleis SJ/JRS)

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**SERVIR**
Servir is available free in English, Spanish, French and Italian. It is published twice a year by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS).

**JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE**
The Jesuit Refugee Service is an international Catholic organisation established in 1980 by Pedro Arrupe SJ. Its mission is to accompany, serve and defend the cause of forcibly displaced people.

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**EDITORIAL**

We are overjoyed by Fr Prem’s release

On 21 February, Fr Alexis Prem Kumar SJ (pictured above with his family), the JRS Afghanistan director who had been kidnapped while visiting a local JRS-sponsored school, was finally released after eight months and 20 days of captivity. His return to his family, to his fellow Jesuits and to JRS has given immense joy to all of us, as well as to many friends from across the world, who prayed for him day after day.

Since his release Fr Prem has often expressed deep gratitude for all who kept him in mind and in prayer during those difficult, dark months when he was kept in shackles under the watch of armed guards. He told me that two things kept him hoping throughout that time: daily prayer and a trust that JRS would do everything possible to achieve his release.

While Fr Prem’s strong hope kept him optimistic, the JRS team in Afghanistan worked tirelessly for his release, corresponding daily with crisis management team members in Rome and Delhi. We came to understand more intensely the harsh reality of refugees who regularly confront hostility, hatred and violence and who find themselves living in camps for years. Fr Prem’s experience taught us to grow in confidence in the efforts of our Afghan colleagues or the Indian government to get through to the captors and achieve his release. We express our deepest gratitude to the Indian government for their successful efforts in doing so.

The environment in which we work nowadays has become increasingly hostile. The simple reality is that JRS, like other humanitarian organisations, needs to cultivate a greater consciousness of security risks and implement local security procedures in each of its regions. While monitoring the movement of hostile extremist groups in many areas where it works, JRS will continue to focus on the needs of the refugees. JRS did not stop or reduce its services in Afghanistan during the period of uncertainty and agony for Fr Prem. In the end, the love expressed in our service prevailed and showed itself to be stronger than any evil.

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**Peter Balleis SJ | JRS International director**

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When Pope Francis urged religious congregations to open their empty convents to welcome refugees in September 2013, Mark* never heard about it. Even if he had heard the news, chances are it wouldn’t have grabbed his attention for long. At the time, the 27-year-old was busy getting his life in Nairobi. Things were looking good: Mark was running a research firm with friends, he had just been accepted on with his life in Kenya’s parliament, as a clerk, and was all set to graduate with a Masters in International Studies.

Barely six weeks later, the unthinkable happened. A politically motivated attack forced Mark, his mother and sister to flee Kenya. The family came to seek asylum in Rome, where a community of the Capuchins, a men’s religious order, opened their doors to them. Their hospitality is an answer to Mark’s prayer in more ways than one.

When I ask him to tell me about his new home, Mark replies with another question: “Is it enough to offer us refugees a place to sleep and dinner?” His manner is not confrontational. Mark is nothing if not respectful and soft-spoken, a gentle giant. He answers his own question: “What we need most is love and compassion to restore the dignity that has been taken away from us. We need to know all is not lost, to heal our wounds and rebuild our lives, and hopefully heal others who are wounded too.”

Mark found compassion in the community that welcomed him. As well as a home, they gave him the pastoral support he badly needed to feel whole again. “For the first few months the situation really took its toll. I became bitter and almost lost hope. Thanks to the counselling I received, now at least I can talk about what happened.”

What happened is that hired thugs burst into Mark’s home in Kenya one evening and took him hostage, leaving his 20-year-old cousin dead and landing a close friend in hospital with serious injuries. “They came after my mother, because of her work,” recalls Mark. “We survived by the grace of God. They took me and told my cousin to go back to sleep. As soon as he turned, they hit him in the neck and killed him.”

The rest of the family survived because neighbours switched on their burglar alarms and alerted the police. Mark’s mother didn’t wait around. Together with her children, she left the country. Mark still bears the scars of that attack. “I have a mark here, on my skull, and on my arm. But the emotional wounds are the ones that stay with you; the final seconds I spent with my cousin are always with me. Every day I think: what if I had resisted? What if I had done this or that? But now I also accept that to live means to honour his sacrifice.”

