A publication of the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors
Welcome to the 21st issue of Refugee Transitions

Up until two decades ago the comprehensive suite of services for torture and trauma survivors that we now associate with STARTTS was just a dream. A much needed dream, though, as proved by the waiting list that materialized soon after the service opened its doors to the public in 1988. Twenty years ago, STARTTS began as a small pilot service tackling a challenging and complex set of problems affecting one of the most heterogeneous client groups conceivable. From a clinical point of view, it was mostly sailing uncharted waters back then, and learning as we went along, from related trauma fields, from a few colleagues overseas, and from our clients.

Twenty years later, the service has grown twenty fold, in both size and scope, and while we continue to learn, we are now proud to also be able to play a leading role in the development and refinement of clinical and community development models and approaches to assisting torture and trauma survivors. It has been an incredibly fulfilling and exciting journey, full of challenges, frustrations and breakthroughs, punctuated by our participation in extraordinary events such as Operation Safe Haven and the PRADET project in East Timor, and always sustained by the inspiration derived from our clients.

The way ahead is not any less challenging. Working with what is probably one of the most culturally and language diverse client population of any agency, we have to continue to learn from our clients and develop ways of working with them that match their worldview and expectations. We also have to develop seemingly successful ways to address the needs of our clients, it is now important to refine and document these methods and substantiate their effectiveness. Similarly, having developed successful models of practice and effective resources and materials places us in a position to be able to make a substantial contribution to the development of the field nationally and internationally. We hope to be able to meet these and other new challenges with the same resourcefulness, creativity and team spirit that have characterized STARTTS up to now.

At twenty, it could be said that STARTTS has well and truly come of age now, and among other things, it is time to review our governance, so as to ensure that STARTTS is able to rise to these and other future challenges in the most effective way, drawing on its strengths and maximizing synergies with partner organizations. In preparation for a ministerial announcement on this issue, STARTTS management committee has been exploring various options for STARTTS governance, and discussions with SSWAHS are well advanced regarding a possible implementation plan.

This is a potentially very positive development, supported by STARTTS management committee and staff. Under the option recommended by the management committee, STARTTS would remain part of the NSW health system as an affiliated Health organization, but it would be its own legal entity, which would greatly enhance its ability to operate in the current funding environment and maximize the fit between our client group and STARTTS services. It promises to continue to be an exciting journey, a journey that hopefully you’ll see as every bit as yours as it is ours.

After all, our clients, volunteers, staff, partners, supporters and friends have made us what we are today. You can read about our journey and future travels in two of the articles.

Looking back, looking forward could be the theme of our 21st issue. David Armitage examines a history in ideas of civil wars, while David Holcroft looks at Australia’s recent performance in relation to refugee policy.

Looking ahead, Emma Pittaway from Greenpeace writes of the looming global challenge facing refugee advocates – climate change. Her thought provoking piece shines light on the intertwining problems of environmental degradation and resource-driven conflicts.

The article on the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo demonstrates just how lethal resource conflicts can be. The competition to control Congo’s abundant mineral resources has produced the most deadly conflict on earth today. The sexual violence accompanying the complete breakdown of law and order is having devastating consequences for the civilian population, who are dying in their thousands every day.

An equally perplexing issue - rehabilitation of child soldiers - is discussed by Michael Wessells, a psychologist who has been researching the area for more than a decade.

On a more positive note, the University of NSW’s Centre for Refugee Research explains “Reciprocal Research”, an empowering and innovative approach that recognises the skills, knowledge and experience of refugee participants to name and identify solutions for their problems. The research, currently being used with women-at-risk in refugee camps, has allowed them to talk about subjects many researchers imagine are either taboo or too difficult.

Innovations of a completely different nature are presented by Dr Stephen Porges. A specialist in neurobiology, Dr Porges is revolutionising our understanding of the way our brain regulates our ability to feel safe and engage socially with others. He writes about the Poly Vagus Theory.

Finally, one of STARTTS heroes, Tiep Nguyen, tells us of his life of service. As our longest serving bicultural counsellor, Tiep has seen many changes at STARTTS. In fact, STARTTS anniversary is also Tiep’s anniversary. It’s therefore fitting that his work be highlighted in this special issue.

So to Tiep, all the staff that has ever been employed at STARTTS, everyone that has ever worked with or for us or shown their support in so many ways, I thank you enormously.

I hope to see many of you at our anniversary celebration.

All the best
Jorge Aroche
Executive Director
Refugee 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.
The Budapest Jews didn’t suffer!” This verbal grenade was thrown at me in 1983 at the First Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Washington DC by a woman from the Hungarian provinces who had survived Auschwitz. I went there hoping to learn something about the fate of my relatives who had disappeared in the Great Abyss. I wasn’t ready for such venom. Having grown up with the ghosts of the dead, the sorrow of the living and my own, secret nightmares of falling bombs, I didn’t know there was a hierarchy in despair.

I suppose, when you are in a war situation, you experience the war subjectively and your perspective of events will revolve around that. After all, it was you ducking the bullets, the tanks; you were the starving skeleton on our TV screens; you looked into the crazed eyes of the machete-waving murderer or passed out from the torturer or rapist(s) thrusts. You alone.

The irony is that this awful experience has automatically placed you in a family of thousands, tens of thousands, even millions of strangers who have faced similar or far worse moments. The 20th century has been the bloodiest in recorded history, with some estimates of 183-203 million dead as a result of political mayhem of one kind or another, and countless million others made homeless refugees. The mind boggles at the inhumanity of man to man - or women to women for that matter, as gender is no barrier to the rapaciousness of torturers, murderers and rapists.

What happens when the insanity stops? How do you pick up the pieces?

The sad truth is that for most victims of trauma and torture there has been very little help available. Most just picked up the pieces as best they could and then muddled through. That’s what we did – my mother, brother and I – and I didn’t know how to respond to that woman’s accusatory statement. I felt vulnerable and out of place.
Almost a decade earlier, as a new US citizen after 16 years of being stateless because my mother was refused British citizenship, I penned a poem that asked: ‘I know who I am, but what has the world to do with me?’ A little later, I wrote in my diary: ‘When will I start to live?’

Interestingly, at the same conference in Washington DC, I discovered that I was a Holocaust child survivor as well as a child refugee (see box), and I became involved in the emerging Child Survivor support group in Washington DC. This helped me put things into perspective and eventually come to terms with my youthful demons and ‘live’. At least, that’s what I thought, until I was asked to write something for the 20th anniversary of STARTTS and I met Dragana, her brother Milos and their mother Rada, who escaped from Bosnia 10 years ago.

Milos politely said hello and good-bye as I walked into their spotless, cozy apartment. Like my brother so long ago, he was ‘fine’ and got on with life, and sorry, but he was going out with his friends. His mother and sister, on the other hand, were happy to share their problems with me and discuss how STARTTS helped them get on the road to recovery.

Their story was eerily familiar. The peaceful, productive life of this professional, middle class family from Drvar is turned upside down by political turmoil they neither create nor have the power to control or change. The town, made famous in 1944 by Germany’s attempt to assassinate Tito there, falls to Croatian aggression as Tito’s Yugoslavia falls apart five decades after its creation. The head of the family dies, and the widow and her two children move to the safety of Kosovo, where Rada, a lawyer, went to university and still has friends.

A few years later, Kosovo is engulfed by the madness and it’s time to move on. Australia opens its doors: Operation Safe Haven. Dragana develops separation anxiety from her mother. The school recommends she goes to see a specialist counselor and she spends one year at home doing her schoolwork by correspondence, while she is helped to deal with her trauma by STARTTS.

Today, Dragana is working and going to university. Her life no longer revolves around STARTTS, but she knows that, should she need them, they are there. Her experience with STARTTS, she says was ‘life-changing’.

“I don’t know if I would be where I am today without their help” – she says with conviction and adds: “I don’t think I would be going to uni and work, having friends and going out and enjoying life.”

Rada’s external achievements may not
mostly from Latin America and East Asia. From a small, three-bedroom house in Fairfield and a permanent staff of five, STARTTS has grown exponentially over the years and today operates from its sprawling headquarters in Carramar, with more than 100 staff serving clients not only in three Sydney service centres, but also across the state and, increasingly, internationally as well. They are at the forefront of trauma treatment and research, community development and knowledge transfer to health care workers in the wider community.

