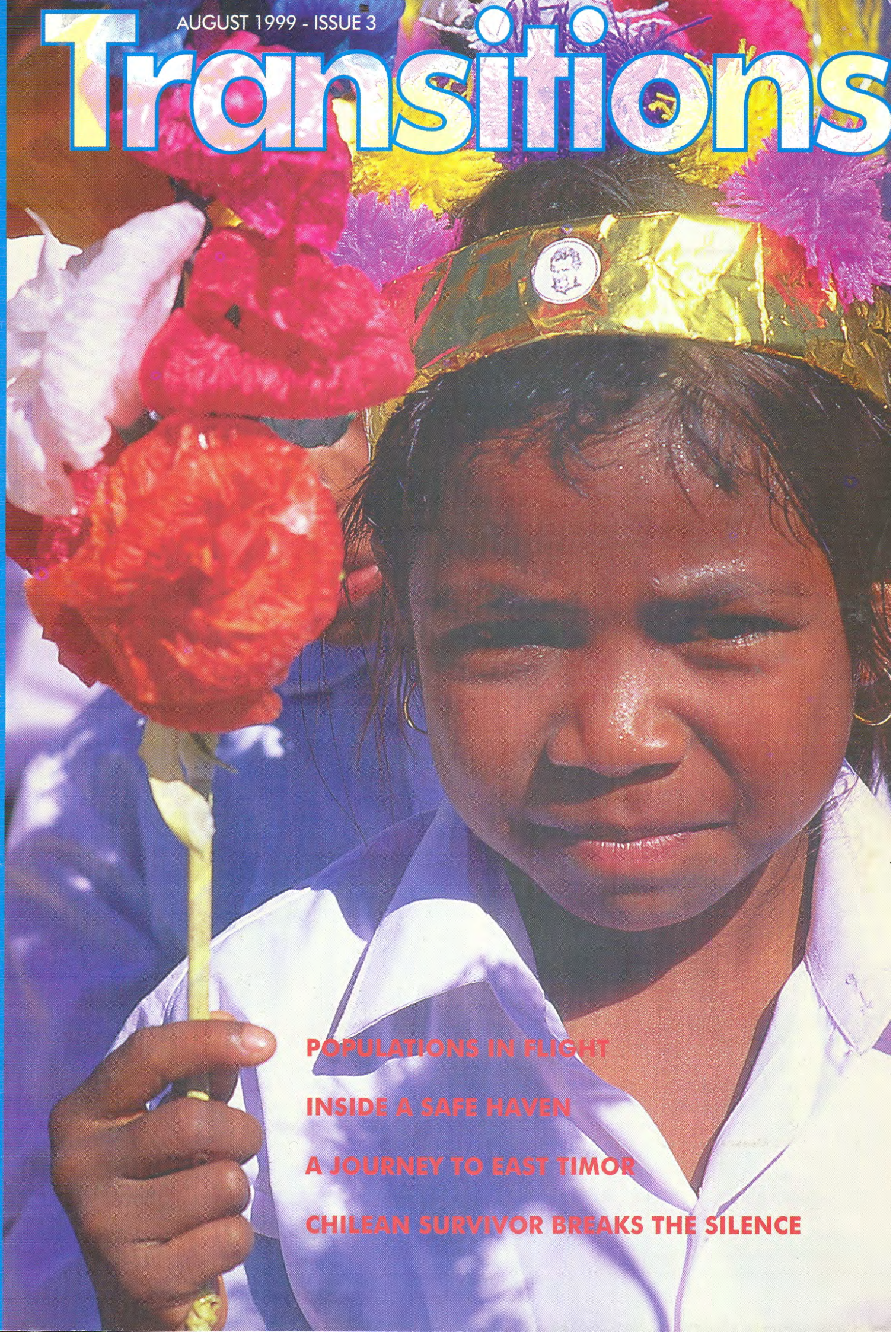


A publication of the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors

AUGUST 1999 - ISSUE 3

Transitions



POPULATIONS IN FLIGHT

INSIDE A SAFE HAVEN

A JOURNEY TO EAST TIMOR

CHILEAN SURVIVOR BREAKS THE SILENCE

Transitions

Transitions exists to report on a wide range of refugee and human rights issues of relevance to the work of STARTTS; to focus attention on the impact of organised violence and human rights abuses on health; to provide ideas on intervention models to address the health and social needs of refugees; to debate and campaign for changes necessary to assist, empower and strengthen refugee communities in their settlement process and ultimately bring together a vehicle for cultural and personal expression.

STARTTS was established in 1988 to provide a comprehensive, holistic service to refugee survivors of torture and trauma in New South Wales. It was the first service of its kind to be established in Australia.

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1999 August

- 3 **A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR**
By Jorge Aroche.
- 4 **POPULATIONS IN FLIGHT**
By Olga Yoldi.
- 8 **INSIDE A SAFE HAVEN**
By Helen Basili.
- 10 **THE MEDIA'S DEMONS**
By Svetlana Milojkovic.
- 13 **REVISITING A HARSH PLACE**
By Nooria Mehraby.
- 16 **NO RESPITE FOR REJECTED ASYLUM SEEKER**
By Helen Basili.
- 18 **A JOURNEY TO EAST TIMOR**
By Peter Williamson.
- 22 **CHILEAN SURVIVOR BREAKS THE SILENCE**
By Maria Pilar.
- 24 **RECLAIMING IDENTITY AFTER TORTURE**
By Julie Savage.
- 26 **POST NATAL DEPRESSION IN LATIN AMERICAN REFUGEES**
By Lucy Marin and Gabriela Salabert.
- 28 **POEM: AMARGURA EN TIERRA MULTIRACIAL**
By Ernesto Perez.



s t a r t t s

Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Jorge Aroche, Executive Director



Welcome to our third issue of *Transitions*. The response to our last issue has been extremely positive. It has certainly provided much needed encouragement to face the challenges of the last three months.

The biggest of these challenges has been *Operation Safe Haven*. STARTTS along with other agencies has provided services to 4000 Kosovar refugees since they arrived in Australia. Our first point of contact commenced at the Airport and continued at the East Hills Reception Centre. STARTTS has provided counselling services, group work, crisis intervention and prevention at both haven centres: East Hills and Singleton. It has also provided support to other agencies that assist the refugees.

Like most other agencies involved in *Operation Safe Haven*, STARTTS' resources have been stretched to the limit by this exercise. It has not been easy for a service of this size to provide an on going commitment of the intensity required to *Operation Safe Haven*. We have recruited full time teams of counsellors and other professionals who will provide services at both Havens. An induction and training program is under way. Although the involvement of more experienced staff will still be required to support the new teams, the pressure on our existing staff will decrease.

As we struggle to regain a semblance of normality following the initial impact of *Operation Safe Haven*, it is a good time to reflect on some of the longer term implications of this exercise and the challenges that still lay ahead.

On the one hand the sheer demands of putting in place the facilities and services required to assist 4000 people coming on a temporary basis, from an extremely traumatic situation, has placed enormous pressure on most humanitarian agencies involved in assisting them. In most cases, it has had

an inevitable impact on the normal services they provide. In STARTTS's case, placing our most experienced staff on *Operation Safe Haven* has resulted in a backlog in their normal work. Although we made provisions to replacing them, it requires time, training and resources, and poses many logistical and administrative challenges that also stretch our resources in these areas.

On the other hand, it has been a case where the end justifies the means. Undoubtedly the debate as to whether *Operation Safe Haven* has been the best way for Australia to respond to this international crisis will probably continue for some time, obscured as it is by the complexities of the situation. The fact remains however that 4,000 people affected by one of the worst conflicts of this decade were assisted in a way that has never been tried before in this country, and they have clearly benefited from this assistance. This was only made possible by the commitment, cooperation and enthusiasm displayed by just about everyone involved in *Operation Safe Haven*, both agencies and individuals.

There has never been so much attention placed on refugee issues as in the context of the Kosovo crisis and *Operation Safe Haven*. As an agency devoted to assist traumatized refugees, we believed that *Operation Safe Haven* has raised more awareness of "refugee" issues at various levels than anything else that has happened to date. For the large number of agencies involved, the gains in terms of increased awareness, skills and development of partnerships have been phenomenal, and possibly greater than any organized awareness raising exercise could have ever hoped to achieve.

At the public level, the overall results still remain inconclusive. Thanks to irresponsible media coverage of some events, the initial good will of the general population in some cases turned sour. In itself this was not unpredictable. Our experience indicates that a certain level of anger is to be expected from people who have sustained enormous losses. This anger can sometimes be displayed in unhelpful ways. On the other hand, for a public expecting gratitude, anything short of this is easily interpreted as ungratefulness or worse. Hence the aggrieved "saviour" becomes the angry victim-persecutor we heard about in many

talk back shows. The ungrateful victim becomes in their eyes the persecutor and so on. The Victim-Saviour-Persecutor triangle is not an uncommon pattern in the dynamics of trauma and its wake.

Operation Safe Haven while no longer the focus of the public attention, is far from over. Nor is the suffering of Kosovars, both in the Balkans and abroad. Once the excitement of the end of the armed phase of the conflict is over, some of the most difficult issues will surface both for Kosovars here and in Kosovo. Realizing and coming to terms with the losses sustained, the challenges of reconstructing their lives and infrastructure and the realities of surviving a harsh northern winter, all lie ahead. For those here, the practical and psychological issues associated with the return will in all likelihood feature prominently and no doubt will provide further challenges to the agencies involved in *Operation Safe Haven*.

Returning to Kosovo will mean different things for the 4000 Kosovars here. Some can't wait to go back home. Others cannot bear the thought of it. For a small number it could be potentially dangerous and re-traumatizing. For most it will be yet another difficult transition. I trust that as a society we will have the maturity and generosity to understand the complexity of the situation these people face and act accordingly.

Operation Safe Haven has also contributed to distract us from other important matters and situations. As highlighted in one of the articles in this issue of *Transitions*, the unfortunate dynamics of blame, stereotyping and retribution has resulted in the further victimization of another very vulnerable group: Serbian refugees. The crisis of the Balkans has also diverted much of the public's attention away from another human rights disaster happening at our very doorstep in East Timor.

Closer to home, the demands of *Operation Safe Haven* have resulted in the postponement of important projects which we will undertake soon.

I hope you will enjoy reading this issue.

Jorge Aroche

Populations in flight

The Silent Crisis of Internal Displacement



Twenty five million people worldwide have been displaced within their own countries as a result of war, human rights violations or natural or man-made disasters. The numbers are rising by the day. Internal displacement is not a new phenomenon, however, it has grown to such an extent that it constitutes one of the worst humanitarian crises facing the world today.

By Olga Yoldi.

The plight of the internally displaced persons came to the attention of the international community at the end of the cold war. The dynamics of international politics suddenly changed. There was a shift in ideological alignments and an increase and intensification of civil wars, which has caused the internal displacement of large numbers of people in many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe.