Like so many other refugees, Mark finds that his Christian faith sustains him deeply as he seeks to come to terms with his ordeal: “Our faith in God is what keeps us going, even as it is constantly tested by the many challenges we face, and as we seek answers about the pain we have gone through.”

Mark, his mother and sister feel like part of a family at the Capuchins now. But acceptance was not automatic. Mark knows something about the initial awkwardness and misgivings that welcoming the stranger can entail. “It’s not an easy decision to take someone into your home, to let them into your ‘private space’. But it is possible: in these months, I have seen attitudes change from suspicion to affection and love. I now feel part of the community.”

Others support the Kenyan family too. Mark is overwhelming with praise for JRS Centro Astalli, especially for his lawyer. “I wouldn’t have been able to manoeuvre the legal system without Francesca’s help. She really pushed our case and we were granted refugee status.”

Francesca also introduced Mark, his mother and sister to a parish group of 20 families. “They invited us to their church to tell our story and we became friends. They are so good to us. Sometimes we attend their meetings. We spent Christmas Eve with one family. It’s like I was saying before: this is what refugees need, to feel welcome, not to be seen as a bother.”

Untold obstacles still face Mark’s family. To name just one, he knows that getting a job is very difficult. But he is upbeat and grateful for so many “guardian angels”. His last word: “If all refugees could get such a welcome, it would be so good. But they don’t. Many are worse off and even sleeping on the streets… my heart goes out to them. This love, this support to start afresh that we have received, is what all refugees deserve.”

*Not his real name

**Dear men and women religious... Empty convents are not ours; they are for the flesh of Christ: refugees. The Lord calls us to be generous and courageous in welcoming people into empty convents. Of course this is no simple task; discernment and responsibility are required; but courage is also needed.**
**Telling a tree by its fruit**

The son of Peter* was killed when a vehicle negotiating a tricky narrow corner in Malawi’s Dzaleka camp ran him over. An elderly refugee, Peter had already suffered enough grief in his life. He cried bitterly when he remembered his son during a support group meeting. Weeks later, as he drew his ‘tree of life’, Peter mused: “You know, the unripe fruit falls from the tree to the ground. But other fruit will grow in its place, because the tree has seasons.”

This revelation came to Peter after many weeks of attending the support group organised by JRS for elderly refugees. Guided by counsellors, the refugees went on a journey of healing together, starting with tentative steps to share their life experiences. After navigating a personal path littered in places with painful memories and broken dreams, the participants found that by the end of the program, they could think about past and present in a new and somewhat liberating way. They have come to feel that they matter, and they have forged friendships, caring for one another in the social space that the program continues to organise.

The opportunity to share is arguably one of the most powerful benefits of the program. An older woman herself, Protasia Gathendoh started the project after realising that elderly refugees were absent from the JRS psychosocial activities on offer in Dzaleka. When she sounded out the possibility of doing something, Protasia discovered that isolation weighed heavily on many refugees aged 60 years and over.

The worst off, she says, are those who are by themselves. Their spouses are dead or gone. Their children are not around; perhaps they live elsewhere, perhaps they’ve been killed. Back in their village, another family might have adopted them, but in the camp the elderly who end up alone stay alone.

When they agree to join the support group, everything starts with trust. ”Creating a safe space means a space where the participants can trust one another when talking about what life means for them, about what each has gone through in their own country and in a refugee situation of more than 10, 15 years,” says Protasia.

“Remembering and mourning the losses in refugee life is like peeling onions: when you peel the first layers of skin, there is no problem, but when you peel layers closer to the centre, the smell makes your eyes smart. As they deal with each memory that comes up, the refugees experience the depth of their pain, which they have kept quiet about for so long.”

Protasia recalls how one woman blurted out: “You make me remember these things all over again!” Protasia countered: “How then do you remember them now?” The reply: “Well, the pain is there but I can also recognise the connection this memory has with my life. It is loss of property, and loss of job, security, statehood, I can still see myself as a refugee, and it hurts to know I have no durable solution. But it is a consolation to know I am still alive and have survived.”