This continuous growth has been made possible by the unusual independent structure of the organisation within the NSW Health System: its management committee reports directly to the NSW Health Minister; its administrative, financial and employee services are administered by Sydney South West Area Health Service, and its financial independence is bolstered by its non-profit arm, Friends of STARTTS.

From the beginning, the STARTTS philosophy embraced a holistic approach to recovery. ‘We see people as part of a system,’ explains Executive Director, Jorge Aroche, a clinical psychologist and leader in the Latin American community, who migrated to Australia with his family as a child in the mid 1970s, when Uruguay was experiencing political upheaval.

‘We understand that people have a need for social support networks... you have to be able to acknowledge both the culture and the socio-political background of the people we work with.’

And that involves community development, which is a slow and continuously challenging task, according to STARTTS Community Development Coordinator Jasmina Bajraktarevic Hayward, a refugee from Bosnia, who became interested in the topic when she taught children science and maths in a United Nations’ run Bosnian refugee camp in Croatia.

‘Community development is a process, not a project for me. Projects are part of the process.’ She says that the community must own community development, and STARTTS role is to step in where there is a skills gap. In other words, the community must first decide where it wants to go, assess its capabilities to get there and then turn to STARTTS for help where there is a knowledge gap. And the reason is simple, says Jasmina: ‘ultimately it’s their journey, and we are here to support people on their journey’.

Because of the close community consultations – both formal and informal – every project has a skills transfer component, Jasmina explains, and she cites the example of a group of illiterate Hazara women from Afghanistan, who participated in a Families in Cultural Transition Program. The women became concerned that they had no job skills and would be forced to enter the mainstream workforce before they were ready. They may have been illiterate, but they were superb needlewomen, producing exquisite embroidery. Through a STARTTS volunteer’s contacts in the fashion industry, their embroidery was sold and is about to become part of a significant fashion show.

This holistic model, which underpins STARTTS success, was developed in the early days under the leadership of Jorge Aroche and Clinical Services and Research Coordinator, Mariano Coello. They presented it to the international trauma research community in 1994 at the 4th International Conference of Centres, Institutions and Individuals Concerned with Victims of Organized Violence.

This model held many innovations, such as employing bi-cultural counsellors and regarding the individual as being at the confluence of the interaction between the traumatic experiences of the past and the stresses and strains of resettlement in a new country, with a different language, culture and educational system.

Children were of special interest, as they are the future of the community. “Children try to adjust quickly in to a new culture, because they don’t want to be different,” says Nooria Mehrab, a medical doctor from Afghanistan who worked for five years in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, and is now a senior bi-cultural counsellor with STARTTS. She likens children to passive smokers, ‘because ... parents would talk about their concerns, their worries in front of them, without thinking that they will have impact on the children, so they are exposed to all this trauma without being acknowledged.’

And it’s especially hard for children born overseas who grow up in Australia, according to Tiep Nguyen, one of the first Vietnamese bi-cultural counsellors to join STARTTS. ‘They stand between the two cultures and don’t know which side they belong to’.

Since those early days, the number of services targeting various aspects of trauma, resettlement and community development has been dramatically expanded, so
that refugees arriving to NSW today are automatically screened for signs of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) under the Early Intervention Program, and families often receive support through the Families in Cultural Transition Program.

There are youth camps; there is help to set up community sports groups, leadership training and opportunities for information exchange. Following the success of last year's Sharing our Stories, Sharing our STrengths conference, plans are underway to keep the communication going across communities in a variety of ways, culminating in triennial conferences. And of course, there is individual counselling at all levels and ages.

Bi-cultural counsellors, with intimate knowledge of their own communities, are at the heart of all this activity. This was a STARTTS innovation, since most overseas trauma centres believed that, for a variety of reasons, torture and trauma survivors would prefer to share their problems with someone outside their own communities, and worked exclusively with interpreters. However, STARTTS was of the view that the process of adjustment and resettlement would be expedited if the survivors could express themselves in their own language with someone of the same cultural background.

When he joined STARTTS, Tiep, who was a teacher with some counselling training in Vietnam, worked closely with Robin Bowles, an Australian social worker. Both recall their early days as being very difficult, because everything was so new and they were operating in uncharted territory. Tiep was involved in youth work then, while Robin worked with translators and bi-cultural counsellors as they studied to become fully accredited counsellors or to get their overseas training recognized in Australia.

Training and staff support has been another key component of the STARTTS ethos, as well as the 50-30-20 job description that requires counsellors to spend 50 per cent of their time in counselling, 30 per cent in community development, and 20 per cent in study, research or training of their own choosing. This regime prevents burnout, according to Nooria Mehraby.

‘Self-care is very important in working with refugees’ she says, ‘we have an excellent clinical supervision and support system. Each counsellor is entitled to have weekly supervision from another clinician and we have a peer support system. We help each other and support each other.’

‘It's a challenging job. We are faced with cruelty and we hear horrible stories of what one human being can do to another. At the same time, we are seeing the resilience of our clients as well. It's not easy to listen to these horrible stories, but when clients begin to change that's an inspiring process. It's rewarding and that's what kept most of us here.’

STARTTS workers have helped more than 42,000 individuals over the past 20 years. They were the major counselling service provider for Kosovo refugees like Rada and her children, who arrived under the government's Safe Haven program. They counselled trauma and torture victims from East Timor and helped set up that country's psychiatric public health system.

They have brought innovative solutions to help their clients, and are probably the only torture and trauma service that has developed protocols for using neurofeedback for patients with hard to treat symptoms.

To say that it has been a challenging 20 years is an understatement, but Jorge Aroche says the service can’t rest on its laurels, it must remain ‘nimble, flexible and willing to learn and be open to different things’.

One of the biggest challenges of the past and future, he says, is the changing background of new arrivals, which necessitates learning about new cultures, political realities and training of new bi-cultural counsellors. He says the profile of new arrivals has already begun shifting from Africa since the African bi-cultural counsellor training program started three years ago.

AND WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

“We would like to see [STARTTS] as an affiliated health organisation’ says Jorge Aroche, ‘still part of the health service provision for the State, but at the same time being able to having our own legal entity, so we can sign contracts … we want a bit more freedom to explore different ways of doing things, which could also result in increased funds for the service and therefore for our clients.’

He sees the organisation moving forward, strengthening its research capabilities, and outreach to the mainstream health community so they become educated about the needs of trauma and torture survivors.

CODA

In the course of my research for this story I meet Minh, one of STARTTS’ recent success stories.

In the mid 1970s, Minh was an interpreter with the US Special Forces in Vietnam for many years and he was badly tortured during a two-year imprisonment after the communist takeover of South Vietnam. Like many people who put their trauma behind them, Minh started showing signs of posttraumatic stress 25 years on, when his business failed and other aspects of his life fell apart. He fell into a deep depression and was in danger of harming himself or others.

As I listen to his story, I realise that this gentle man with those clear, smiling eyes, has been witness to both sides of the fence: the torturer and the tortured. The hairs on the back of my neck start to bristle when I ask where he would be today if there was no STARTTS. His answer is unequivocal: ‘Maybe I become crazy. Maybe I kill somebody or I kill myself or I hit somebody and I get put in jail.’

I think about a friend’s brother and others I knew or heard about, who committed suicide or went mad in exile from Hungary. Again, I wonder how things would have been different for our cohort if STARTTS was there. The thought that comes to mind is the fervent hope that the STARTTS team will be able to continue on the path they charted for themselves 20 years ago for as long as their services will be needed. Hopefully, that won’t be forever.
Hard work, commitment and inspiration made STARTTS what it is today: a leader in the treatment and rehabilitation of torture and trauma survivors. JORGE AROCHE, STARTTS Executive Director and MARIANO COELLO, its Clinical and Research Coordinator spoke to OLGA YOLDI about the past, present and future.

**OY:** You both have seen the organisation grow significantly in the last few decades. What was it like working at STARTTS in the early days?

**JA:** When I joined there were five staff members operating from a small house in Fairfield. Today there are about 100. Twenty years ago STARTTS was indeed a very new service, starting to work in a very new area of psychology (the treatment of post traumatic stress disorder). I remember that Mariano and I tried to find literature on the subject but managed to find only seven articles. At that time we were still learning about the best treatment approaches and were keen to explore the best ways to work with refugee communities and provide a good service. We wanted to find out how best to talk about trauma to our clients and address the constellation of symptoms they were presenting to us.

I imagine at the time there were very few organisations in the world working in this field. Who were your mentors?