After the fall of the Berlin wall at least 23 internal conflicts have emerged in developing countries where there are more than 50 armed groups. Such violent groups are active in Algeria, Senegal, Angola, Burundi, Congo, Liberia, Sudan, Zaire, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Lebanon, Peru, Colombia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Yugoslavia and Cambodia, to name a few.

All these armed groups may be

ideologically different, however they have one thing in common: the destruction of their own countries. Many of these conflicts have been caused by increased poverty and social exclusion which has exacerbated the political, ethnic and religious tensions, to the point of transforming these conflicts into endless civil wars, where the worst atrocities are committed with total impunity.

In some countries, conflicts that began as genuine national uprisings against governments or foreign occupations degenerated into vicious fights for land, resources and arms, among militias or paramilitary groups, who in some cases are no different from criminal gangs.

These wars are of little interest to great powers -there is no territorial or security interests at stake- therefore they can be

allowed to go on forever.

In many cases these conflicts tend to go through cycles of intermittent violence interrupted by continuous armed truces with rebounds of combat, where rebel groups dispute among themselves the monopoly of violence. Such conflicts have transformed nation states into what political scientist, Oswaldo De Rivero, has defined as "Chaotic, Ungovernable Entities".

Chaotic, Ungovernable Entities are a new phenomenon. When this occurs governments become powerless and unable to control their national territory or the population. Whole sectors of the economy, cities and provinces fall under the power of the new warlords, drug lords or mafias. Civilians caught in the line of fire are forced to leave their homes, become uprooted or fall under the power of the armed groups.

Those who are able to flee become no longer dependent on the central governments but on the International Committee of the Red Cross and other humanitarian organizations for their survival.

A FUTURE OF UNCERTAINTY

Internally displaced persons are obliged to abandon their homes at short notice leaving everything behind.

Libby Tata Arcel in her book *Psycho-Social Help to War Victims: Women Refugees and Their Families from Bosnia and Herzegovina*, wrote that "the attachment of people to their homes and their towns is usually so strong that people leave home when the threat to their lives is very near; they often leave home much later than it was wise to do. This is a well known phenomenon from all wars: people postpone their evacuation, fearing dislocation and the poverty that accompanies it."

The journey to safety is normally fraught with danger and uncertainty. Anything can happen. Older children may be forcibly separated from their families, conscripted into armed groups and militia forces or even sold into slavery. Women are particularly vulnerable to violence and rape. Travelling on foot for miles, or on overcrowded trains with inadequate sanitation and scarce food and water, some don't even survive the journey. Camped in squatter settlements, church halls, warehouses or abandoned buildings, internally displaced people often have insufficient food and water, and little or not access to the most basic services.

The feeling of danger and uncertainty never leaves them, even when they reach the camps or protected areas. Internally displaced persons may be persecuted by governments for being suspected of supporting an armed group. They may be caught in tribal conflicts over land, or in the firing line between two armed groups. Normally they are perceived as an enemy by a warring party because of their ethnicity, political affiliation or religion.

In many countries camps

and settlements for displaced persons have been the target of attacks by armed groups, such as in the case of the Kibeho camp in Rwanda in April 1995. Thousands of internally displaced people were killed during a military operation, designed to close down the camp and send everyone back to their place of origin. Armed attacks on camps accommodating the internally displaced have also occurred in countries such as Bosnia, Burundi, Chechnya, Lebanon, Liberia, Sudan and Sri Lanka, resulting in thousands of deaths and forcing many other people to escape for a second time.

Unlike refugees, internally displaced people do not have the protection offered by the Refugee Convention and international institutions. In fact it has been argued that displaced people find themselves in more difficult and dangerous circumstances than refugees because they remain under the jurisdiction of the state, which is unable or unwilling to protect them. On the other hand, refugees are more likely to come to the attention of the international community and receive some form of protection and humanitarian assistance than internally displaced people.

PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT

According to the *State of the World's Refugees Report*, very few field based studies have been conducted about the dynamics of internal displacement. Normally, the patterns of fighting forces people into particular regions within their borders. A large proportion of internally displaced people can be found in cities or squatter settlements. In many cases they cannot be distinguished from rural or urban migrants. They may be crowded in areas protected by peacekeeping forces, or under the protection of warlords.

Some times governments or rebel groups actually order people to leave their homes by force. Such was the case of 114,000 displaced people in a province north of Kabul, Afghanistan. All of them had been ordered out of their homes to facilitate the Taliban military offensive in that area. In Bosnia and more recently in

Kosovo, organised population displacements were aimed at creating ethnically homogeneous areas. In Guatemala it was used as a counterinsurgency technique, designed to prevent rebel and guerrilla movements from associating with – and mobilizing support amongst – the rural population.

Internally displaced people are those who never made it as refugees. They are prevented from leaving their country for social, economic, political and geographical reasons, or because neighbouring countries may not welcome them.

People may be unable to leave because they don't have the financial resources to do so. They may be confined by mountains or situated a long way from the country's borders. Political obstacles are also common. Lack of legal documents make it very difficult for displaced people to leave. During the war in Bosnia people couldn't flee because of travel restrictions and check points erected by the local authorities. In Sri Lanka, Tamils living in conflict zones experienced restrictions imposed by rebel groups. We all remember television images of Iraqi Kurds trying to escape to Turkey and being stranded in the mountains in winter.

INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES

The international response so far has been unsystematic. The problem has grown to such proportions that nobody seems to know what to do.

Internal displacement is a politically sensitive issue. Displaced people remain under the jurisdiction of the state. Intervention will raise the question of state sovereignty and state responsibility. Governments may be unwilling to admit to the presence of internally displaced people in their territory, demonstrating the state's failure to protect its citizens.

International humanitarian organizations coordinate and provide emergency assistance in conflict areas: food, shelter and medical care. Protection and security remain controversial issues.

The brutal nature of recent conflicts has shocked the world and has started an endless debate about

morality and war. It was generally believed that the types of wars we are witnessing had long banished into history. However we have seen fighters who have not scruple to target Red Cross convoys, civilians, displaced people and defenseless women and children.

The question is: what separates war from savagery? If there is no difference between the two, whose responsibility is it then to protect displaced populations? So far no single humanitarian agency has been given statutory responsibility for the protection of the internally displaced persons. To make matters worse, no legal definition exists of 'internally displaced people' either.

Humanitarian organisations have played a limited role in protecting displaced people. They have done what they could, but they lack the power to enforce international humanitarian law. In some cases, multinational peace keeping forces have been used to protect the population. In other cases, humanitarian corridors or safe havens were created in a desperate attempt to deliver relief in war affected areas. Unfortunately this strategy has not always guaranteed safety either. They were also the target of attacks on numerous occasions.

Even providing relief has become a dangerous operation. According to *the State of the World's Refugee Report* in the last decade relief agencies have been themselves attacked at check points. They have been prevented from providing relief in conflict zones. As in Bosnia, where starvation was used as a weapon of war, access was in fact obstructed to prevent the delivery of humanitarian relief. In Eastern Zaire access was also denied because the government wanted to prevent humanitarian organisations from witnessing deadly human rights violations being committed. In Liberia emergency food and medical supplies did not reach displaced people, since they were stolen by the warring parties to help themselves and their own cause. In Chechnya, Bosnia, Rwanda and Sudan relief workers and nurses were murdered by warring groups.

Let's not forget that in many countries there is limited international presence. In such cases local groups have filled the gap. The church has played a very important role assisting and protecting displaced people in Colombia and other Latin American countries. In Liberia for example there has been a growth of local self help organisations. Women organisations in Chechnya assisted displaced people and documented human rights abuses. In Bosnia anti war movements and women's groups played a very important role in assisting displaced people, sometimes risking their lives in the process. Such acts of heroism were rarely reported in the media.

THE LAWS OF WAR

What can be done to protect displaced people? In 1992, the United Nations Secretary General appointed his first Representative of Internally Displaced Persons. Dr Francis Deng. He has visited a dozen countries with large populations of displaced people and reported regularly to the UN Human Rights Commission and the General Assembly. He developed *The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*. It is not a legally binding document, however it provides some guidance to agencies dealing with the needs of internally displaced populations.

Some argue that such guiding principles may not be enough. That it is absolutely necessary to create a new and radical legal framework, covering all forms of forced displacements. Others believe that there is a need for new legal instruments or standards, similar to international refugee law but specifically focused on the protection of internally displaced people. The International Committee of the Red Cross has stated that there is not much point in reinventing the wheel. The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols already make provision for the protection of the internally displaced people. That is the reason why the laws of war were created in the first place. According to them the answer lies in improving respect for international humanitarian law.

Articles 17, 14 and 23 of the Geneva Conventions state that the civilian population shall enjoy general protection against the dangers arising from military operations; that starvation of civilians as a method of combat is prohibited; that the displacement of the civilian population shall not be ordered for reasons related to the conflict... Civilians shall not be compelled to leave their own territory for reasons connected with the conflict.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has an essential mandate: to ensure that states and warring parties comply with the Geneva Conventions. Apart from providing aid and medical care, they teach combatants the laws of war.

The International Committee of the Red Cross is the only human rights organisation that believes that war is neither good nor bad – it's just there. Their mission is to ensure that warriors conform to certain basic principles of humanity.

But war is becoming more savage and more visible. It is quite obvious that warriors no longer play by the rules. The Geneva Conventions cannot change that for the simple reason that they offer no mechanism for their enforcement.

Jean Henri Dunant who founded the Red Cross in 1864 believed that war as an essential ritual of human society may be tamed but will never be eradicated. So far he has been proved right. War has not been eradicated or diminished in any way. However in modern ethics war is inhuman and therefore undefendable. In the age of progress, human rights and pacifism, war is a paradox in itself.

The temporary nature of internal displacement may have created wrong perceptions. Displaced people are just seen as a sample, a microcosm of the wider community affected by the same causes. It is expected that one day they will return home. Unlike refugees, they are not a burden to another country, or a threat to anyone. They are the invisible victims of endless wars whose voices have been silenced by the noise, explosions and the violence of war. Stranded in no man's land, many have been waiting for too long for a way back home. ●

**CONFLICT-INDUCED INTERNAL
DISPLACEMENT 1997-98**

A SAMPLE OF COUNTRIES	Sudan	4 million
	Afghanistan	1.45 million
	Angola	1.2 million
	Iraq	1.2 million
	DR Congo	1 million
	Myanmar	800,00 - 1 million
	Sri Lanka	790,000 - 1 million
	Lebanon	500,000 - 800,000
	Liberia	725,000
	Azerbaijan	550,000 - 612,000
	China	550,000
	Burundi	551,000
Nigeria	470,000	

*Source Internally Displaced People:
A global survey, June 1998*

REFERENCE

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UNHCR/O.U.P. Oxford 1997

Warriors Without Weapons
Dr Marcel Junot

El Mito del Desarrollo,
Oswaldo de Rivero Mosca Azul,
Lima 1998.