Protasia beams as she recounts this. ”Then we say yes you are a survivor, let us look at your resiliency. And people begin to tell what they did to survive, what helped.”

The journey into the past is far from easy. Tears, tiredness and feelings of guilt take their toll. ”There can be areas where a survivor feels guilty not to have done what he could to protect his loved ones, or feels ashamed for not fighting back. We say that what they did to survive was very important, that they should not carry a burden that they could have done something better.”

The ‘tree of life’ is an exercise that brings everything together. Each person is encouraged to draw their story as a tree: the roots are our ancestors, the trunk is our experience, the branches our relationships, and the leaves things we do well. The fruits could be ripe, that is what we have achieved, and unripe, our broken dreams.

The focus on strengths and how they can be used in the present is crucial. ”We encourage them to think about what resiliency means,” says Protasia. ”It means doing what I have to do, one day at a time. So we look at another tool, the 24-hour exercise, asking: what do I do with each hour of my day? What is amazing is the way they look at life in the camp with a different understanding: that what they do from when they wake up to when they sleep is important. They can learn new skills, support one another and not feel excluded. And for older people this is so important: that whatever they do matters, it has value and meaning.”

And for eight support groups attended the 10-week program over two years, there is now a ”totally open social space” for those who want. There is more to meeting than card games, music...
and a cup of tea. “The overall benefit of the program is the way they care for one another,” says Protasia. “Take the example of Joseph* who is in his seventies and lives alone. “If you stay alone for a long time, people start asking, why don’t you have friends? Joseph needed more and more alcohol to deal with his isolation. He said, no one wants to talk to me except when we drink together, otherwise I am alone again. We talked to the others and encouraged Joseph to take an interest in joint activities, to go with another man to his vegetable patch. Joseph has done so and, although he continues to drink, he has started to connect with others and this has made a difference.”

Then there was Unita* who was missing out on activities because she had a swollen leg. “We asked if someone could call for her on the way so the women started pairing up in twos and threes,” recalls Protasia. “From there, they decided to start pooling money to buy produce from a weekly open market to resell in the camp. They had long wanted to organize a small business like this and it finally happened.”

The progress is painstaking but real. The counsellors make it clear that the present hardships and scars of past trauma will remain but there are ways of accepting them, of learning to live and grow with them, especially in community. In the support group, they tell the story of a palm tree to make this point. I’ll skip that but all this talk of trees makes me remember something Jesus said: you can tell a tree by its fruits...

INFO POINT
Dzaleka refugee camp is 45km north-east of the Malawian capital Lilongwe. It is an open camp but refugees need written permission to leave for any reason. JRS mainly provides schooling and other learning opportunities for the refugees, especially children and young people whose education has been interrupted, delayed or even denied. The main need expressed by the refugees is for work so they can earn money to buy those necessities either not provided by UNHCR or only infrequently so: sufficient food, clothes and cooking materials, medical care as well as adequate roofing for their shelters.

*Not their real names

Where does the future lie?
Judith Behnen, Jesuit Mission Office, Germany

Kamala is crying. “We have lost everything,” says the 45-year-old woman, “we had a house in Mosul, an income, and we invested so much in our daughter’s education. All for nothing... everything is gone, even our identity. This is worse than death. What kind of future do we have here?” Kamala points at the container she now calls home. She has tried to make it comfortable. There is a carpet, a clock, boxes with clothes and groceries covered by blankets, and mattresses neatly stacked against the wall to create some space.

CONTAINERS IN THE CHURCHYARD
Kamala’s is one of 80 displaced families living in the churchyard of Mangesh, a small village in northern Iraq. Since last summer more than 700,000 Iraqis have fled to the autonomous region of Kurdistan to escape the notorious Islamic State (ISIS). Muslims and Christians came from Mosul and the mainly Christian town of Karakosh and thereabouts, while the Yazidis came from villages in the Sinjar Mountains. With the help of the local parish and financial support from international organisations, the first temporary tents in the churchyard have given way to more stable and insulated containers. The refugees are thankful for such hospitality but, after six months of waiting, they are getting restless and anxious about the future.