**JA:** Not only there were few organizations working in this field, but most were working in quite different contexts and circumstances. Rather than finding a mentor, it was a case of picking up various bits and pieces of knowledge from different sources, and learning from both the successes and failures of colleagues from around the world.

**MC:** The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), an international umbrella organisation associated with the rehabilitation centre from Denmark, the London Foundation for Victims of Torture, and PHAROS in Holland were the most developed at the time, but there were also small organisations in other countries as well. We had contact with psychologists who were working in this field in countries, such as Chile, particularly with Elizabeth Lira, who had written an article about new therapies, such as Narrative and Exposure Therapies. She wrote it under a different name because it was too risky to have her name published during the Pinochet dictatorship.

**JA:** It was therapy underground. Then we discovered the writings of Ignacio Martin Baro. He was a scholar, social psychologist, philosopher and Jesuit priest who was killed by the Salvadoran Army. He wrote a series of articles about the effects of what he called ‘state terrorism’ on societies. He developed what is called ‘liberation psychology’. His writings had
a huge influence in STARTTS philosophical framework and associated service provision model.

MC: Elizabeth Lira came to Australia to facilitate a workshop on how to work with refugee survivors of trauma and torture. We felt at the time that everyone was tentative about how to proceed. Nobody really knew much. We didn’t have a clear idea either. One must take into account that refugees came from so many different linguistic backgrounds, from such a vast array of cultures and worldviews, so we were not totally clear what methodologies would work or how to best apply them. However, we kept on trying different approaches and many times we got good results.

JA: We consulted with people in countries where therapy was being applied, such as Denmark, Holland and at the London Foundation. There were some psychiatrists in the US and Canada working with clients in private practice. But in most of those countries they took a medical approach. Also, the emphasis back then was on individual therapy.

MC: There were also psychologists and health workers in countries where there was political repression. They were aware of the problems and issues presented by clients that had been tortured but they were working underground, others were more open but discreet about their work.

JA: Our approach was different from the beginning, partly because of the way STARTTS was set up. Because of the influence of workers from the same communities our clients came from, because of progressive Australian policies such as multiculturalism, the emphasis on resettling refugees on a permanent basis and became familiar with their perspectives on life, their culture and with the symptoms and problems they were presenting to the health system that were associated with traumatic experiences, with torture in particular. There was a lot of emphasis on learning from refugees how to make our interventions meaningful and consonant with their world views in terms of their current priorities in the context of the resettlement process.

How was STARTTS set up?

JA: We were both involved with the pre-history of STARTTS. At the time we were both working with Latin American refugees in different capacities. Many of them had been tortured and were experiencing various difficulties associated with these experiences. But the health system seemed ill equipped to deal effectively with these problems. Their symptoms were often misdiagnosed, not well treated or even dismissed. Often well-meaning health professionals were at a loss as to how to deal with these issues, and overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of the problems and the different worldviews people brought with them. It was not only the diversity of cultures but also the range of experiences they had endured.

Similar problems were being experienced by the Vietnamese, Laotian and Khmer communities. All this was putting pressure on the NSW Department of Health and some bureaucrats started talks about how to address these issues.

Before STARTTS was set up a network of Spanish speaking psychologists was formed, sponsored by SLASA¹ and we were both involved in it. SLASA managed to gain some funding to provide a small service, while lobbying for a proper service to be developed.

MC: Some of the ideas were taken up by the Department of Health. St Vincent De Paul and the Immigration Department also took an interest and sponsored a conference where for the first time different government departments and NGOs met to discuss issues about torture and trauma.

JA: The Department of Health, through the South Western Sydney Area Health Board commissioned a report whose main author was Janice Reid. She interviewed refugees; she looked at what was happening overseas and at the initial work done in Australia. More importantly, she produced a report that incorporated a plan for the type of organisation that should be established. She proposed a flexible service that was to be integrated in the community, and would be in direct contact with stakeholders. It was a significant departure from the medical model, which was used at the time by other services around the world.

The report emphasized that the service needed to be flexible in order to adapt to the situation of the communities it served. It should consult with refugees about the kind of services they needed and should have a degree of independence from the health system. The new service should not be just another unit within mainstream health but should have its own identity. It also had to be physically separated from a hospital. These recommendations were taken up by the Health Department, and STARTTS was set up with a unique hybrid governance system, still part of the health system and South West Sydney Area Health Service but managed by an advisory committee reporting to the NSW Minister for Health.

STARTTS would never have developed the way it has without this autonomy. This made an enormous difference.

MC: While in other countries the service had been initiated by doctors, here it was a combined initiative by bureaucrats, doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers, so the whole endeavour had a different flavour. It was much more...
multidisciplinary in its approach. All views about how to tackle the issues presented by clients were welcomed, explored, and integrated, and there was a lot of discussion about how to deal with specific problems most effectively. So I would say that we developed a more holistic approach. From that notion Jorge and I developed a more systemic model that integrated clinical and community development approaches and was published in 1994. It has become synonymous with “the STARTTS model”.

JA: The other important difference to the other centres at the time was our philosophy of service. From the beginning STARTTS hired staff that spoke the main languages of clients and were from the same cultural backgrounds, so they were familiar with the culture of the client groups. That was really different from other services in other countries. In fact, in some of the early articles you find, the authors recommend against employing staff from the same background as clients, as this could pose problems because they might have survived similar experiences.

MC: Which is true. Even now we continue to hear this at different conferences. In some countries access to interpreters by clients is not that easy, so refugees only receive treatment when they can speak the language of the country of settlement.

I guess in many ways we have been precursors in this field, but the service was set up at a particular time in history, when the Australian government embraced a philosophy of service that included multiculturalism, access and equity policies, affirmative action etc. So our service reflected that unique philosophy which fitted well with our values, ideas and intentions. As far as I know there is no country in the world that offers an interpreting service 24 hours a day seven days a week, with so many languages.

So yes, it was timely; the social and political conditions at the time did in fact facilitate the establishment of STARTTS. From the early days we had an open policy that ensured clients participated and communities were consulted on all aspects of service delivery and in the direction of the organisation.

Did similar organisations in other countries learn from you?
MC: Yes, we did participate in international conferences, where we made presentations about our systemic model. The model was first presented at the IV Conference of the International Society for Health and Human Rights, in Manila, 1994.

JA: The systemic approach takes into consideration the complex problems that we are dealing with. These include the effects of trauma on the individual as well as the effects of being in exile, and of resettling in a new culture. There is also the complex interface of these issues with the problems normally experienced at different life stages. Refugees also get sick; they also experience barriers finding a job. They also experience generational problems.

MC: This means that you cannot only restrict your intervention to the individual since the problems are not only with the individual. You have to work with the community, and that brings a new dimension to our work. That is why we use community development strategies to assist communities to develop structures that can sustain and support clients that have been traumatised, because the environment where survivors heal is also important. The recovery environment must be appropriate.

The systemic approach also involves education for other service providers, working with the media, and our publication Refugee Transitions. Clients also suffer from what happens overseas. The ongoing trauma and fear for relatives left behind in a conflict continues to distress refugees.

We also need to take into consideration the social and political context in which torture happens. We need to gain an understanding of all those dimensions and how they interface with one another, so that we can “unpack” the problem and find the most propitious points to intervene effectively to assist clients regain control of their lives.

How would you define the vision that has guided the organisation?
MC: We haven’t stopped thinking. We have been flexible, but we have also been critical with ourselves. We have tried not to get bogged down with the dynamics of clients and perpetrators which can be destructive. We have moved forward in spite of the odds because of our firm commitment to provide a good service to clients. This has also been a challenge.

JA: There are many visions. There is still enormous scope in this field. Fortunately we have been able to attract committed individuals that work in something they believe in. But it hasn’t been just good fortune. We’ve been careful to attract people that are committed to the values of STARTTS. They tend to give a lot more than what is expected of them, in terms of hours, dedication, ideas and commitment. As a result there has been a lot of creativity, a lot of effort invested in continuously improving the service, bending backwards to identify the needs of clients and address the problems. We have a policy of drawing into the service the languages and skills that are relevant, and we keep the communication open to include the ideas and perspectives of staff and clients. There has also been a commitment to consult with communities. So in other words, we aim to maximise our resources and achieve the best possible outcomes. We are committed to growth, innovation, and continuous improvement.