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11 September to 22 September 1999



An exhibition of the photography
of Vietnamese Australian
Gia Hai Nguyen.

At Face Value captures the
diversity of multicultural Australia
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Inside a safe haven

by Helen Basili.

What does it feel like to lose everything, and then be flown across the world for a temporary stay in a foreign country? Three Kosovar refugees tell their story.

"We just can't imagine why this has happened to us," says Fatbardha Haliti. "Everything we had established over 30 years was destroyed in one minute." As the Kosovar refugees bask in their newfound safe havens, the terrible reality begins to sink in. There are sleepless nights and long days in which to contemplate the enormity of their losses. Fatbardha Haliti is not alone in her disbelief.

Ismail Sahiti left his family home in Pristina with his wife, daughter and one bag of belongings. "They [Serb soldiers] knock on your door and tell you to get out. If they are good they don't kill you. In my street they were half-good. We are lucky. We are still alive. If you are unlucky you die." Sahiti and his family caught a train from Pristina to the border of Macedonia. "It was dangerous. Serb [soldiers] patrol the trains but you take the risk because you don't want to live like this."

Ismail's uncle, Avdush Sahiti, fled Pristina with only a small amount of cash and 10 cigarettes in his pocket. He had been forbidden to work during the last few years of Serb occupation and lived in a single room with his wife and two children. It was a spartan existence. Avdush Sahiti had few possessions worth taking with him.

At the East Hills safe haven in southwestern Sydney, these Kosovar refugees have been struggling to make sense of the horrors they have experienced. At the same time, they are trying to make the best of their situation in Australia and regain a

sense of control over their lives. Ismail Sahiti has been holding tai kwon do classes for his fellow safe haven residents. Fatbardha Haliti wants to teach or work with mothers at the safe haven. Avdush Sahiti cleans and does whatever else he can to help out. There is talk of establishing a community garden. People are buzzing with ideas and motivation.

Recently, a committee was formed to organise celebrations for Kosovo Independence Day on 2 July. A crowd of 300 Kosovars gathered on the day at the sports field normally reserved for soccer matches. They were entertained by their fellow countrymen and women who read poems, played music and spoke of their desire for a free Kosovo. The

"They [Serb soldiers] knock on your door and tell you to get out. If they are good they don't kill you. In my street they were half-good. We are lucky. We are still alive. If you are unlucky you

Australian and Albanian flags were flown in tandem. A band, formed especially for the occasion, had spent the previous week rehearsing to a group of enthusiastic children.

"It is a wonderful day for us to forget all the bad things and have a few nice moments," said Fatbardha Haliti.

The news that the Kosovar refugees will be able to work for up to 20 hours per week has been well received. Many of the refugees have been feeling bored and restless and have long been expressing a desire to work. "If I am allowed to, I would like to work outside the camp," says Fatbardha Haliti. "Maybe if we were

working we would be distanced from our thoughts. For a time, you can more easily forget your experiences."

For Avdush Sahiti, being able to work would be a demonstration of the gratitude he feels towards the Australian people. He does not care about money, he says, he just wants to be able to give something back to the country that offered him shelter. "I am happy in Australia. I have money, a house and clothes. I want nothing more," he says.

The "house" that Sahiti refers to is a small unit in the East Hills complex. It consists of only three rooms: two neat and simple bedrooms and a bathroom. His two children play quietly on the floor with the toys that were given to them upon their arrival

and in the cupboard are clothes that have been donated. The walls are plain white with no pictures and the only item to adorn a shelf above the bed is a copy of the Koran.

Beneath Sahiti's words lies a sense of the indignity he feels at not being able to provide for his family. A plumber by trade, he has worked hard all his life until he was prevented from doing so by the Serb authorities. The concept of receiving goods and services without having worked for them is something he has difficulty coming to terms with. "It is very hard not to work," he says.

Avdush and Ismail Sahiti are keen to emphasise the regret they feel over the Albanian refugees they describe as "troublemakers", those who protested over conditions in the safe haven at Singleton. Again and



Fatbardha Haliti with her son

Photo by Dennis Jones

again they come back to this point. "I was reading in your newspapers [an article that said] 'ungrateful Albanian refugees'. It is not good. When you are in trauma you say things you don't want to say," explains Ismail. Avdush is less forgiving. He says that the protesters must have been Albanians from Serbia proper - *his* people would never behave so outlandishly.

The depth of gratitude felt by the Kosovar Albanians towards every day Australians is overwhelming. On a notice board outside the East Hill's canteen are several children's drawings with the caption "Thank you Australia". Visitors are greeted by numerous cries of "hello", especially from the children. "Australians seem to be a people that have a huge heart and a wonderful passion to help people," says Fatbardha Haliti.

With 875 residents who will stay for at least two more months, the East Hills safe haven has acquired something of a village atmosphere. Classes have just commenced for school aged children and adults are to begin learning English. Elderly men sit in the afternoon sun playing cards and women gather in large groups, their babies beside them in strollers. Girls dance in a central hall, boys play soccer and men try their luck at pool.

This semblance of normality masks the painful memories that the refugees are just beginning to process. "We look normal but we are not normal. All the time we are under pressure," says Ismail.

Avdush Sahiti only sleeps two or three hours a night, visions of his escape preventing him from rest: "I saw a massacre. I saw many dead people and many dead animals," he says.

He is also fearful that his four-year-old daughter has been irrevocably damaged by her experience. Since their escape, she has been introverted and withdrawn. "Before, she used to play outside all day. Now she won't go anywhere without her mother," says Avdush. He recounts one of the events that she found particularly distressing: "It was midnight and there was a big explosion. She was crying. I tried to lie and said that I had broken something in the bathroom. She knew I was lying and asked 'can we go away somewhere?'"

The commencement of tracing operations by the Red Cross at the safe havens may bring more bad news to contend with as residents discover that family members are dead or missing. This is likely to put increased pressure on counsellors working at the sites as they assist residents to deal with yet another trauma.

Despite all that has happened, many refugees are able to find the spirit to consider a brighter future. Fatbardha longs for the day when she can return to a peaceful Kosovo. Avdush is still holding on to a cherished dream: "I'd like to have just a little house for my wife and children. I'd like to be a free man. If I am free I have everything." ●

STARTTS & Operation Safe Haven

Organising 4000 Kosovar refugees to come to Australia for three months is a complex task. A diverse range of services have been required to cooperate and make Operation Safe Haven a success.

STARTTS' involvement has extended from training interpreters and other staff working closely with the refugees to providing crisis counselling and longer-term therapy to the refugees themselves. "We are in a good position to provide those services because we have a lot of experience in working with refugees. Many of our staff have worked in refugee camp situations," says STARTTS' Executive Director, Jorge Aroche.

In the coming weeks STARTTS will be organising groups and other therapeutic interventions at the NSW safe havens in East Hills and Singleton. It will also continue to provide counselling at these havens and assist other services in devising community development activities for the refugees.

The symptoms the refugees have been experiencing as a result of their trauma are varied. Counsellors have noticed that sleeping disorders, in particular insomnia and nightmares have been prevalent. "Some people appear to be depressed but that doesn't express itself as readily as other symptomatology like flashbacks and insomnia. Surprisingly few have really expressed suicidal ideation," says Jorge Aroche.

New counsellors have been employed by STARTTS to work at the East Hills and Singleton safe havens. They will provide support to the refugees for the duration of their stay in Australia.



The Media's Demons

By Svetlana Milojkovic.

The outpouring of public sympathy for Kosovo refugees is often accompanied by vilification of Serbs. What is the role of the media in this process and what impact does it have?

The television tells them their people are aggressors and war criminals, some of their teachers treat them with hostility, some of their classmates are mates no longer. A neighbour shouts insults across the fence. They feel unwelcome, unaccepted and unacceptable. They fill with anger; some lash out, others silently withdraw.

They are Serbian refugees. Having fled to Australia in order to escape the violent excesses of group identification, once again they find themselves condemned solely for their ethnicity. The media's reporting of the progressive disintegration of the

former Yugoslavia - most recently the conflict in Kosovo - has resulted in the demonisation of Serbian people. As the most vulnerable members of their community, Serbian refugees and particularly their children are suffering the greatest impact of the media's need for simplicity. Sympathy extended to other refugees is not only denied them but is replaced with condemnation.

Of course demonisation is not new. The process of comparing individuals or groups to demons, or portraying and perceiving them as evil, wicked and inhuman has long been a feature of relations between and

within groups. Damnation of entire groups requires the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, where the individual's identity is subsumed by that of the group. No diversity is admitted. The demonisation of ethnic groups prioritises and denounces an individual's ethnic identity above all else. In doing so the many aspects and rights of the individual are lost to the mass.

The advent of modern media has extended the reach and so the impact of this process to miserable effect. The way in which modern news is made encourages a polarised view of conflict where complexity is

compromised for comfortable certainty. Rapidly assembled stories, shallow research with little sense of history and the amnesiac qualities of day to day reporting lend themselves to archetypal formats of good and bad. Television in particular, the main source of news and information for most people, does not lend itself to communicating complexity. This in turn encourages inaccuracies, misrepresentations and the omission of important qualifiers.

So it is not surprising that the reporting of modern conflicts frequently creates demons in opposition to its heroes. To cite but one example from the last decade, the reporting of the Gulf War effectively demonised the Muslim world in general and Iraqi people in particular.

In relation to the Balkans there has been no shortage of simplistic generalisations. The media has freely and frequently spoken of the Serbian people as one undifferentiated mass. Serbian civilians and refugees have been included more often than not with Yugoslav armed forces and paramilitary units. "Serb" has become shorthand for aggressor. All Serbian people

in the broadest sense are thus implicated in the evils perpetrated in their name, allegedly with their support. Thus many Serbian refugees in Australia have had to face the sneaking belief of others that they got what they deserved when they were driven from their homes, as if individual rights can be invalidated by a perception of collective guilt.

There has also been no shortage of inaccuracies and omissions. For many nights the television reported on the desperate plight of the Kosovo Albanian refugees. In this reporting there was, rightly, an attempt to convey the tragedy of their refugee experience. But wrongly, the media presented the exodus of Kosovo Albanians as singularly unparalleled in post World War II Europe. This ignores or forgets the hundreds of thousands of Serbian refugees forced to flee Bosnia and

Croatia during the various conflicts that raged there over the last decade.

The demonisation of Serbs has been further advanced by the media's preference for stereotypes in place of understanding. The Balkans in general and Serbs in particular are depicted as uniquely and inescapably trapped in cycles of ethnic hatred and violence, a so-called "Balkan mentality". Clearly, the Balkans do not have a monopoly on violence, nor for that matter, on suffering.

There are many more illustrations of the media's demonising work, its relentless efforts to force the reality of conflict into the make-believe mould of simple goodies and baddies. The point becomes that truth is not the only victim of demonisation.