MILITARY CHECKPOINTS
Mangesh is located a mere 100km away from Mosul. But since ISIS conquered Iraq’s second city, the refugees are not thinking of going back any time soon, despite recently declared US and Iraqi plans to retake Mosul. Kurdish Peshmerga fighters are beating back ISIS and have already brought three main roads leading to Mosul under control. Military checkpoints are everywhere on the roads to prevent spies and fighters of ISIS from invading Kurdish territory. “Suddenly it is an advantage to be a Christian; that’s something new in Iraq,” says Sarah Mikha with a smile. “As Christians we are not suspected of supporting ISIS so we can pass without problems.”
FROM SYRIA BACK TO IRAQ

Sarah coordinates the JRS projects in northern Iraq. She grew up in Baghdad and studied Informatics and Psychology there. “In 2006 an Islamic terrorist group abducted my brother and threatened our whole family,” she recalls. “We paid the ransom and fled.” Her mother now lives in Canada, her sister in the USA and her brother in Sweden. Sarah went to Syria. “It wasn’t easy to start a new life in Damascus. In the beginning I worked as a cleaner at a computer company and one evening I got into a conversation with the boss. He was astonished when I was able to help him with a computer problem. Through him I met the Jesus in Damascus and I started to help them to set up aid projects for Iraqi and later Syrian refugees. It has always been my dream to go back to Iraq to do something for the people there.”

AN ENTHUSIASTIC JRS TEAM
In October 2014 Sarah moved back to Iraq to coordinate the JRS projects in the Kurdish provincial capital, Erbil. The local Christian communities in the city have accommodated the refugees with warmth and efficiency and things are very well organised. A JRS team of 20 has started work in four locations in and around Erbil, going on family visits and conducting psychosocial and educational programs. Almost everyone in the team is displaced. Many come from Karakosh or Mosul, others, like Sarah, spent years in Syria before fleeing the civil war there to return home, where life remains equally unsafe. Most are young and well-educated people who are doing their work with empathy and vigour. Abeer used to be a teacher in Erbil.

GIVING BIRTH IN A HELICOPTER
Our journey continues to Feshkhabour, a village directly on the Iraqi-Syrian border. The river Tigris separates the two countries. Yazidi families have sought refuge in the ruins of an abandoned farm and some more tents have been erected. The wind howls across the bleak landscape and a thin layer of snow covers the hills. Small kerosene heaters are the only source of warmth and plastic tarpaulin barely seals the draughty buildings.

Noura, one of the Yazidi women, invites us to her makeshift home. “This used to be a stable,” she says. “Animals stayed here, not people.” In one corner, a young woman lifts a tiny and malnourished baby gently from a cradle. “He is my first child,” Hadiya says. “We escaped ISIS by fleeing to the Sinjar Mountains and had nothing left to eat. A helicopter came to rescue us and he was born in it. We called him Behvar. In our language that means: without a home.”

OCCUPATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN KURDISTAN
Most of the refugees speak Arabic, not Kurdish. This is why it is not so straightforward for refugee children to go to local schools and why it is difficult for their parents to find a job. The JRS education programs are tackling this problem. “One of our most urgent tasks is to prepare children, through informal education and Kurdish and English classes, so that they will be able to attend regular local schools,” continues Fr. Balleis. “The same applies to the adults. Learning Kurdish is key to getting along and establishing a future here.”

OPPORTUNITIES IN KURDISTAN
Losing their home is unspeakably painful for all refugees. But at least there are opportunities in northern Iraq. “Compared to other places that host huge numbers of refugees, Kurdistan is a stable island in a tumultuous region. It is developing and its emerging economy offers employment opportunities,” says the JRS International director Peter Balleis SJ. “Many of the refugees are well educated and with solid work experience so local integration is possible if language barriers are overcome.”