We are aware of current research in this field. We have been keeping in touch with the latest developments in psychology and therapeutic methods, and with research into the biology of trauma. We are particularly interested in advancements in the area of physiology and brain physiology in the context of trauma and what that means for the different treatment approaches, as well as for understanding what we are trying to do with the different methodologies we use. Ultimately, while our clients come from different cultures and all have different ways of understanding and communicating stress and the sequelae of trauma, we all have the same physiology, the same brain. So we are now better able to understand how trauma affects people at the brain level, and as a result we are in a better position to apply this knowledge to the different therapeutic approaches that we use.

The vision behind what STARTTS today is a commitment to excellence.
What have the challenges been?
JA: Many. Ongoing. Like in any service, there is a constant need to balance the demand for services, the capacity to supply those services and the funds needed to keep them viable, so we are continuously juggling different needs.

This is not the only service that faces this dilemma. A challenge we always face is the continuous change of client groups. Initially we worked with groups from Latin American and South East Asia, then with refugees from the Middle East, Asia, South Asia, former Yugoslavia, Africa and now with clients from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Tibet. We really need to learn how best to communicate with these diverse groups, to understand their cultures and their problems. Most importantly we also need to know how to package our interventions so that they match their world views.

Another challenge is the growth of the service. In 1997, when I became Executive Director, there were 17 staff members. Now there are over 100. This growth means that we need to change our structure and learn different ways to manage the organisation and communicate. The growth of the service itself poses other challenges in terms of numbers as well as in the scope of the service. Increasingly we are becoming a state-wide service in earnest. We’ve been working in Coffs Harbour and Newcastle but now we are considering establishing smaller outposts in other regional areas to work with communities that are spread out geographically.

Another challenge is finding the time to keep in touch with advances in the trauma field in general and to ensure our staff is able to access this knowledge so that our clients can benefit from it. We do so by reading articles, attending conferences, and communicating with an international network of practitioners in this field, and by placing a high emphasis (and resources) on the ongoing training of staff. That is important because it is easy to become isolated in a specialised field. So contact with similar national organisations such as the national Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASST) has been crucial in ensuring we are able to exchange ideas, materials, ways of working, and have a joint approach to negotiations with the Commonwealth government. Keeping in touch and being informed is crucial; otherwise you can waste a lot of energy reinventing the wheel.

How do you see the future?
JA: In a few weeks time we will know if we have succeeded in our efforts to review our governance, so that STARTTS can be a separate entity, which will give us a lot more scope to extend those services that have the potential to grow. There are new and innovative ways in which we can assist torture and trauma survivors. There are a lot opportunities in terms of developing the service, such as using more sophisticated therapeutic approaches like Neurofeedback, but we also need to package the activities we do at a community level. Lately we have been working a lot with schools and young people. We intend to continue this work. There is also a lot of scope in training. As STARTTS grows and masters its service-provision model, we have a responsibility to share our knowledge with others, here as well as overseas. We don’t want it to remain within the confines of STARTTS. We want that knowledge to be made available to people outside the service.

There is potential for us to venture into many exciting projects in the future. There are so many ways in which we could continue to develop and consolidate what has already been done. Our experience continues to confirm our views that resources spent ensuring that refugees are able to deal with the trauma related issues that affect their health, their resettlement and limit their opportunities to participate in the Australian society, are one of the best investments a society can make.

How would you describe the experience of working with STARTTS all these years?
JA: It has meant much hard work but it has also been a privilege. I am here because I am committed to my work and I believe in what STARTTS does. STARTTS is not only a workplace but an entity that is congruent with my values, with those things I believe in. It’s been a privilege to work with the type of people that work here: staff, clients, and partner organisations. The work continues to be exciting. STARTTS has given me access to great people and to opportunities, although the nature of the work we do is quite bleak. Working with STARTTS you get to know the underbelly of the world, the part of the world we wish didn’t exist. You also see the opposite, you see hope, the promise of things to come, the optimism of people who have experienced the worst, the very worst the world has to offer, but despite that they have been able to regain control of their lives and find hope, optimism and often great wisdom. That teaches you about the best of human nature. There are obviously those who are still struggling with the aftermath of trauma, and they have taught me a lot too. All this work can be done because of a team that is supportive and committed.

MC: I have personally learned a lot about cultural differences, religions, different ways of understanding life and what healing truly means: what trauma does to people, and the interface of all those dimensions. It is the beauty and complexity that attracts me to this job. It is the interconnection of many unique dimensions such as human rights, political conflict, psychology, sociology and human development, as well as the anthropological and ethnographic characteristics of each group. For me this work has been a very enriching experience at many levels. Not only from having accompanied many people on their journeys towards recovery but also because it has been a source of continuous learning.

You must have seen many people who have been damaged?
JA: Yes, and that continues to be a challenge. Our question will continue to be: How can we develop better ways to help these people? You never get over those experiences, but people need to regain control of their lives, find themselves again, find hope, enjoyment and be able to give back to society. When it happens it is so inspiring. It is a great experience. I feel lucky to be part of their healing process. Reclaiming one’s life after torture is an amazing achievement because torture is the most dehumanising experience.

1 Spanish and Latin American Association for Social Assistance (SLASA)
The Democratic Republic of the Congo has experienced the deadliest conflicts since World War II, it has absorbed many international groups, rebel forces and government troops. REBECCA HINCHHEY writes.

Buried deep beneath the feet of soldiers fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (The Congo) today, lie the reasons of much of Congo’s horror. Below the surface lies gold, diamonds, cobalt and coltan. The Congo’s borders are awash with the minerals adorning the bodies of Western men and women. It’s also one of the few countries with abundant reserves of coltan – an essential mineral for mobile telephones, laptop computers and other hi-tech electronic devices. Estimates put the Congo at having close to 80 percent of the world’s reserves of this rarest of iron ores. Above ground, timber and water complete the deadly ingredients spurring the fighting.

Resources have long been the nexus of the Congo’s woes. It began with the King of Belgium’s grab for ivory and rubber. King Leopold II ‘owned’ the Congo from 1885 to 1908, when it was known as the Congo Free State. His wealth grew exponentially thanks to the rich resources of that country. Like today’s conflict, ordinary people saw none of the proceeds. Forced to work as slaves for their Belgian masters, they watched as the King added mansion upon mansion to his already considerable wealth. In the first decade of the new century, the Belgian government took over the King’s rule. Conditions remained horrendous. By 1960 they were gone, brushed aside as a post-war world rejected old-style colonialism.

For five years, various political groups jostled for power, hampered by the influence of military and cold-war powers. In 1965, Mobuto, then leader of the army, seized control of the government and remained at the top until the First Congo War of 1997. While his affluence increased, the same could not be said for the people.

The Congo’s troubles escalated in 1994 when Hutus and Tutsis began fleeing the genocide in Rwanda for the relative safety of the Congo, settling in refugee camps in the provinces of North and South Kivu. However, two years later the brutality of Rwanda followed them to the Congo. Hutu militias, responsible for the massacre of Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda, had escaped the new Tutsi-led government in Rwanda and joined the civilian refugees in the camps in the Congo.

When these blood-stained Rwandan Hutus formed new fighting groups, which included members of Rwanda’s former army, they launched attacks on their Rwandan Tutsi enemy from their Congo base, as well as on Tutsis living in the Congo.

These Rwandan Hutus were not alone in the Congo, and countless rebel groups and foreign troops increasingly complicated this conflict. Among them were Burundian Hutu rebels who were also carrying out attacks on Tutsis, particularly those in south Kivu known as the Banyamulenge.

Then the Rwandan army marched into the Congo, ostensibly to protect the Tutsis...
living there. Fronting their invasion was an armed rebel group led by the Congolese commander, Laurent-Desire Kabila. Uganda also stood behind him. Like Rwanda, Uganda viewed Kabila as a shield against armed groups in the east. And like Rwanda, Uganda also saw potential for a steady-flow of dollars from the resource-rich Congo. Cutting a swathe through the Congo, the Rwandan army perpetrated mass killings, particularly against Hutus living in the refugee camps. Hundreds of thousands died or disappeared in what became known as the first Congo war. A demoralised and destitute Congolese Army quickly capitulated.

Under the pressure, the Congo's President Joseph-Desire Mobutu, entrenched in kleptocratic power since 1965, fled the country. Kabila immediately seized control, beginning a period of corrupt and dictatorial rule full of the same largesse the people so hated in their former leader. The Congolese people’s hopes were deflated. Dreams of a new period of fair and just government faded and distrust of their foreign-backed government grew.