The psychological and social impact of demonisation on Serbian refugees, while persisting still, was at its most marked and manifold during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. At this time the media's demon-Serb message was the loudest and Serbian refugees at their most vulnerable.

Many Serbian refugees were

Serbian refugees in Australia have had to face the sneaking belief of others that they got what they deserved when they were driven from their homes.

overwhelmed with fear and concern for relatives exposed to NATO's bombs. Most worrying were relatives who were refugees in Serbia and Kosovo and housed in disused army barracks - "legitimate" targets during the conflict. While they watched images of war on the television, many were revisiting their own perilous and hopeless flight, nursing the grief of their own traumatic experiences of separation and loss. Unable to help their relatives in any way, often unable to contact them, they felt again the helplessness they recognised and dreaded. Some of them, suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, experienced a re-emergence of disabling symptoms they had previously tamed.

Demonisation was fuel to the fire. Angry at the bombs; angry at their own sense of impotence; angry at those who taunt them and their kids,

and angry at the media's spectacular silence at the time of their own tragic exodus from their homes, they felt doubly persecuted. Voiceless because they were refugees and voiceless again because they were the perceived perpetrators, their pain went unacknowledged. Trying to come to terms with the reality of their own experiences, they were being told those experiences were invalid; that they had no right to sympathy.

Most of us are aware of the benefits of sympathy, of how comforting and healing it is to feel understood. Demonisation worked to deny Serbian refugees what they needed and deserved. Instead, they had to contend with the resounding message that some refugees were more deserving than others.

Their own ability to empathise with the suffering of others was often undermined by their need to defend and preserve their sense of self, leading some to defend the indefensible done supposedly in their name. Dealing with their own guilt: for surviving; for not being the parent

that they once were; for not being able to help those at a great distance from them, they

were then compelled to feel guilty for being Serbian - to carry guilt which was not theirs to carry. Demonisation thus effectively re-traumatised these people because, at a time when they were feeling most like victims, they were being seen most like violators.

The impact of demonisation however, is arguably most damaging to the young of this community. Like all refugee youth they are dealing with the regular and difficult developmental task of establishing an independent identity from their parents while also struggling to define themselves within an unfamiliar language and culture. Caught in those impressionable years between the demands of their traumatised parents and the crush of school ground conformity, they are often desperately divided. Their distress is often further compounded by their own and their parents' traumas. ▶

Added to this heady mix is the effect of demonisation. As rapid language learners, they are trying to deal with parent-child role reversals, but with the additional burden of translating the media's unwelcome messages. Should they protect their parents? Should they share in their anger, or should they believe what the media is telling them?

Like the rest of this generation, they are oriented strongly toward the electronic media. But, savvy as they are, their untested faith in and reliance on the media as their primary source of information leaves them bewildered when they find themselves the targets of its negative attention. Some feel betrayed - probably not for the first time; others feel a heightened sense of dislocation and alienation - rejected before they have begun. Still others feel shame and guilt and pull away from family, denying that they are Serbian or wishing they weren't, bearing responsibility, again for that which is not theirs to bear. Many feel angry. Often without the ability to articulate

their position as adults might, and even less the opportunity to do so, these kids wound most readily.

The question for nearly all these kids is how to escape the bombardment: the media's messages; the endless talk about it at home; the accusations at school. How to live again in a peaceful and happy home.

Demonisation does not bring peace and happiness. By creating cycles of over generalisation and defensiveness, it reinforces ethnic prejudices on all sides and results in feelings of persecution,



disenfranchisement and anger.

It is important to remember that demonisation - a kind of dehumanisation - at its end point allows people to torture and kill one another. It is not a process that leads to anything positive but rather leads us down a very sinister path. Basic social psychology readily predicts this tragic trajectory of group antagonism and exclusion.

Fermentation of suspicion and hatred one might expect on battlefields - Balkan or otherwise - but not within the borders of peaceful and multicultural societies such as Australia. If we wish to avoid the violent excesses of group identification within our borders, we need to be wary of what we take from the media. We need to disclose what the media so easily conceals. In the face of demonisation, it is our individual responsibility to recognise and respect the human rights of all individuals, by virtue of their and our humanity. ●

Svetlana Milojkovic is a STARTTS' counsellor for the Serbian community.

Not everyone is so ready to participate in the process of demonisation.

There are voices which recognise that demonisation brings us no closer to understanding, let alone resolving ethnic conflicts. Though very much a minority in the media, journalists such as Australia's John Pilger, a number of documentary filmmakers and select internet discussion groups and publications have sought to move beyond divisive simplicity.

But even more directly, community groups and some schools and government agencies are also doing their best to counter demonisation and its impact.

STARTTS plays a key role in indiscriminately embracing and assisting refugees from all over the globe. Among them are Serbian refugees, receiving assessment and referrals, individual short and long term trauma counselling or taking part in regular group work. Some of the traumatised youth are attending STARTTS' youth camps run during school holidays.

Schools have also responded to the needs of their Serbian refugee students, particularly during the period of NATO's bombing campaign against Yugoslavia. Elizabeth Pickering, the school counsellor at Cabramatta High invited STARTTS' counsellors to run a workshop for their Intensive English Centre students. The workshop assisted the predominantly Serbian group of students - many of whom were very recently arrived refugees - to express and address their feelings during that difficult time.

STARTTS is also working in conjunction with the Serbian Orthodox Welfare Association to provide a regular group for Serbian adolescents. This group allows these vulnerable members to deal with their past and ongoing traumas, including their feelings of alienation and persecution.

Many of STARTTS' clients, have in recent months expressed gratitude that they have a place where they feel welcome, where their trauma will be acknowledged and they will be helped not hindered to heal their pain.

Revisiting a HARSH PLACE

NOORIA MEHRABY worked as a doctor in Afghan refugee camps from 1987 to 1993. A refugee herself, her own experiences were intertwined with those of her patients. Last year she returned to the camps and found that life is not getting any easier for Afghan refugees.

In 1987 Afghanistan was experiencing many problems as a result of the Russian occupation. Internal security was virtually non-existent and the country's infrastructure was deteriorating rapidly because of the widespread fighting. There were an increasing number of rocket attacks on Kabul, the capital, and food was becoming scarce. People had difficulty finding fuel for heating during winter and most parts of Kabul were without electricity.

As doctors, my husband and I were at risk of being targeted by the Communist regime. Many people from educated backgrounds were living in fear because the government wanted an ignorant population that it could easily control. Thousands of middle class, educated people were persecuted and imprisoned. My husband and I felt that the safest thing to do was to escape from Afghanistan as our lives would be endangered if we remained in the country.

I left with my mother and two young children. We took a bus from Kabul and set off for Peshawar in Pakistan, where we had organised to

meet my husband. He had already escaped by himself the week before because if we had left together, as a family unit, our intention to escape would have been too obvious. My children were anxious about where he was and wondered why he wasn't traveling with us.

During our escape, I wore a *chaderi*, which is a long piece of cloth that covers the entire body and face. My mother and children also had to wear traditional clothing. It was usual for us to wear Western-style clothing but on this occasion we wanted to be inconspicuous and blend in with the local people from the area we were travelling to.

Leaving was made all the more painful because I couldn't say goodbye to any of my close friends and relatives. Doing so might have jeopardised our attempt at escape. In a climate of such fear and treachery, it was foolhardy to trust anyone.

We had given a lot of money to a smuggler who had promised to help us to escape to Peshawar. He arranged for us to travel by bus to Logar province and spend the first night there with his family.

The next day we walked for

two hours and caught a lorry. It was over 40 degrees Celsius. The road was very rough and my head was constantly bumping on the roof. My four-year-old son kept asking why other people traveled by plane but we had to travel in a lorry. We traveled for a whole day and in the evening reached a place called Tera Mangle. We had run out of food and only had bread to eat and tea that we got from the local people. We slept in the parked lorry because there was nowhere else for women to stay.

In the morning we discovered that the smuggler had disappeared. He had told us he would send all our belongings in a separate lorry, so as not to arouse the suspicion of the authorities, but it never arrived. My jewelry and other precious things were in the lorry along with my documents, a book of poetry I had written and an address book. The loss of my poetry and address book was the hardest thing to cope with. Now, I had no means of contacting the friends and relatives I had been close with in Afghanistan.

We continued on to Peshawar in Pakistan where my brother was living. Peshawar is close



My husband and I felt that the safest thing to do was to escape from Afghanistan as our lives would be endangered if we remained in the country.

to the border of Afghanistan and a large number of Afghan refugees live there, both in refugee camps and in residential areas in the city itself. Overall, there are about three million Afghan refugees who live in Pakistan.

At my brother's place I was reunited with my husband. We stayed with my brother for three months and felt lucky to have him there because, by the time we had arrived, all of our belongings and most of our money was gone. However, the living conditions there were extremely difficult. My brother was already sharing his four-bedroom house with 26 relatives who had also escaped from Afghanistan.

After three months in Peshawar I found a job as a medical doctor in Shamshatow refugee camp. The refugee camp was two hours from Peshawar so I spent four hours travelling every day in the heat, wearing a *hijab*.

There was a huge demand for doctors at the refugee camp. I worked in an under-resourced health clinic with rudimentary supplies and medicine and saw about 60 patients a day. All my patients were women or children. A lot of women had lost their husbands, or male supporters, who were killed while fighting against the Russians. They felt a lot of anger over their losses and suffered many

Pregnancy-related deaths were common as babies were usually delivered at home by relatives.

physical and psychological problems due to their poverty, dislocation and war-trauma. Their needs were so great that it was not possible to assist all of them at the clinic with our limited resources. It was a terrible, frustrating position to be in. It was hard to address their psychological problems because people were so overwhelmed with the basic tasks of survival.

I worked for two years in this situation. During the time I was working at Shamshatow refugee camp I had my third child. Forty days after her birth I had to return to work because of the huge demand.

After two years I got a job in another refugee camp which was



An elderly woman with cancer is supported by her daughters

only one hour from Peshawar. I kept on seeing patients and I also started teaching medical students at the women's university in Peshawar. I was working six days a week with very long hours each day. I continued working in different refugee camps for the next four years and kept on working at the university as well.

In 1993 I arrived in Australia with my husband and three children. We had only a small support network of four people. Our experience was similar to that of most refugees. I was facing multiple losses: loss of extended family, identity, job, society and friends.

Due to misleading information, it was six months until I found

and cousin took me to see Naser Bagah refugee camp for newly arrived refugees from Afghanistan. Many educated, middle class families from Kabul were living there. In the past, when I worked at the refugee camps, most of the residents were from poorer rural areas.

There were about 75000 people living at Naser Bagah. They were given a small amount of money to build their own houses from clay. Those who had not yet built their houses lived in tents distributed by the United Nations.