FROM SYRIA BAC k TO IRAQ
Abouna Zakka (left) is an Orthodox priest from Marga village near Mosul. Sarab Mikha, who works for JRS, is moved to tears as she listens to his story. Abouna Zakka left Marga together with 80 families to escape from ISIS. Now they are living in containers set up in a churchyard in Mangesh village in the region of Dohuk, northern Iraq. (Peter Balleis SJ/JRS)

Abeer used to be a teacher in Erbil. She met Sarab with warmth and efficiency and things are very well organised. A JRS team of 20 has started work in four locations in and around Erbil, going on family visits and conducting psychosocial and educational programs. Almost everyone in the team is displaced. Many come from Karakosh or Mosul, others, like Sarah, spent years in Syria before fleeing the civil war there to return home, where life remains equally unsafe. Most are young and well-educated people who are doing their work with empathy and vigour. Abeer used to be a teacher in Karakosh. Now he visits displaced families in one of the container colonies in Erbil. Rupina is Armenian and had already worked with JRS in Syria. She met Sarah again by chance in Erbil. Mithal is an artist who had a pottery atelier in Mosul. All that remains of her artwork are a few pictures on her mobile phone. She shows them to us with a mixture of pride and grief. Nowadays she supervises the arts and crafts program for children and youth. Sr. Rajaa and Sr. Raed are two Little Sisters of Jesus who have joined the team; the community from Mosul found refuge with their sisters in Erbil.

DREAMING OF SAFETY
Afaaf does not see her future in Kurdistan. She fled from Karakosh and is now living with more than 400 other families in an unfinished shopping mall in Erbil. She wants to resettle to Germany with her family. One of her brothers has lived in Cologne for 12 years. He found a job and built a house. “It is safe in Germany. It is like heaven,” says Afaaf. It is very hard for people like Afaaf and Kamala to consider the opportunities close at hand instead of hoping for a distant paradise. They have seen hell in their own country and no longer believe that a peaceful future will be possible in Iraq. Only time can prove if they are right in their bleak assessment of what lies ahead.

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DEAR FRIENDS,

In recent months, it’s become all but impossible not to hear about the advances and atrocities of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled the onslaught of this terrorist group. In Kurdistan, northern Iraq, JRS is working side by side with the local Church to help the refugees. We want our newly established projects of education and psycho-social support to give them the consolation and hope they so badly need. Please help us to help them.

HERE’S WHAT YOU CAN DO:

1. **US$50/€45**
   - Pays for medical tests and medicines for one.

2. **US$300/€264**
   - Pays the rent of two or three families.

3. **US$500/€440**
   - Pays for skills training for one adult for three months.

4. **US$1000/€880**
   - Pays for the education of one child for one year.

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Account Number for US dollars: IBAN: US 00003410 SWIFT CODE/BIC: POSOTIT2

Thank you

Let’s not celebrate a fifth anniversary of the conflict

Elias Sadkni completed his Masters in Conflict, Security and Development at Sussex University in 2013 after which he returned to Syria. He lives in Aleppo where he is assistant country director for JRS Syria.

It’s complicated talking about Syria. Usually I try hard to avoid naming my feelings; maybe because I don’t really know how I feel about what is happening, or simply because I am afraid of facing the truth. The situation in Syria is too complicated to be described in one word: devastating, shocking, depressing. The only reality I see is that we are losing hope of getting over this deadly war and of resuming a normal life some day.

The most important need is the will to end this war. But until now it is missing and so nothing can be done. All other attempts to find any kind of incomplete solutions would be in vain. The war has become larger than Syria but at the same time the solution should start from inside Syria.

Civilians, and in particular Syrian civil society, have already played and continue to play a significant role. Although only recently emerged, civil society is performing its role mostly in a professional way. Nevertheless its impact is – to a large extent – confined to the social aspect of the conflict and has not been felt on the political or military tracks.

I believe in a possible positive role for the international community when – and only when – it is based on local perspectives and emerges from ground realities. International organisations can support initiatives proposed by Syrians to deal with the consequences and especially the causes of the war. However, the most significant role rests with governments to push for a solution to end the suffering and to give protection to refugees.