The Kabila-Rwanda-Uganda grouping was a shaky alliance at best. Sensing waning support from his backers, Kabila roused militia groups to his side. Just a year after ascending to power he turned on his backers (from eastern Congo), purging government ranks of Tutsi held positions and ordering foreign troops from the country. Their refusal to leave precipitated the beginning of a deadly conflict.

Ugandan, Rwandan and Burundian troops swarmed into the country, entrenching themselves in the north and the east. They named border protection and anti-Tutsi rebel activity as their motivation. But the Congo’s African neighbours had their eye on the glittering prize – its gold, diamonds and other mineral wealth.

More than 25 militia groups, both independent and foreign backed, joined them in the tussle for power and resource control. But Zimbabwe, Angola, Chad and Namibia came to the Congo’s aid.

FAILED PEACE AGREEMENTS
The first sign of hope that the conflict might end came in 1999 with the advent of the Lusaka agreement. However the hope would prove false because the agreement was riddled with cavities. Missing signatures included many of the major militia forces. The promised United Nations Peace Keepers – under the banner of MONUC (United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) materialised in pitiful numbers. International eyes focused elsewhere, leaving the Congo’s neighbouring countries which had invaded the Congo to do as they pleased and the unprotected Congolese to fend for themselves.

In January 2001, Kabila was assassinated and replaced by his son Joseph. His ascension brought a conciliatory tone and a brief lull in the fighting. While the United Nations dithered, Rwanda and Uganda increased their forces in the country. A new round of talks – the Sun City Talks – began in 2002. Agreements were reached but again they had holes. Major players were missing, power-sharing deals lacked detail and land and power imbalances in the East weren’t addressed.

International pressure forced Rwanda to the table, resulting in a peace agreement in July 2002. Under the terms the Congo would disarm Rwandan Hutu fighters living in the Congo while Rwanda would withdraw troops from the country. A similar deal was struck with Uganda.

Four million people had died in the official five-year battle, mostly from conflict-related disease and starvation, leaving a nation grieving for their loved ones. The blood bath had crippled the country. Health services disappeared, villages burned and bridges and roads disintegrated. The year 2003 heralded a year of peace. There was, however, no peace for the east, where disparate rebel groups still continued their war, displacing thousands of civilians.

The conflict in the East continued when a separate peace process in Ituri, a north eastern province, faltered. An ethnic-based conflict stirred by international backers resulted in violence as ugly as any seen in the Congo. Looking north raised the bile in the mouths of Rwandans, who wondered why there was no such peace process for the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu, at a time when the rest of the Congo enjoyed relative peace. So they began to covertly support private armies in the area. Other opposing rebel groups representing various different ethnicities joined the battle. The viciousness and brutality that followed was petrifying, even by Congolese standards. People feared another Rwanda.

Throughout the rest of the country, the situation was slowly improving. Most foreign troops had withdrawn and June marked the start of a transitional government which saw the younger Kabila sharing power with four vice-presidents.

MONUC substantially increased their peacekeeping operation to more than 10,000 personnel. Today, it is the largest such mission in the world, employing close to 17,000 staff. The lack of progress in the east is caused by greed, fear, ethnic abhorrence and a desire for supremacy.

HUMAN-RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THE EAST
While fears of genocide have abated, partly due to targeted MONUC intervention, the situation in the east still remains petrifying for the civilian population. Wide-spread sexual violence, disappearances, summary executions and looting go unpunished. In the eastern city of Goma, close to 800,000 civilians rot in the camps.
for internally displaced people. Boys and young men are being enlisted to a lifetime of violence – both a means of economic survival and a way of gaining power, it threatens to become an entrenched way of life.

Currently rebel groups continue to operate with impunity. Among them is the National Congress for the People's Defence (CNDP), lead by the infamous Laurent Nkunda. A self-styled protector of the Tutsi people, he is viewed by many as a major irritant in the war and a key factor in the continuing terror in eastern Congo. He is ably assisted by countless other mercenaries, who fight for control of the people and the land. Chief among them are the Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a mix of exiled Rwandan-

The UN was covering-up gold smuggling and arms trafficking by their own peacekeepers

Hutu fighters and disgruntled Congolese soldiers. Not helping is the national army, who themselves are guilty of gross human-rights violations.

An agreement this year has lead to paper hopes. January's Goma pact looked for an end to hostilities between 22 warring parties, a significant accomplishment for Kabila's presidency. It was not found. Less than six months later Human Rights Watch reported the killing of 200 civilians in the area. In the same period the UN told of 200 ceasefire violations.

While MONUC has lead to some improvements, they remain largely ineffectual in many areas and have been accused of exacerbating the situation in others. Earlier this year former UN officials were reporting that the UN was covering-up gold smuggling and arms trafficking by their own peacekeepers while others have accused these of taking sides, thereby adding fuel to the fire. That even UN personnel may be involved in resource exploitation shows the depth of the problem.

AN ENDLESS WAR

A United Nations investigation has found Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda guilty of illegally extracting precious resources from the land of the Congolese. Among a litany of evidence they have found that during the war, these countries were exporting diamonds, despite not producing the compressed carbon themselves.

Militia groups are similarly culpable. They are decimating the native forests bordering Uganda and Rwanda. The prize is charcoal, made by baking wood buried underneath soil. It's the major energy source across much of Southern Africa, used by villagers and city-folk for their everyday needs: Cooking, boiling water and heating.

Corrupt members of the Congolese army have also been implicated in illegal charcoal trafficking, along with drugs and other minerals. Billions are being made, but the people are starving. In 2004, 74 percent of the population were undernourished. "If the government was protecting the resources and using them for the benefit of the local community these issues wouldn't be there," Mfashingabo, a Congolese Australian and member of the minority Banyamulenge tribe, lamented.

Instead multinationals grease the pockets of government officials and local militiamen alike to ensure they can go on stealing from the world's poorest nations. The international companies buy mining rights and security from the government and other armed groups, who in turn use the profits to buy more of the military hardware that continues to kill the people. The soldiers see little of their leaders' wealth. They use their guns to get what they need.

Jacques Mwandulo, a Congolese academic currently working in Australia, tells it like this: "Most mining companies in the area, they don't play nice. Take the RCD. They have dealings with mining companies. They [the RCD]** provide bodyguards for them and in exchange they [the mining company] must supply military equipment.

Several well-known international mining corporations have highly questionable dealings within the Congo. Human Rights Watch names AngloGold Ashanti among them. "AngloGold Ashanti representatives established relations with the FNI***, an armed group responsible for serious human rights abuses including war crimes against humanity, who controlled the Mongbwalu area. In return for FNI assurances of security for its operations and staff, AngloGold Ashanti provided logistical and financial support – that in turn resulted in political benefits – to the armed group and its leaders."

Anvil Mining Ltd, an Australian-based minerals giant, has also been implicated in human-rights violations. An ABC Four Corners program screened in 2005 highlighted the company's role in providing transport and other logistical support to the Congolese military. Fifty kilometres from the company's copper and silver mining interests, disparate, disorganised rebels gained control of a police station and were heading for the mines.

According to the report, the rebels were distressed by the lack of profit flowing to the community from Anvil's mine. One hundred villagers were killed in the fighting. According to Albert Kitanka, who featured in the ABC report: "We started running but the soldiers caught and searched our belongings, they arrested my dad and two other boys. They put the boys into the Anvil mining truck. They came for my dad. I asked them 'where are you taking him?' and they didn't answer. "They took him 50 metres down the road where they shot and stabbed him to death."

An internal company investigation as well as a Congolese military court has cleared the company of any wrongdoing while the human-rights organisation that first raised the alarm is being accused of sabotaging investment in the country.

If the illegal and immoral exploitation of the Congo’s resources is not stopped soon violence will continue. But bringing the innumerable militia leaders together to stop the bloodshed is a task of Herculean proportions. Ensuring all the myriad ethnic groups receive representation and a share in the Congo's resources is one of the biggest challenges facing Africa today. Without addressing those root causes the brutality will continue. Will Kabila be the one to do so? Only time will tell.

*Family names have been omitted to protect their identity
** RCD – Congolese Rally for Democracy - Rwandan backed rebel group.
***FNI – Front for Nationalist Integration – A Ugandan militia group.
Traumatic fistula is a tear in the wall between the vagina and bladder caused by violent rape. In the eastern Congo the tormenting injury is as common as a broken bone. It is the by-product of the most lethal war in the world today, where rape is used to terrorise, humiliate and to destroy. In this complex and cruel conflict, more than 1,200 people are estimated to be dying every day.