The houses were very small with two to three rooms and small windows with plastic coverings rather than glass. A house this size would be shared by three families. Doors were considered a luxury so most people hung hessian sacks at the entrance to their homes. They had dirt floors and no furniture, just some cushions on the ground. Most people got their water from a communal well. The water was unclean and was a cause of much illness

The camp residents were forced to take up menial jobs to survive. Men frequently did construction and labouring work, cleaned shoes, or established stalls from where they sold fruit and other food products. Women made handicrafts which they sold in the city. People had no choice but to do this work as the cost of living in Pakistan is constantly increasing.

There was one school for the 15000 children living in Naser Bagah

out that there were free AMES English classes that I could attend. Gradually I found out about and attended other courses as well. After 16 months I got my first job, as a health educator, and have been working in Australia ever since.

In March 1998 I returned to Pakistan to visit my extended family in Peshawar. It was the first time I had seen them in five years. I stayed for a month and the time passed quickly. We stayed up late most nights talking about the things that had happened in the years we had spent apart. It was good to see them again

After two weeks my brother

camp and it went to primary school level only. Girls were not allowed to attend. There were no chairs or tables so students had to sit on the ground.

There was one public health clinic. The other clinics were private and people could only go if they had money to pay the fees. The main health problems were infectious diseases such as diarrhoeal diseases and dehydration, respiratory infections, typhoid, and tuberculosis. Also common were malaria, kwashiorkor and anemia.



A girl stands at the entrance to her home

Gastroenteritis and malnutrition were widespread and often caused death in children. Most deaths among children at the camp could have been prevented by immunization. Pregnancy-related deaths were common as babies were usually delivered at home by relatives.

The people looked lifeless. There was an 80-year-old woman (pictured) who was dying from stomach cancer and could not afford any medication. She was in constant pain. She had been living in a mud house with her daughters for two

years. Her daughters previously worked as school teachers in Afghanistan.

The day-to-day life of residents at Naser Bagah was taken up with the basic tasks of survival. They cooked over an open fire and did whatever they could with the basic facilities available. Bread was baked in a *tanoor* (clay oven) which the residents had made themselves. Most of them couldn't afford meat or any other proteins.

I was in tears after seeing children living in this situation. Many children played in the cemetery because they had nothing else to do. I saw other children dying of starvation. It broke my heart to see highly educated men and women unable to utilise their skills. I admired their strength and ability to survive.

My visit to Naser Bagah camp disturbed me more than my experiences in the various refugee camps five years ago. I couldn't help but compare the situation and note how much worse it had got. The refugees of Naser Bagah have been on my mind ever since.

I talked to a repatriation officer from the UNHCR who was working with Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The UNHCR tried to repatriate some refugees but it was a difficult process. Most returned due to the continuing war in Afghanistan which endangered their lives. The people in Naser Bagah camp are living in limbo, waiting for the day when the situation stabilises in Afghanistan and they can return home.

In Afghanistan today, it is as if the 20th century does not exist. The human rights situation is worse than it ever was, particularly for women. The prices of goods and services are grossly inflated and the people are cut off from the outside world with no television, radios, newspapers or music.

International support for Afghan refugees has been reduced dramatically in comparison to the first years of Russian occupation. A lot of hospitals and schools for Afghan refugees in

Peshawar were closed because they lost their funding from various aid agencies. The remaining hospitals and schools began charging fees, which the refugees cannot afford.

When the Cold War came to an end the international focus moved elsewhere and Afghan refugees were no longer considered "refugees" but "displaced persons". This has made it difficult for them to be granted residency in other countries. Despite the worsening internal situation in Afghanistan, and the refugee camps in Pakistan, the international intake for Afghan refugees has been reduced. The widespread corruption in Pakistan only exacerbates matters for the refugees.

When the time came to return to Australia I had to go through the separation process all over again, just as I did five years before. I cried during the plane trip because I was so sad. At the same time I was overjoyed that I would soon be with my children and husband again after a long absence.

This is typical of the life of a refugee. With family scattered all over the world things will never be the same as before. The loss of extended family is one of the greatest losses of all. ●

Nooria Mehraby has been a STARTTS' counsellor for the Middle Eastern community since 1995.



An elderly man rests outside his home

No respite for rejected asylum seeker

By Helen Basili

She has been through hell. She thought she had found a new home in Australia but now, Rosa Esperanza is to be deported.

Rosa Esperanza is counting down the days. As the moment draws closer for her deportation, she is filled with an increasing sense of dread. Her airfare will be covered *if* she agrees to return to her homeland of Ecuador. If not, she has to take matters into her own hands.

The choice for Rosa, is an obvious one. In Ecuador she will be faced with a violent husband and a father-in-law who has threatened to slit her throat. Even if she manages to avoid them there are the ubiquitous government agents who, Rosa believes, will take her life. If Rosa has any doubts, she only need remember what happened last time. It is something she is unlikely to forget.

Rosa will go anywhere *except* Ecuador. She has three children. They cannot afford to be left motherless. They have suffered enough. If Rosa cannot find the strength to survive for her own sake, she does so for her children. She will maintain her struggle so that they may have a better future.

Speaking through an interpreter, Rosa says: "When I am with my children I am always laughing and trying to lift their spirits. I say 'don't worry about it, I know what I'm doing'." But the reality is, their future is far from certain.

Rosa's predicament grew out of a desire to help others. A charity worker since she was a little girl, Rosa never dreamed that her actions would result in such horrific consequences.

In 1996, Rosa and her family

returned to Quito, the capital of Ecuador, after a period abroad. The family was well off and this enabled Rosa to continue her charity work. She was introduced to some Italian nuns who invited her to join them in assisting prisoners in the men's and women's jails in Quito. Rosa happily accepted, looking forward to the chance to improve the prisoner's quality of life.

The work in the prisons was difficult and overwhelming at first, but Rosa persisted. She organised religious and handicraft groups, showed films and arranged for medical supplies and food to be distributed among the prisoners.

Soon after commencing work in the prisons, Rosa became a member of the Partido Roldosista Ecuatoriano (PRE), the ruling party in Ecuador at the time. "They were a political party that helped the poor. I observed them going into poor communities and building schools and other social services. I thought it was a good party and that was how I came to meet the sister-in-law of the president of the republic," says Rosa.

Her involvement in the party escalated and she began to meet other influential PRE members. Rosa was startled when she learnt that the PRE had initiated covert, sinister activities to enrich these members. She grew even more alarmed when she realised she was being coerced to participate.

According to Rosa, the president's brother had implemented a drug-dealing operation using prisoners in the jails where she was

active. In a statement to the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT), Rosa wrote:

"[The prisoners] wanted to use me because I was above suspicion. They asked me to be a courier and offered me a lot of money. I refused. Then they started threatening me and I became afraid. Once they put a little plastic bag in one of my books and told the prison officer that I was carrying drugs."

Rosa reduced her prison visits and attempted to end her involvement with the PRE but was threatened that

she would be “taken care of” by “Los Pepudos”, the PRE’s militia group. Terrified, she searched for other options. She discovered that the PRE was looking for a diplomat in London but in order to get the position, she and her husband would have to pay thousands of dollars in bribes. As they could not afford all the money, they paid a deposit and signed over their property deeds and belongings as security until the balance was repaid.

Things went terribly wrong. The PRE government was overthrown on 7 February 1997 and Rosa and her family lost everything.

Their hopes of a secure life in London were shattered.

Many PRE members were fleeing the country, fearing

bookshelves. They opened all the doors and went upstairs and checked under the beds,” wrote Rosa in her RRT statement. The men kept asking her the whereabouts of the president’s brother and his wife. She had no idea. They bashed her. They told her her children wouldn’t return from school. Then they forced her into their car.

“We drove out of the city...They took me out of the car. They took all my clothes off and the three of them raped me.

“I think after what had happened I lost consciousness. When I awakened I was already in hospital. The doctor told me that I was found by some people in a small town called Cayambe,” wrote Rosa.

The nightmare continued. “My brother and I told my husband what had happened. He blamed me and accused me of having lovers who did this to me. My husband’s family were told of what had occurred and my brother said that my father-in-law had told him that he wanted to kill me for all the things that my husband had lost because of me.”

Rosa had to escape. Her life depended on it. With the assistance of a friend, she and her family were able to leave Ecuador. They were issued with a family passport and flew to Australia on a tourist visa

Rosa reduced her prison visits and attempted to end her involvement with the PRE but was threatened that she would be “taken care of” by “Los Pepudos”, the PRE’s militia group.

in April 1997.

For Rosa and her children, life in Australia as an asylum seeker has been an ordeal. Her husband became violent and she separated from him last year. Soon after, she had a stroke and was hospitalised for four months. Rosa has been caring for her children on her own and, as an asylum seeker, she is not entitled to any social security or medical assistance. “Sometimes I don’t understand how up until now I have been able to survive. I think that god opens his doors every day to give me something,” says Rosa.

Recently, Rosa’s application for refugee status was rejected by the

RRT. The Tribunal accepted that Rosa had been sexually assaulted, had experienced significant personal losses and had knowledge about corruption within PRE. However, it considers that she does not satisfy the criteria for refugee status under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The Tribunal believes that the harm Rosa fears is not “owing wholly or partly to an imputed or a perceived political opinion”.

In the decision handed down by the RRT, the Tribunal member wrote: “The fact that the applicant is targeted by those connected with the PRE or political rivals is not because of her political opinion but because of circumstances personal to her.”

Rosa and her children are to be deported.

“I felt like a mouse in a trap [when I heard the news]. I didn’t know what to do. I thought that [the Australian government] were going to be able to help me especially after the situation I have been through. I don’t really know why they haven’t been able to help me,” says Rosa.

She struggles to speak through her tears: “Sometimes I feel like I am going through a nightmare and someone is going to shake me and say ‘it is only a nightmare, wake up’.”

Rosa and her children are leaving for Chile. She is desperately trying to scrape together money for the airfares. A number of fundraising activities have been staged to help her and she will soon be prepared for the journey. She doesn’t know anyone there but arrangements have been made for them to stay with a group of nuns in a convent.

“I don’t think it’s good to be running with my suitcase without any stability, running from here to there. Now I’m going to Chile and maybe they won’t accept me there and I’ll have to run somewhere else,” says Rosa.

Her search for respite has no end in sight. ●

Rosa’s real name has been changed to protect her privacy.

retributions from the new government.

Rosa decided that she would have to do the same thing. Her husband and children hid at her brother’s house and Rosa went back to the family home to collect the few personal belongings they had left.

There was a knock at the door. Three men bearing police identification badges stood outside. They came in and began searching. “They were removing books from the



A Journey to East Timor



18

RECA

Photo by Peter Williamsen

MASABERLAKUWA 5.97
BERAT KEND 2720 KG
JBB 6500 RB
- JBI 6500 KC
KELAS JALAN : 3 C
DABANGKUT.ORG : 3
BARANGS63000

Visitors to East Timor can be overwhelmed by the oppressive atmosphere they find there.