I want to put what I have learned into practice. When we started the JRS project in Aleppo, we were only eight people providing support to 25 needy families. Today this project has 200 staff and is reaching more than 10,000 families. So yes, I do believe that one person can make a difference, because inspiration and hope are transmissible to others.
Xenophobia: a crime against South Africa

David Holdcroft SJ, JRS Southern Africa regional director

Xenophobia is once again rearing its ugly head in our country. At least five people are dead, three of them South Africans, as a result of the violent lootings of foreign-owned shops in townships around Johannesburg. More than 80 shops have been destroyed.

Media sensationalism and denial amongst leadership and the police paint these attacks as acts of criminality and not xenophobia. This is hard to argue when only three of the 800 shops looted were owned by foreigners, and the rest were owned by South Africans. As a result of the attacks, people are killed, looted, dispossessed and terrorized with no sense of justice or accountability.

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Inside the border

Michel Croc, JRS France

Around midday, Reporters Without Borders alert us that they have no news about a Syrian journalist, who was due to arrive in Marseille. I call the police, who let me know the journalist is being kept in the waiting area of the airport; he has not crossed the border yet. I go to visit him and realise that he is due to be sent back in the evening and that he did not ask for asylum. The border police hadn’t told him he could do so… and he was waiting for Reporters Without Borders to turn up. I told him how to make a claim for asylum, which he did, and he was waiting for Reporters Without Borders to help him. According to law, the border police have plenty of discretion here. If they decide to refuse entry to someone and to re-embark him immediately, no one is there to observe, intervene, check or oppose their decision.

The journalist was one of many people who end up inside the border. If you glance at a border drawn on a map, you see a thin line traced between two countries. But if you take a closer look with a powerful magnifying glass, on a large-scale map, you’ll see there are actually people inside that line.

When someone enters France on route from another country that is not in the Schengen area, he is subject to inspection at the border and, for many reasons, may be prevented from crossing it. One possible reason is that perhaps he hasn’t quite understood that his documents – visa, return ticket, invitation letter – and travel allowance must be in complete and complementary order. More seriously, the traveller may have an invalid visa or a false passport, or even no papers at all. If in transit, perhaps the papers for his final destination are not in order.

Anyone in this predicament might end up in a waiting area at the border, if he cannot immediately be put back on the boat or the plane on which he arrived, or if he has asked for asylum. There is another scenario too: anyone who knows his rights may ask for a ‘clear day’. This is a 24-hour breathing space in which he may contact relatives and a lawyer.

The border police have plenty of discretion here. If they decide to refuse entry to someone and to re-embark him immediately, no one is there to observe, intervene, check or oppose their decision.

According to law, the border police may hold someone for four days, until a trip back is available or the initial asylum procedure is completed. Meanwhile the “non-admitted” may contact a lawyer and relatives and receive visits and help from humanitarian NGOs. To prolong detention beyond the first four days, the police need the authorisation of a judge.

What do visitors from humanitarian organisations do when they go to waiting areas at the border? I’d like to share a few examples from my personal experience. One is that of the Syrian journalist, noted above. Here my role was to give advice in what amounted to crisis intervention. Unfortunately, however, NGO visitors are not always around to do this.

In the waiting areas, airline companies supply the meals. For more than a week, I visit a young African man who is fed morning, midday and evening with a cold meal. Who can withstand such a regime? I ask him what he prefers; he speaks of rice with a sauce, chicken, fish or peanuts. I leave the police post and return with a container bought and reheated in the airport. I ask the head of the police if he is willing to give the food to the young man. He tells me that the young guard: “Take it, but pass it through the security channel.” This simple gesture of humanity has an unintended outcome: it impresses the young guard, who has been found to have some inconsistency in his travel documents. He is distraught, because he feels he is no longer valid. He finally calms down, and if his passport and visa are still valid. He finally calms down, because he feels he is no longer valid. He finally calms down, because he feels he is no longer valid. He finally calms down, because he feels he is no longer valid.