Dr Kasereka Lusi, a surgeon working at one of the few hospitals in the area describes the sexual carnage like this: “There is nothing worse you can do to a human. They talk about four or five men. They rape them, they use material like sticks, like guns to really make a lady suffer. It is the most horrible thing.”

As dreadful as the physical consequences of rape are – the leaking urine, the constant smell, the inability to have children, the contraction of HIV – other costs are perhaps more devastating.

“The custom and the culture condemn them,” explains Lulu Mitshabu, a Congolese Australian and African Project Worker for Caritas. “Women have lost their dignity. They won’t get married. The husband can’t stay with the women. If someone has been with his wife it’s a disgrace. The best way to show his manhood is to chase the woman away. Even their families don’t want them because there is such shame.”

The social stigma compounds the psychological trauma. Economically, rape can crush a woman. “The threat of rape terrorises women and stops them from going to the field or the market, thereby destroying the economy of the region and emptying it of people,” says Lyn Lusi, who with Dr Lusi co-founded HEAL Africa, a charity working in the Eastern Congo. The incidence of rape is astounding; crossing boundaries of class, age, education and ethnicity. The United Nations reports that in June 2008 more than 2,000 rapes were reported in one province alone.

The ferocity of sexual violence is as shocking as its incidence. A Human Rights Watch report describes atrocities such as shooting women and girls in the vagina or cutting them with knives and razor blades. “Rape goes from six months to 80, 90 years old,” Mrs Mitshabu says, shaking her head at the memories of her recent visit.

Explanation for the sexual violence is almost as varied as explanations for the war itself. Lulu Mitshabu says that women bear the family honour. That by destroying her you are destroying the whole group and gaining power for your side. Mfashingbo believes it is a deliberate genocidal strategy, designed to affect a community’s ability to reproduce.

Lyn Lusi blames the twin problems of war and “underlying attitudes to women who are often treated as objects with the permission of traditions of a male-dominated society.” Tshimanga Beya, who once investigated the Congolese Army for abuse of power, puts it down to disaffection, poor training, drugs and humiliating the enemy.
It is no secret that wars are fought over competition for resources. So when the resources that are most critical for human survival – food and water – begin to diminish, we can expect to see more war. By EMMA PITAWAY

Climate change is demonstrating on a global scale what we have known for decades: that environmental degradation and human wellbeing cannot be separated. When warmer temperatures trigger ecological crises it should come as no surprise that the result is social breakdown and violence.

The link is already being observed. In Darfur, Nigeria, and parts of Asia and South America, long-held tribal tensions are being brought to critical points because of empty rivers, arid lands and dwindling food supplies.

And this is just a taste of what’s to come. According to the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), changes in climate are expected to have major negative consequences on food production in many parts of the world. Shifts in rainfall patterns will accelerate erosion and desertification and render land infertile; sea-level increases will inundate farmlands and disrupt fish populations; extreme weather events will disturb agricultural processes; and increased temperatures will accelerate grain sterility. Water will become increasingly scarce and disease will spread.

These projections alert us to the dire consequences of ignoring the threat of global warming. But the current effects of climate change on social and political instability are already providing us with a glimpse of the potential human toll. Never mind new definitions of climate refugees, global warming is already exacerbating existing refugee crises.
DARFUR: CLIMATE-INDUCED CONFLICT

One of the first links made between climate change and intensified conflict was in Darfur. A 2007 report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) recognizes the erosion of natural resources caused by climate change as among the root causes of Darfur's social strife and conflict. Even UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has acknowledged that “the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change.”

According to the UNEP report, unprecedented rainfall reduction in Northern Darfur has turned millions of hectares of already marginal semi-desert grazing land into desert. Desertification has threatened the livelihoods of pastoralist societies, causing severe, prolonged droughts over several decades, and instances of localized famine. Since 2003 this has resulted in widespread displacement in the region, as the Arab pastoralists have been forced south to find pasture, encroaching on the land of African farmers and sparking violent conflict.

It is overly simplistic to attribute armed conflict to any single cause like climate change. In the Darfur crisis, like all others, there are various contributing factors: ethnic and political tensions, tribal and clan divisions, poor governance and economic influences. What is different about Darfur is that it showed the world for the first time how climate-related factors can push existing tensions beyond the tipping point into violent conflict, affecting not only localized communities but also the region and the international community at large.

A GLOBAL TREND

Similar trends are being observed in other parts of Africa and the world. All countries in the Sahel belt—which has suffered ongoing drought and localized famine—are experiencing similar patterns as climate-induced desertification leads to displaced populations and ethnic conflict. The UN Special adviser on conflict, Jan Egeland, has recently visited the area, and recognises the “very clear link between climate induced resource competition and conflict.”

Parts of the Middle East, Central Asia and South America are likewise already facing societal stress due to climate change, making them more vulnerable to conflict. Tibet's vast glaciers cause the world's greatest river system, which provides a lifeline to 47% of the world's population residing in South and Central Asia. Due to climate change and environmental degradation, a cycle of chronic flooding and droughts is already creating water scarcity in the region. The potential consequences are unimaginably serious if global warming causes the melting and disappearance of the Himalayan glaciers as predicted. Intrastate water-sharing disputes have become rife in several Asian countries—from India and Pakistan to Southeast Asia and China—and the potential of greatly escalated conflict over river water resources now looms just over the horizon.

The trend of climate-induced resource scarcity leading to violent conflict is only beginning to be mapped, but it holds important lessons for humanity. It shows us how global warming is already affecting our world, and what we can expect to come. Climate change is acting like a ‘stress multiplier’, amplifying existing social tensions and creating new ones. It has the potential to cause heightened competition over resources; the displacement of populations and regional instability; and economic shocks leading to unemployment and violence.

The main lesson here is the importance of averting a disastrous global warming scenario. The contribution of climate change to current regional and ethnic conflicts is like stress cracks appearing before the real flood of climate-related refugees begins. As well as those areas where impacts are already being seen, resource conflicts are predicted to flourish in the former Soviet Union, the Niger Delta, the Nile Basin, the Indonesian archipelago and the vast watersheds of the Himalayas and the Andes. In what’s referred to as a ‘cascading effect’, resource-stressed societies will be less likely to withstand other climate change fallouts, such as intensifying natural disasters, economic depression, and people movement. Hundreds of millions of people will become refugees as their ecological and socio-political systems collapse. Climate change has the potential to create the biggest social and political destabilisation humanity has ever witnessed.

TIME TO ACT

Australia, as the highest per capita emitter of greenhouse gases and one of the leading refugee resettlement countries, is perfectly placed to play a leading role in averting these looming humanitarian disasters. Ratifying the Kyoto Protocol was a symbolic first step for the Rudd Government, but the real test will be whether the Government takes a leadership position in critical global climate negotiations in Copenhagen at the end of 2009. The world still has a chance to avoid the worst projections of melting glaciers, arid farmlands and flooded deltas, but it depends on developed nations like Australia committing to reduce their carbon emissions by the range recommended by IPCC science—25-40% by 2020. If they back down from this commitment when they meet in Copenhagen they’ll be blowing the chance of securing a global agreement to address climate change.

Time to tackle climate change is running out. If the international community fails in Copenhagen we will start to see food scarcity, water scarcity and violent conflict dramatically on the rise. And with decreasing habitable land and dwindling natural resources, the world will have to shelter hundreds of millions of new refugees.

Emma Pittaway is a climate change campaigner at Greenpeace. From 2005 - 2007 she was a community development research officer at STARTTS and she has worked for years in the refugee sector as a researcher, lobbyist and trainer.

---

1 Sudan Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment, UNEP, 2007
2 The Washington Post, 16th June 2007
3 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, www.irinnews.org
Dr MICHAEL WESSELLS is a Senior Child Protection Specialist for Christian Children’s Fund and Professor of Psychology at the Randolph Macon College in Virginia USA. He has served as President of the American Psychological Association Division of Peace Psychology and Psychologists for Social Responsibility. Author of three books and sixty published papers, his current research on children and armed conflict examines child soldiers, displaced children, psychosocial assistance in emergencies and post conflict reconstruction for peace. He spoke to OLGA YOLDI
You have mentioned that societies around the world are increasingly socialising young people for war. How many child soldiers do you think are fighting wars? In what countries?