PETER WILLIAMSON reports on his experience prior to Indonesia's approval of a vote for independence.



Arriving in Dili on a domestic flight from Bali, an "immigration" officer calls me aside to fill in forms. This does little to enhance the argument that East Timor is fully integrated into the country as the 27th province of Indonesia. So begins a few weeks of continual questioning by the authorities - often I was not sure which authority - on my reasons for being in East Timor.

Within hours of arriving I am hit with a sense of the oppression, of the quiet desperation of the people. As I walk down a street, a voice calls out the freedom slogan "Viva Timor L'este!" just loud enough for me to hear. People insist that I photograph them, even demand it. Before the moment of exposure they flash two fingers in the victory sign, small acts of defiance to ensure that I take home some evidence, however intangible, of ongoing resistance to Indonesian authority.

I am frequently questioned about my background. My questioners seem determined to find out whether or not I am a journalist - even to trick me into saying that I am - and what exactly my profession is.

One man present is later introduced as a "captain in the intelligence". On learning I am from Sydney, he asks me if I know José Ramos Horta:

"No."

"Do you know who he is?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Well, he has just won the Nobel Peace Prize; he's in the news a fair bit."

"Oh. Do you know..." and so on.

Knowledge arouses suspicion for such people. So does any interest

in local economic or social conditions. Implicit in the rules, and the general attitude of the Indonesian authorities, is an idea that tourists are not interested in politics or human rights. Anyone with such interests cannot be a genuine tourist.

I meet some people said to be from the resistance. I am shown photographs of young Timorese who have been tortured and murdered by the military. Their bodies are beaten and bloody, and the Timorese flag has been draped over them for some pictures. I ask in amazement how they were able to get such pictures, and I am told that the torturers, who made the photos and also appear in the pictures, sold the pictures to them. As I leave, I am urged to take photos of military cemeteries:

"Why?" I ask.

"Because we want the world to see that the fight is still going on, and that Indonesian soldiers are still being killed."

Each grave of an Indonesian soldier is a symbol of the success of the resistance - like a trophy staking a claim to the vigour of their struggle.

I am amazed that the students will risk so much for the sake of seeing a few photographs reach the outside world. Again and again, I have similar experiences. People beg me, implore me, even demand that I make defiant photographs of them to show the world that the resistance is still alive and strong in East Timor.

On the streets I hear rumours of demonstrations that may or may not happen. I am approached a number of times by young men: "Do you want to see a demo. Tomorrow at ten o'clock. Just follow the people and you will find it."

On Palm Sunday I am the only foreigner amongst hundreds gathered in the church grounds, for the church cannot contain such a crowd. After it is over, some young men urge me to follow them. I sense that something has happened. I am hurried behind an outbuilding where a makeshift clinic has been established and some nuns are tending to four injured men. They have been beaten by the military in an early morning demonstration to mark the arrival of Jamsheed Marker, UN Special Envoy to East Timor. One man has been shot, but it seems he will survive. They do not seek treatment at a hospital as they say they would be arrested there and face possible detention and torture. I am told to take photographs, and then a four-page manifesto is thrust into my hands as I leave.

A rumour says that forty people have been arrested; another says that four people have died. Later I hear six. I want to leave the church, but police or troops in riot gear have blocked off the roads. I find a Timorese taxi driver and ask him to get me out of there. This he does via back streets and I return to my guest house rather shaken. It is time to leave Dili.

Some Timorese say that this demonstration, and many others, has been arranged by the Indonesian Intelligence. Others say that the demo was to have taken place at 10 am, but the Indonesians spread false rumours that it had been changed to 6 am. It is a strategy designed to confuse the people and undermine the protest, so that the visiting media would miss the show. ▶

The use of informers and stooges causes great resentment, splitting the Timorese people and placing them in awful dilemmas. People who have or want government jobs are under particular pressure. The cost of a job can be betrayal of your people.

On minibuses known as microlets, I travel to regional towns - Ermera, Venilale, Viqueque,

instructions for dealing with the tourist. An hour later I am free to go, but I must also report to the military police.

They ask me trivial questions. I feel they want to delay me, to waste my time. I try to be friendly; a soldier talks of East Timor as a hardship posting. A policeman from Kalimantan says he wants to go home, but transfers are not easily arranged. He could resign from the force, but

I ask in amazement how they were able to get such pictures, and I am told that the torturers, who made the photos and also appear in the pictures, sold the pictures to them.

Maubisse, Los Palos, Suai. The names are exotic, so un-Asian with their Portuguese spelling. Not much of the Portuguese architecture remains - a few churches, houses and schools with graceful arches and terracotta tiles. The language is still widely spoken by people of about 40 and older. My rusty Portuguese is called into urgent service and I manage, at least, to forge some kind of communication with the Timorese. They love to talk, but any mention of politics provokes a barrier which may terminate the encounter.

Microlets are brightly coloured, with names such as Phoebe, Adelaide, Travolta, Traque de Victoria, Quo Vadis, Shirley and Amanda. Along winding roads, overworked tape players pump out Timorese pop. We stop every few minutes to pick up or drop off passengers. An oversized westerner with an oversized backpack. I am crushed into the back with the friendly Timorese. Mostly we manage to exchange words and gestures; occasionally someone speaks some English or we battle on in Portuguese. My dictionary is always close at hand.

I am high in the hills and mist is wafting through the town. It is late afternoon, and getting cold. As I
20 amble past a market with women selling their meagre produce - a neat pile of chillis, lemons stacked like marbles on a ragged mat - a policeman calls me to the station. My arrival and lack of Indonesian language causes concern. Soldiers radio to headquarters awaiting

he fears he could not support his wife and children.

There is no accommodation in the town. I am offered the concrete floor of the station, but this option does not appeal and I decide to try the church. I go looking for the priest and find myself at the nuns' house:

"Good afternoon, Madré..."

"I can't speak to you about the situation. If you are looking for the women, they are not here."

"Which women?"

"They are not here."

"I'm actually looking for the priest."

"Oh, you'll find him in that house over there."

The priest puts me up in a room kept for seminarians; we eat the best meal I've had in East Timor. I

One woman regularly wakes her in the night, hysterically screaming that the soldiers have killed her family; this is true but the killings occurred years before.

ask about "the women" and what is going on. In a hushed voice he tells me that there has been an incident in which two young women were arrested by soldiers who claimed that the women were trying to make contact with guerillas. They were repeatedly raped and beaten. A church delegation from Dili has just secured their release and they are now being cared for by the nuns. No charges have been laid against the soldiers.

Next day I travel on. Whole hillsides are eroding, denuded of trees. Large rivers have silted up, their beds

littered with trunks of washed away trees. The once plentiful sandalwood is gone - exploited by the Portuguese and finished off by the new colonists in Jakarta. It is the poorest province of Indonesia by any measure, and one of the poorest places I have seen. There is little evidence of industry. There are few private cars. Almost all shops appear to be owned and run by Indonesian immigrants, gradually moving in from the islands to the west - Java, Bali, Flores or Sumatra. The Timorese are mainly subsistence farmers, increasingly marginalised in their own land.

Many of the educated elite fled to Portugal and Australia in the years following the invasion. A nun tells me how at the age of one she fled to the mountains with her family to escape the war in the towns. At the age of two she learned how to keep quiet and still, already understanding that her life depended on it. She endured bombing raids and once was separated from her parents for three weeks, surviving with other children on roots and berries. Incredibly, all her immediate family survived the three years in the mountains, but she saw her pregnant aunt die when her child was cut from her belly by an Indonesian soldier.

Such stories are common in East Timor. Well over a hundred thousand Timorese died in the war, many of starvation. No one knows

how many, but it may have been a quarter of the entire population. I ask another nun about the psychological trauma accompanying such a legacy. "No-one ever asks about that," she says, and goes on to tell me about cases in the village where she works.

She is a foreigner and thought nothing of playing a prank with the children she was minding in an orphanage. Another nun was returning from town and as she heard the car pull up outside, she said "Quick, let's hide so Sister will think we're not here!" A girl broke into hysterical sobbing and shaking and

could not be consoled. The child's terror of hiding from the soldiers has been reawakened. Others she spoke of wandered aimlessly round the village, lost in their tortuous worlds. One woman regularly wakes her in the night, hysterically screaming that the soldiers have killed her family; this is true but the killings occurred years before.

In Maubisse I get stuck, having missed the day's last bus to Ainaro. A man approaches me in the market and says "come with me". He is not in uniform, but claims to be a policeman. At the police station we go through the usual questions and filling in of forms. Some police are playing soccer on a lawn and I ask if I can take a photograph. They are happy, but the commander shouts "No, no!" Across the road is a cemetery, and I am not to photograph that. In fact, he indicates that I am not even to visit the cemetery. Later, I discover that the cemetery contains mass graves - entire families who all died on the same day. It is telling evidence of the atrocities against civilians, including women and children.

The restriction annoys me and I walk back along the road to the guest house which sits atop a small hill. I watch rain clouds receding across the valley and the mountains; the sun breaks through and a soft light falls onto the cemetery, little crosses on a green rise on the edge of town. I feel a strange and unspecific anger rise up inside me. I think of the waste of life, the suffering, and the injustice of twenty-two years of occupation. I think of the faces I have seen, worn down by years of hardship, the desperation in the eyes of the many people I have met. I think of Linda, a student I met in another town. We talked and joked in her house - her mother correcting my rudimentary Portuguese, feeding me biscuits and coffee, asking me about Australia. She avoids my attempts to turn the talk to the "situation" in East Timor, then through her silence I detect an awful fear that my visit will bring trouble to her family.

I think of her and how I did not visit again for fear of bringing trouble to her family; I was being watched and questioned by

intelligence officers. In an idle aside I said that I did not trust politicians - they were all crooks - Soeharto included. The room fell silent and I thought "This is it - I'm going to be charged with something. Insulting the president. Maybe I'll just be deported". Nothing happened, but I was too concerned to drop in again. I wish I had her address, or her surname, but what could I write anyway?

In my room the lights do not work, so I lie in my sleeping bag, thinking that travels in East Timor cannot leave a thinking person unchanged. There are so few tourists (I have seen only two in as many weeks); every tourist must get some sense of the Timorese people's reaching out to them, at the same time as noticing their deep fear of saying the wrong thing to the wrong person. There is an atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion. Anyone could be an informer, a spy.

My last stop is Ocussi where I watch from the bus as we pass a dozen or more burnt out buildings, the only remaining indication of Timorese anger and resentment of Indonesian traders in a riot a few months earlier. I climb a hill to see some statues of Christ with animals at his feet. The sun glints sharply off the Sawu Sea. It is hot and quiet. I try to reconcile what I have seen in the weeks gone by, but I cannot digest it yet. Perhaps later it will fall into place. Leaving feels like walking out on a people in need of friends. Perhaps I should not have gone to look, but I think of what one Timorese said to me:

"People must come. We want tourists. We want them to see what is going on, how we must live."