Another time, I visit a man who has just come from Algeria and who has been found to have some inconsistency in his travel documents. He is distressed, because he feels he has come to France to steal, and he is sure they will write “thief” on his passport. I tell him he has no way of preventing the police from putting him back on the plane that same afternoon, and I explain all the risks that a refusal to embark entail, making it clear that the choice is his. I also tell him he can return as soon as he has the necessary lodging and money and if his passport and visa are still valid. He finally calms down, because he feels he is no longer in a tunnel with no way out… even if the eventual outcome isn’t what he would have preferred. My elementary role here is to explain the situation, all the ins and outs,
If the Syrians refuse, then there is no other solution other than to send them back to Istanbul. The authorities don’t really wish to do this, all the more so since there is a witness… yours truly. We reach a deadlock, all the more so since there is no other solution other than to send them back to Istanbul. The authorities don’t really wish to do this, all the more so since there is a witness… yours truly.

Visitors to waiting areas are few, so they cannot help all those who go through this trying time, they cannot always monitor that their rights are respected. So what makes our actions effective when they are, all things considered, so limited? It is the well-known Christian belief that evil fears the light and that it flourishes with ease as long as it is assured of secrecy. Even if visitors are not always present, they can ask to go into the waiting area at any time without warning. And repeated observations eventually do make their way up to the higher echelons, and they do end up by bringing about substantial improvements, in those places where many suffer and few can be at their side to take action.

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**Traces of resurrection**

Felix Polten SJ, JRS DRC

Easter is the celebration of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Via Crucis, with its 14 stations, takes an intense look at suffering and death, and sometimes leads with a 15th station into resurrection. But traces of resurrection can be found even within the first 14 stations. Working and living with JRS in eastern Congo, passion and death on one hand and resurrection on the other are a daily experience. The first station portrays the condemnation of Jesus: all over the world, forcibly displaced people, an unbearable number of more than 50 million men, women and children, are condemned by evil forces and have no chance of fighting their sentence. They must escape, without really knowing where to go and when or if they will be able to return.

Stations three, seven and nine tell how Jesus falls three times under the cross. Célestin looks at the place where the small hut with his few belongings had stood. After five days in the forest, he returned to find the place burned down by one of the countless armed groups fighting here in North Kivu. It is the third time he and his family must start from the very beginning. Seven years ago they fled their village when it was attacked. Their desperate flight brought them to one of the many camps for internally displaced people in the region. But they didn’t stay for long: the camp was raided and again the family had to set off for an unknown destination. They lived more or less in peace in another camp, Muhanga, for six and a half years – just until last week.

The fifth station pictures Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus to carry the cross. Every time Zawadi carries the 20-litre can on her back, tied to her head with a piece of rag, the 11-year-old knows that the half-hour walk to and from the water place will take quite an effort. But she happily goes on this trip four times a week. Without it, her 77-year-old neighbour wouldn’t have any water. Igahas’ legs can no longer walk, and she lives alone in a little hut in the camp of Kalembe, where she arrived eight years ago.

Station six tells how Veronica wipes the faces of Jesus. Maombi is proud of her school uniform and that she can attend secondary school in Kashuga. She was absent for two years because her family could not afford school fees for all their children. Education gives Maombi hope for a better future beyond the camp.

People living in exile need more than daily moments of resurrection. They need a new life, a definite resurrection, not only in Kingdom come but already today in this world. This must happen for the heavenly Kingdom to become reality, for God’s plan for one human family to materialise, for life, love and peace to have the last word – just as it is at Easter.
GIVING REFUGEES SPACE TO SHARE SOUTH AFRICA

Refuge, a new JRS publication, gives a glimpse into the fragile and heroic lives of five refugees who were caught in the sweep of history and fled to South Africa. The individual stories ask how human beings survive extreme hardships such as dispossession, persecution, civil war, genocide, rape and imprisonment. These pieces also reveal specific problems facing refugees in South Africa: xenophobia and crimes against foreigners are themes that run throughout. Being ‘invisible’ is a survival mechanism for most refugees so we acknowledge the courage of those who participated in the project. The book is part of the JRS Southern Africa storytelling project, which gives voice to refugees and forcibly displaced persons in the urban space.

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