No exact figures are available, in part because commanders are skilled at hiding the evidence but also because many formerly recruited children fear stigmatization and want to avoid being identified. My personal best estimate is over 200,000 children are in armed forces or groups at this moment, and they span all continents. Significant numbers of children are recruited in Sri Lanka, Iraq, Myanmar, Palestine, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Chad, Sudan, and Colombia, among others.

What methods do rebel groups use to dehumanise and brutalise young boys?

The dehumanization and brutalization applies to girls as well as boys. The primary method is forcing complete obedience by demanding on threat of death that children carry out actions that would be unthinkable in civilian life. Not uncommonly, groups that abduct children force them to kill members of their own village to destroy the social bonds and reduce their motivation to escape.

In many armed groups, children are forced to kill other children who try to escape, and the killing methods are calibrated psychologically to reduce moral qualms about killing. In Northern Uganda, for example, children are forced to collectively beat escapees with large wooden sticks. In this method, no one knows who dealt the death blow, thereby easing any moral angst that might have occurred over killing. Also, many commanders force children to drink the blood of presumed enemies to ‘harden them off’, when the goal is really to remove the sense of sanctity of life. Often children are beaten severely or killed for even minor infractions of the rules. In this situation, children learn very quickly to obey orders and to stop thinking about right and wrong in civilian terms--they enter a different moral world and do what they have to do to survive. The dehumanization process is completed by strictly isolating children from their friends and family, and prohibiting talk of what life is like outside the armed group. They become sealed, at least temporarily, in a new world where they have to operate according to the armed group’s rules.

When wars end these children will be socially isolated and stigmatised. What is being done to integrate them back into society?

In many African countries, former child soldiers are believed to be contaminated or haunted by the spirits of the dead. In rural areas, people often believe these spirits hold the power of life and death, which is quite terrifying. The first step toward gaining community acceptance in such contexts is to work with local healers, who perform rituals to cleanse or wash away the bad spirits which are
seen as threatening not only the former child soldiers but also their families and communities. In addition, young people need to find a place or meaningful role in society—if they hang out or spend time ‘idling’ and getting in trouble, this will impede their acceptance. Accordingly, most reintegration programs follow the Paris Principles, which set the standards for reintegration practices, and organize a mixture of education, livelihoods, family reintegration, and reconciliation supports. The good news is that when these supports are available, the vast majority of the formerly recruited children do in fact integrate into civilian life, though reintegration typically is measured over years.

You have mentioned that children are not always passive agents, that in some circumstances they find meaning in violence. This is very challenging. Do you think that education on peace and the value of human rights is as important for post conflict communities as it is providing aid?

The majority of humanitarian work is guided by concern over human rights, which I support wholeheartedly. Yet there are other reasons to support violence-affected youth, including those who have intentionally joined so-called liberation struggles to overthrow powers whom they regard as oppressors or who have joined armed groups to get revenge, money, or goods they could not obtain otherwise.

The main ‘other reason’ has to do with peacebuilding—what realistic chance for peace and sustainable development will we have if young people are socialized into violence and finding meaning in it? What we need is a combination of international and national commitments to building positive life options for children so they will be less likely to get involved in violence. This entails not only access to education and means of earning a living but also addressing the root causes of the conflict, which often related to social exclusion and injustice. Education for peace and human rights do not work well when applied alone, but they are effective when coupled with this approach of systems transformation.

You have worked with the Children Christian Fund in programs to reestablish trust between young killers and their victims. What programs did you develop to achieve that?

The most important first step is to rebuild empathy. In Sierra Leone, for example, local people feared ex-combatants and thought they were trouble-makers and bloodthirsty predators. A key step was to create social spaces in which young people told their stories of abduction and mistreatment by the armed groups. Local people came to understand that the children had in fact suffered and that they had not done bad things to have a good time but because they had been exploited by adults.

CCF/Sierra Leone also did a very useful program in organizing work teams of ex-soldiers and other youth who together built things such as schools and health posts that the villages valued. As the youth collaborated, they rehumanized each other. Equally important, local people came to see the former soldiers not as fighters but as civilians who give back to their communities. This giving back is a means of restorative justice whereby youth pay back the community for the harms done to them during the war. CCF has implemented many other supports for war-affected children—typically they involve traditional cleansing, education, livelihoods, and mentoring—such programs have been implemented in places such as Afghanistan, Liberia, Chad, Angola, Uganda, Sri Lanka, and Sierra Leone, among others.

The proliferation of small arms means that it is easier than ever to arm children. What percentage, do you believe, of arms production are small arms?

In addition to production, we have to think about distribution and availability. In most war zones in Africa, people can purchase an AK-47 assault rifle for the price of a chicken, and small arms are readily available through war profiteers. The numbers of small weapons are in the hundreds of millions, and this broad production and distribution makes it possible even for children of relatively small stature to be effective fighters.

As child soldiers, children are considered cheaper, less demanding than adults and they are easily manipulated. Are they also less able to cope with trauma than adult soldiers are?

Children are remarkably resilient overall. The chances of recovering and reintegration are high for most children. Chances are lower for children who are recruited at a very young age and who live inside armed groups for many years. But with appropriate community and family supports, most children defy the odds and make a successful transition to civilian life. This cautions against simplistic portrayals of young people as a “lost generation” or “traumatized children” who cannot find their way back.
Civil wars are the most fearsome, the most frequent form of human conflict that continues to haunt humanity,” said Professor David Armitage, an historian, and guest of the University of Sydney’s International Program Development Fund.

Currently more than 30 non-declared civil wars are being fought around the world at a cost of US$120 billion per annum. This is more than what the international community spends each year in aid to developing countries.

An authority on civil wars from ancient to modern times, and author of The Ideological Origins of the British Empire, Professor Armitage said that no other kind of collective violence parallels its impact, the lives lost, communities shattered, and histories defined. “Civil wars tend to linger in the memory of individuals, families and nations much longer than any other type of conflict,” he said. “Overall civil
Civil wars tend to be longer in duration, higher in casualties, more costly and with longer lasting social ramifications than wars between opposite nations."

However, by studying civil wars throughout history, Professor Armitage said they could “tell us what people hold most dear and what they are prepared to fight for. And most of all, it reveals what communities they think they belong to.”

Since 1989, 115 of the world’s 122 wars have been intra-national rather than international wars. Professor Armitage said that it was Roman history, law and literature that formed the idea of civil war.

“At the height of Rome’s civil war in the first century BC perhaps a quarter of male citizens aged 17 to 46 were in arms. 1,700 years later a bigger proportion of England’s population died in the civil war of the 1640s than perished in WWI. Two centuries later still, the death toll in the American civil war was six times larger (relative to the size of the population) than the casualty rate of WWII,” he said. “Slaughter of such magnitude shattered communities, shaped nations and scarred imaginations.”

In the first half of the 20th century civil wars were pivotal events in China, Russia, Spain, Ireland and Greece. And in the last 50 years almost half of the world’s countries, especially the poorest, have suffered civil wars.

Many of these conflicts have been caused by increased poverty and social exclusion, which has exacerbated existing political, ethnic and religious tensions. Many have become endless, protracted civil wars where the worst atrocities are still being committed. Some of these conflicts have spilled over into neighbouring countries or have drawn in outside powers causing regional disruption.

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

In many cases these wars are of little interest to great powers since there are no territorial or security interests at stake and therefore they can be allowed to go on forever.

Some of 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.” When this takes place 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.

Professor Armitage predicts that most conflicts in the foreseeable future will be civil wars. His lecture traced the history in the ideas of civil wars; the semantics and definitions. Why are some conflicts defined as civil wars by the international community while others aren’t? He explained that describing civil war has been much easier than defining it because its definitions have led to vigorous debates and spectacular disagreements throughout history.

The current disagreements over Iraq is indicative that the debate continues. Only in 2006 did some American newspapers conceded that the conflict was in fact a civil war, although the Bush Administration denied it. It used terms such as ‘terrorism’, ‘insurgency’, ‘a political military struggle for power’ to define the conflict, but never ‘civil war’. Two British journalists also refused to define it as a civil war because it was “fragmented, partly made up of non-Iraqi insurgents and part Iraqis, fighting for ends more contradictory than seizing power, so the Iraqi troubles did not qualify as civil war. Professor Armitage said that what was at stake in applying or withholding the term civil war in relation to Iraq was nothing less than the continuous presence of the US and the coalition forces.

The definition of civil war used by most political scientists stipulates that, “it must be a sustained military combat, primarily internal, resulting in at least 1,000 battlefield deaths per year, pitting central government forces against insurgent forces capable of inflicting upon the government forces of at least five percent of the fatalities the insurgents sustained”. However, many of the current conflicts may not necessarily fit into this definition.