The presence of tourists offers the Timorese a small degree of protection. If something terrible happens, then someone may find out. It is not a fun place to travel; the accommodation and the food are poor. In many towns you cannot find a cold drink. But East Timor will stay on my mind for years to come. It pricks your conscience. They are probably right in saying that the more people who go, the sooner the world will stand up to Indonesia and say "Enough is enough". ●

Peter Williamson is a freelance journalist and photographer. He traveled to East Timor in 1997.



Day in support of victims of torture

Two years ago, the United Nations proclaimed 26 June as an International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. The response was overwhelming. Services for torture survivors all over the world staged events to commemorate the occasion.

In Zimbabwe a press conference was held for the publication of a report on torture. Hundreds of people joined in a rally in Bangladesh. Five hundred people released 1000 white balloons in Denmark. In Australia, STARTTS hosted a ceremony at NSW Parliament House and services in other states organised various activities. Other countries in Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East marked the day with their own unique events.

The second International Day in Support of Victims of Torture has just passed. This year, STARTTS staged an event at the Pavilion on Sydney's Bondi Beach. A crowd of over 200 people gathered to listen to speakers from STARTTS and Amnesty International as well as renowned human rights activist, Justice Marcus Einfeld and Chilean torture survivor, Maria Pilar. SBS broadcaster, Silvio Rivier acted as master of ceremonies for the occasion.

The mood was set by award winning, Latin jazz band Tigramuna and singer/songwriter Gina Ogilvie. People milled around before and after the speeches to listen to the band and look at the exhibitions of artwork by individuals affected by torture and trauma.

The International Rehabilitation Council For Torture Victims (IRCT) in Copenhagen is the coordinator of the international events. In a statement about the importance of the day the IRCT said: "On this day we sound the bell of indignation for these unconscionable persons who callously abuse human beings. We let them know in unison that we are watching, that more and more of us in every nook and cranny are on guard against their wickedness. We let them know that their days of governing through heartless pain infliction are numbered."



Photo by Gia Hai Nguyen



In 1973, a bloody coup led by General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected Chilean government. It was during this time that I saw my neighbour being taken away after having his house violently ransacked. It was also the year that, for the first time, I was arrested for requesting the return to democracy.

I was 21 when I was kidnapped by the secret police. Also in detention, were my best friend and her eight-month-old baby, her partner, and a mother pleading for her children. Our crime was requesting an end to violations of human rights.

We were blindfolded, our hands and legs tied together, and thrown in the back of a truck for a very long ride. At our destination I was thrown into an isolation cell. I heard screams day and night of people being tortured; a young boy pleading and crying for days and days; the mother still pleading for her children.

I was taken with dogs to see my friend being tortured. Then it was my turn. Stripped naked, gagged, blindfolded, and with hands and legs tied to a metal bed, electroshocks were applied to my genitals and breasts. I



CHILEAN SURVIVOR BREAKS THE SILENCE

MARIA PILAR shares a personal account of her devastating ordeal in Pinochet's Chile.

was insulted, beaten, humiliated and laughed at. Then more electroshocks. I passed out in a pool of urine, excrement and terror.

I was kept there for a month. Stripped of any dignity or rights, it felt very unreal, like it was hell. So far away from any humanity, it was nothing I could have imagined before. I thought every day of how I could kill myself. They wanted more names. There was no way I was going to bring anybody else to this horror. Dying was the only way I could make sure of that.

After that month, I was taken away again. I thought this time I would be shot, but instead they put me in a very overcrowded prison with one toilet for 100 women. There I waited to be taken to more interrogations and my trial. I was considered an enemy of the state, a subversive criminal. I felt safer there than where I had been before, even though I was with what were considered common criminals. There I could talk with other women. I was given warmth and care. I felt human again.

Later I found out that the place where I was tortured was one of the regime's concentration camps. I was considered disappeared or

missing. My family had been denied any information about me. Then telegrams from all over the world began to arrive requesting the whereabouts of the missing and disappeared. This saved my life, the act of caring and concern from people that didn't know me.

The months in prison passed by very slowly, spent in fear, in complete despair, powerless and hopeless. One day I received a letter from an Amnesty International group telling me that I wasn't alone, that they had taken my case, that they were campaigning for my release. This meant so much to me. It gave me so much hope.

When my trial came up, it was a complete mockery. I was tried as a war criminal, five generals against me. It was quite funny actually. There they were, high up with their chests full of medals for killing acts and 10 pages of accusations against me. Was I the criminal?

I was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Later I confronted the military prosecutor. I asked him how could he, a man of law, submit himself to that. He lowered his eyes and didn't answer.

After a year, there was so much international pressure to liberate the political prisoners, that an amnesty was decreed. Again we see the power of the solidarity of ordinary people when they get together. I was released but it was short lived. The continual harassment by the secret police and the police forced me to go into hiding and leave the country. I was given a United Nation passport and refugee status. The World Council of Churches paid for my ticket thanks again to contributions from all over the world. At 22 years of age I boarded a plane for the first time and crossed half of the world. It was scary but nothing in comparison to what I left behind.

After 22 years, I still live with the effects of my traumatic experience. I still have terrible nightmares, hear the screams, I am afraid in the streets and at home. I live with fear: who is coming to my door, who is walking near me, that car that stopped, that surprising noise. Extreme anxiety, stress, indecision, guilt, shame, body pain, emotional pain, memories are with me everyday. When I see a dog I need to cross the street. If I meet somebody in a position of authority I am in so much panic that I shiver and sweat profusely. I don't trust anybody or anything. Sometimes, I don't get out of the house for weeks. The denial of justice, the impunity and silence about unspeakable crimes, makes healing almost impossible.

We all know that torture is a standard practice everywhere. Together we gather strength to fight it. Together we share hope all over the world for a just, safe and respectful future. Action is the only antidote to this inhumanity. This is the world that we have created. It is our responsibility to change it before it is too late. ●

This is an edited version of a speech given by Maria Pilar at the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture held at Bondi Pavilion.

Reclaiming identity after torture

One of the most profound losses experienced by survivors of torture can be a shattered identity.

JULIE SAVAGE reports on the impact of identity loss and grief on the healing process.

To feel a loss of identity after torture is a massive assault on an individual's emotional existence. Refugee survivors, such as those seen at STARTTS, have not only lost their country, community, family, friends and their belief in a recognisable and predictable morality, they have also lost the person they used to be. The enormity of losses that torture survivors experience puts them at risk of being unable to resolve their grief. Trauma and grief reactions become intertwined and the therapist must unravel and address the issues simultaneously to facilitate the healing process.

Torture and identity loss

Loss of identity, or selfhood, is a common response to torture. The ultimate goal of torture is to destroy the victim's personality and to obliterate their soul. The idea is to release a featureless, damaged individual back into society to serve as a warning to others. The torturers aim to kill the mind, not the body.

24 According to psychiatrist and trauma expert, Judith Herman, "traumatised people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose their trust in themselves, in other people and in God... The identity that they have formed prior to the trauma is irrevocably destroyed."

Manifestations of identity loss

The loss of identity experienced by torture survivors is felt and expressed in a number of different ways. The survivor is often acutely aware of the loss of their position in their family and community. Their relationships with friends, family members and colleagues can be severed if these people fear associating with the survivor and suffering the same fate themselves. Alternatively, the survivor may be released from prison to find that their significant others have been 'disappeared', killed in fighting or imprisoned themselves.

Where it is possible to continue relationships with friends and family, the dynamic of the relationship may be damaged. The personality of survivors can change immeasurably as a result of their horrific experiences. Their family may find them uncharacteristically withdrawn or angry and have difficulty in living with the changed person. Tensions can spiral into unmanageable conflict leading to divorce or separation.

While friends and colleagues are progressing with their education and careers, the survivor may have to resort to a life in exile. There, they will have to learn a new language and



familiarise themselves with the customs and infrastructure of the new country. If they had professional qualifications in their country of origin, they may not be recognised in the new country and the survivor will have to start all over again, usually with a sharp drop in their socioeconomic status. Every day becomes a battle for survival with a backdrop of painful memories of past events.

Sexual assault can alter the sexual identity of male and female survivors and cause isolation. "I couldn't tell my husband, and I can't let him near me. I worry for him and what he thinks. I feel so alone," said one woman. Other women express concern that the sexual assault will mean they will be unable to marry and will impact on their relationship with the rest of their community.

If the torture was genitally based, the survivor's ability to have children may be compromised. They will almost certainly be faced with grief over their inability to be a parent and the stigma this may bring in their community.

The physical identity of a survivor can be damaged if they bear

scars or disabilities as a result of the torture. In their day to day life they will be confronted with a constant reminder of the event which caused the scarring or disability to occur. Decreased physical function due to the damage inflicted during torture can be an ongoing source of pain or frustration.

Survivors often lose a sense of control over their bodies. During their torture they experience an incredible violation of bodily integrity. Their choices of how to care for their bodies and how to deal with their bodily functions are annihilated. No longer do they experience a sense of self-control or freedom to make decisions and behave in ways that are in accordance with their values and morals. Their belief in humanity, God, and a just social order are demolished. The norms of society become distorted in a frightening and overwhelming way. The paradigms formerly used to relate to the outside world are crushed by the act of torture leaving the survivor marginalised and alone.

Risk factors for unresolved grief

Survivors of torture and extreme war trauma are often dealing with intense post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomatology. They are also dealing with massive bereavement. Unfortunately, many of the risk factors identified as impediments to the resolution of losses are applicable to refugees. These risk factors include sudden onset of the incident leading to bereavement, witnessing a traumatic event, perceived preventability of the death, lack of social supports and the occurrence of other concurrent crises (D & M McKissock, 1998). Both intense grief and PTSD that continues for more than three months are considered to be chronic and indicate a more complex path towards resolution.

The interplay of trauma and grief reactions

When intense grief and post-traumatic stress become intertwined, the healing process becomes more complex (Raphael and Martinek, 1997). This is exacerbated by the fact that symptoms of grief and PTSD

may appear to be similar, but for the survivor the experiences of grief and PTSD are qualitatively different. The therapist must become skilled in recognising the overlap between PTSD and grief symptoms and address both issues simultaneously.

Many STARTTS clients suffer from a dual diagnosis of PTSD and depression. In some cases, severe PTSD symptomatology can cause a major depressive illness. By attempting to minimise the intrusive thoughts and anxiety associated with PTSD, the survivor inadvertently reduces the emotional range they are capable of experiencing resulting in a kind of 'shutting down' or 'death in life' existence (Ris  Becker, 1999).

However, underlying the depression may be enormous grief, possibly unacknowledged and masked by PTSD symptoms. If the grief is not addressed, then the outcome of treatment for PTSD is unlikely to be satisfactory.

Healing

Healing is affected by the individual circumstances of the survivor. The nature of the trauma experienced, personal and cultural belief systems and the developmental age of the survivor at the time of the trauma are all influential. The survivor's beliefs about the meaning of the trauma or grief can have a powerful effect upon the healing process. Political activists, for instance, are often better equipped to survive the torture experience as a result of their prior understanding of the risks involved in their actions and their commitment to the cause.

Some survivors identify the healing process with forgetting and avoiding the pain. Others underestimate the importance of healing, fearing that if they do forget they will wipe out their personal history.

Cultural beliefs, for example, about sexual assault, can become an obstacle to the survivor's individual ability to grieve. Alternatively, cultural factors such as religious beliefs can be mobilised, with the assistance of the therapist, to assist the recovery process.

Therapeutic interventions should allow the client to ventilate their feelings. Space needs to be given to the client to discuss and, where appropriate, challenge personal, family and cultural belief systems. The therapist can also alleviate some of the client's anxiety by providing them with psycho-education, so they can better understand the cause of the symptoms they are experiencing.

Healing requires a safe place and a continued sense of safety in which to connect with the present and to integrate the horrific experiences of the past (Herman, 1994). Recurrent insecurity and lack of safety in the country of origin, and the insecurity of the refugee experience for those who manage to migrate elsewhere, complicate the process.

To facilitate the healing process, the therapist must address safety issues and strengthen family and social support networks. For this reason, STARTTS places a heavy emphasis on community development and linking clients to services and resources in both their own community and the wider Australian community.

Rebuilding the ability to trust is a major issue in the therapeutic context as well as the broader social context. The survivor should be made to feel that their experiences and feelings will be honoured by the therapist so that, eventually, they will regain their sense of trust in themselves, their family and their community.

The healing process requires a sensitive response to the overlapping symptoms of trauma and bereavement. For the traumatised and the bereaved, the reclaiming of trust depends on them being able to re-experience a sense of control, both in therapy and the world. A client centred therapeutic process brings about a slow movement towards trust in the self and others. As feelings of trust are rebuilt, so is the survivor's ability to reclaim their identity, to address their grief and to resume a productive life. ●

Julie Savage is a generalist counsellor at STARTTS. This article was adapted from a paper presented at the Fourth Transcultural Mental Health Center in November 1998.

Post-natal depression in Latin American refugees

When post-natal depression is detected in refugee women with a history of trauma, finding suitable treatment options becomes a confounding process. LUCY MARIN and GABRIELA SALABERT report on the issues affecting Latin American women.

Among the Latin American communities living in Sydney are a large number of women of reproductive age. The last census reported that there were about 12400 Latin American women between ages 15 and 44, representing a quarter of Sydney's Latin American communities. The majority of these women are from Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, El Salvador, Peru, Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela.

Although Spanish is the common language in these countries, the cultures are extremely diverse. Each has its own unique perspective on health care and in rural areas traditional medicines and health practices are used. The Spanish word for "midwife" varies from country to country as do the expected roles of a midwife. It is important for health professionals to take into account this conceptual diversity when treating pregnant women from Latin American backgrounds.

Many of these women living in Sydney arrived as refugees and have a history of traumatic experiences that occurred before, or even during, pregnancy. It is not uncommon to find pregnant women or mothers who have experienced rape by government soldiers or militia groups. In some cases, pregnancy was the result of the rape.

In most Latin American countries abortion is illegal and there are few choices available to women who find themselves pregnant. They may terminate the pregnancy in unsafe or dangerous conditions, or proceed

with childbirth.

In Latin American culture, a woman's mother is an important source of practical and emotional support during and after pregnancy. Traditionally, husbands have been less involved in the child-rearing process however this has begun to change over the last decades with men increasingly providing childcare assistance. That depends on social and economic factors and, in the case of refugees, the difficulties of settling in a new country.

These women who come to Australia as refugees may find themselves isolated during pregnancy. Their mothers, husbands and other extended family may remain in the

In most Latin American countries abortion is illegal and there are few choices available to women who find themselves pregnant.

country of origin or be inaccessible for other reasons and the natural support network that they might have expected breaks down. As a result, mothers can be extremely overwhelmed with the responsibility of caring for a new baby.

When Latin American refugee women present to health and welfare professionals, they usually display symptoms such as nightmares, panic attacks and sleep disorders which are related to their past trauma. They are often diagnosed with depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD exacerbates post-natal distress particularly if the child is born soon after the woman arrives in Australia during the process of settlement.

In these circumstances, the new pregnancy can cause women to have intense feelings of hopelessness,

confusion, ambivalence about bringing a child into the world and fears that their own anguish may effect the health of their baby. After the birth, mothers may become very depressed and internalise their feelings of anger caused by isolation, lack of support and their limited capacity to cope with this new experience.

Research carried out on Latin American women living in exile in the United States and Europe found they experienced a high incidence of post-natal depression (Canaval, 1998). The rate of post-natal depression was estimated to be between 10% and 30% depending on the country of residence. The risk factors identified were poor quality of life, lack of support from husbands, an increase in responsibilities and the sequelae of sexual, physical and emotional abuse in the country of origin.

The provision of social support has been identified as an important factor in the design of maternal health programs (Espinoza & Peralta, 1990). The establishment of support groups and psychotherapy groups for Latin American women in the public health system can alleviate some of the problems associated with isolation.

It is essential to understand the context in which post-natal depression occurs, to assess the resources available to the woman and to facilitate a comprehensive follow-up for women after birth.

Committed, aware health professionals will be an invaluable asset to women in this situation and will greatly assist their recovery.



Claudia's Story

Claudia is a 25-year-old woman from Peru who arrived in Australia with her husband when she was five months pregnant. They were both asylum seekers who had entered the country on a tourist visa.

Claudia had been a political activist in Peru and was studying teaching at university. Through a student organisation she recruited fellow students for the Shining Path guerilla movement. Claudia was also an active member of the Catholic Church, distributing food and other resources to disadvantaged people in Lima.

One day a truck with government soldiers arrived at the university to interrogate students suspected of being affiliated with the Shining Path. Claudia was abducted by the soldiers who blindfolded her and drove her to an undisclosed location. There, she was imprisoned in appalling conditions. She was kept in complete darkness and was fed scraps of bread and water. Occasionally a fellow prisoner was placed in the cell with her and later taken away by guards. She never saw them again and believed that the guards had taken them to be executed.

Claudia was kept in prison for three months. During this time she was beaten, burned on various parts of her body and raped repeatedly.

After three months she was

removed from her cell, driven to an isolated area in the mountains and abandoned. She walked for hours until someone driving past in a van picked her up and drove her to the city. She was physically and emotionally ill.

Claudia stayed with her mother and husband but could not seek medical assistance for fear of detection by the authorities. Soon after being released from prison Claudia became pregnant. She

and her husband escaped the country several months later.

In addition to these traumatic events, Claudia had also suffered physical, sexual and psychological abuse from her stepfather at the age of five. She later witnessed the murder of her stepfather and 15 year old brother by soldiers. Both had been tortured prior to their deaths.

When Claudia first presented to STARTTS for treatment she was experiencing a number of PTSD symptoms. Of greatest concern were sleep disorders, flashbacks, anger, fear and intrusive thoughts. Although she had experienced these symptoms before the birth of her son, they escalated after he was born.

Claudia developed post-natal depression and began exhibiting depressive moods, suicidal thoughts, feelings of guilt, lack of energy and concentration and memory problems. The intensity of her post-natal depression rated as severe according to the Edinburgh Post-Natal Depression Scale.

The uncertainty of gaining permanent residency in Australia, her lack of financial resources and inability to pay the hospital fees, further exacerbated Claudia's diagnosis.

Prior to the birth of her son, Claudia attended weekly counselling sessions at STARTTS where she worked on her psychological trauma, migration issues and grief. The most difficult issue for her at that time was her fear that she would not be granted

refugee status in Australia and forced to return to Peru. Claudia was writing a statement describing her past trauma for the Refugee Review Tribunal which was an additional source of distress. The memories evoked by writing the statement were painful and hard to cope with.

Claudia had many practical needs that were dealt with. St Vincent de Paul, the Smith Family, Centacare and the Sydney City Mission were all contacted to assist with Claudia's material needs such as food, clothing and housing. There was regular liaison with Claudia's solicitor and hospital staff. The hospital needed to be convinced to waive the payment of fees until Claudia obtained a medicare card.

Claudia was also referred to a hospital where she participated in a pre-natal group for Spanish speaking women. At that stage she stopped attending counselling at STARTTS however she was re-referred for further counselling after her child was born. The issues she needed to discuss were related to her past trauma, settlement, isolation and post-natal depression.

Claudia was successful in obtaining permanent residency in Australia and has managed to come to terms with the traumatic events that she experienced in Peru. She is currently expecting her second baby and is an active participant in self-support groups. Claudia's mother has arrived in Australia and she has been able to build up her family again.

Claudia is now more self-reliant, assertive, aware of the health care system and confident about her second pregnancy. ●

Claudia's real name has been changed.

Lucy Marin is counsellor for the Spanish-speaking communities at STARTTS. Gabriela Salabert is a psychologist at Fairfield Health Service. Together they have 20 years of experience in working with refugees.

This article was adapted from a paper presented at the Fourth Transcultural Mental Health Centre Conference in November 1988.

Amargura en Tierra Multiracial

En el tiempo, tras el tiempo
Esta canción sonará a derrota
Me estrujo la amargura
Me ví envuelto en una guerra
Cual locura
Donde no había hermanos
Sólo enemigos
Y después de tanto batallar, tanto batallar...
Exilio en tierra multiracial
A donde muchos buscan refugio
Recordando su doloroso pasado
Déjame decirte que yo era joven igual que tú
Qué crimen cometi por haber nacido pobre?
Luché para alcanzar lo que no pude lograr
Con gran esfuerzo de estudio y trabajo
Sangrado, apressado y despatriado
Díme!
Cómo voy a cantar un himno
A la tierra donde nací o admirar su bandera
Si con ella me esclavizaron?
Canta, si así lo quieres, aunque no suene bien
Sólo canta al tiempo
Que él se lleve tus derrotas

Multiracial continent

On the time, after time
This song will sound of defeat
I was overwhelmed with bitterness
I saw myself involved in war
It was madness
Where there were no brothers
Only enemies
After so many battles
Exile in a multiracial continent
Where the majority are refugees
They arrived with memories of the past
Let me tell you that I was young, the same as you
What crime did I commit for being born poor?
I went to fight to reach the thing
That working and studying I did not gain
Bleeding on occasions
Persecuted and captured and then exiled
Can you tell me
How can I sing a hymn
Of the land I was born
If I never had its respect
How can I hoist the flag if I was slave
How can I cry for a country that is so far
That has stolen my youth, my happiness
And my illusions to live
By the time this song has passed
When I sing it is a sound of defeat
Don't sing if it bothers you
Sing only to the time, when my defeat will be taken away.

A Song by Ernesto Perez

Photo by Gia Hai Nguyen