What are the implications of calling a conflict a civil war? According to Professor Armitage, civil wars are perceived as purely internal matters, as someone else’s business, so the consequence of these definitions can become a matter of life and death for vulnerable populations. “Can we call the conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda civil wars? And allow the rest of the world to wash their hands of responsibility for what took place behind closed and sovereign borders?”

And what about Darfur? Darfur could be defined as a civil war, but it could also be defined as genocide, tribal infighting, as an ethnic conflict, or even as an endless and intractable political conflict that is beyond hope of resolution. Professor Armitage said definitions matter because they create different reactions, and raise different conceptions of political responsibility, and have moral and political consequences.

He mentioned that social scientists had invested significant resources into researching the factors that determine the onset of a civil war, its duration and its intensity, how civil wars end and why they seem so often to recur.

What factors cause such fragmentation in a community that can lead to a civil conflict? He mentioned social scientists normally take into consideration factors such as income inequality, religious
Civil wars are perceived as purely internal matters, as someone else’s business

differences in the population, or even how mountainous a terrain is. All these factors can play a role in determining the onset of a civil war and its duration. This research is useful because it can predict how long these conflicts tend to last. It can help governments and aid agencies plan for action. Of course all those decisions depend on the quality and relevance of the data.

He mentioned that some wars have been rebranded as revolutions, depending on who is writing the history. In the US there is still vigorous debate over whether the civil war was in fact a civil war or a revolution. He cited major revolutions such as the Russian, Chinese, Cuban and Iranian revolutions. “They were international as well as national events and shook the world like no other political tremors. Their end marked decisive breaks with the past and an opening of a new world order”. “Some of the revolutions of the 19th and 20th Centuries were ideologically closer to the American ideals of universal freedom, and the ideals of the French revolution, such as the Declaration of The Rights of Man. But it was Marx’s theory of history as a class struggle that radically shifted communities”.

He mentioned that in light of such revolutions, civil wars could be seen as retrograde, pointless and sterile by comparison since there was no promise of liberation but only destruction.” However, he said that such revolutions were in essence just civil wars.

A major shift in the concept of war emerged during the Cold War between the communist nations led by the Soviet Union and the democratic nations led by the US. This was a war between two ideologies and two opposing systems of government. This war has been defined as a “global civil war”. A war that, according to John Kennedy, tormented and divided mankind and polarized nations.

This was followed by transnational terrorism, which Professor Armitage defined as a war against all, as “the unrivalled struggle between transnational terrorists such as Al Qaeda and opposed parties, without any of the constraints placed upon conventional forms of warfare”.

Professor Armitage said that because most wars in the future would be civil, there was a need for ideas to prevent them; for new protocols to safeguard the security of civilians, and above all for new strategies to alleviate the developing world’s long agony, as they are mostly the ones living the reality of violence of war on a daily basis.

Will there ever be peace in the world? Jean Henri Dunant, who founded the Red Cross in 1864, believed that war as an essential ritual of human society may be tamed but would never be eradicated. Perhaps it has been tamed through politics. However, according to Harvard professor of psychology Steven Pinker, this is the most peaceful time in our species’ existence. We are currently benefiting from a long and steady decline in human violence, a phenomenon which, according to him started in the 16th century with the Age of Reason - particularly in England and Holland. “Even in the short term,” he adds “violence is on the wane.” According to Professor Pinker there have been fewer genocides and fewer civil wars in the last centuries.

Although this notion may seem somewhere between hallucinatory and obscene, particularly when one thinks about Darfur and Iraq, recent studies that quantify the historical ebb and flow of violence point to exactly that conclusion.

However, in modern ethics war is inhuman and it is simply undefendable. In the age of progress, human rights, and pacifism, war continues to be our greatest paradox.
Research among refugee communities can be problematic. Power imbalances, differing levels of education and literacy, the need to develop trust and sensitivities relating to particular topics, are just some of the issues researchers must navigate. Conversely, communities sometimes feel research fatigue, particularly when they believe the research brings them little, or no direct benefit.

DR EILEEN PITTAWAY and LINDA BARTOLOMEI from the Centre for Refugee Research at the University of NSW describe their own methodology.
Reciprocal Research is an action-research methodology, involving community training and consultations, which grew from our work examining the incidence and impact of systematic rape and sexual abuse on refugee women and girls in camps and refugee sites in Thailand, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and subsequently, in Australia.

This methodology had much success in both eliciting information and giving something back to communities.

The process gives participants a space to share information which they previously have withheld. For example, there is a conventional wisdom that ‘women do not talk about sexual abuse,’ for a number of reasons including shame and culture. However, in camps and urban settings in six countries, and with resettled populations in Australia, we have found that women are desperate to tell their stories. The key is establishing trust with these women in a safe space, and providing the opportunity for them to share their experience. The most common response that we get in all settings is “This is the first time I have been ALLOWED to tell my story – this is the first time anyone has LISTENED to me.

**HOW RECIPROCAL RESEARCH WAS DEVELOPED**

We developed this particular “Participatory Action Research” methodology for use with community groups, with significant input from refugee women in community-based organisations on the Thai-Burma border.

They discussed the fact that they were tired of constant requests to participate in research projects by academics, post-graduate students, international non-government organisations and human rights groups, for which they perceived little or no direct benefit for themselves and others who gave up their time. In some cases communities were put at risk by the researchers. The women asked that human rights and gender training be provided as part of the research process, and that they be taught how to undertake their own research projects.

**WHO TO USE IT WITH**

The focus of Reciprocal Research is on collecting information from often vulnerable populations in a way that is empowering, not harmful, not exploitative and which has the potential to bring about social change. It is ideal for use with marginalised and disadvantaged groups who have valid reasons for distrusting people in authority, such as researchers, academics and representatives of Government and other institutions.

People who have experienced discrimination on the basis of class, race, gender, disability or refugee status are just some of the groups for whom Reciprocal Research could be a useful tool.

The method transforms many of the accepted relationships and principles which have underscored research and consultation in this area. Where people were seen as subjects of research, they are now participants in research. Where ethical practice meant minimising harm, it now means providing benefit to both researchers and the researched. And where researchers once directed projects and outcomes, participants and communities now take on that role.

**ESTABLISHING TRUST**

The key to success is establishing trust between the researcher and the group with whom she, or he, is working. Researchers are often time and resource poor, which makes it difficult to establish these relationships. One method that helps to quickly establish a trusting relationship and a willingness to participate is to use of a DVD of previous consultations. We have found that once groups have been shown a video of the method being used with other groups they quickly agree to participate in the process. This remains true even for those initially displaying obvious reluctance to engage with researchers. In all cases to date that initial trust has quickly grown because of the process itself, enabling the sharing of in-depth testimonies and evidence.

**THE CONSULTATION PROCESS**

The consultations, which are the key part of the Reciprocal Research, involve four stages. These are 1. Training in Human Rights, 2. “Story Circles”, 3. Story Boarding”, 4. Planning Future Actions.

The training includes an introduction to human rights and gender issues, to provide a context to guide participants as they examine and articulate their communities’ critical issues. Strict confidentiality agreements are negotiated at the beginning of each session, and all participants sign a group agreement.

Next, using Story Circles, participants are invited to share stories of particular issues positioned within the human rights framework. These can be their own stories or stories of a friend, family or community member.

This gives participants a degree of safety, allowing them to share information without necessarily identifying the issue as their own. The stories yield a large amount of rich data on the type of problems being...
Women reported that at night villagers, police and guards in plain clothes would go to the sheds to target young beautiful women. They said the men would rape the girls and threaten their fathers and brothers with beatings and false allegations if the rapes were reported. Some women said influential villagers forced girls to have sex on the false promise that their male relatives would be released. One older woman reported that some girls were having unsafe abortions and some had died.

Bangladesh Camp 2006
experienced and the impact of these on individuals, families and communities.

The next step is to analyse what is happening in response to the problem at a local level, what needs to be done and who might be involved in the solution. This involves a technique called “Storyboarding”, during which participants use a series of drawings to conduct situational analyses, including proposals for action, response and interventions.

Working in small groups they are invited to focus on one of the key issues of concern which has arisen from the stories, and to prepare a series of six posters which analyse the issues. The posters can be drawings, a mix of text and drawing, or collages of magazine pictures. The focus is not on artistic ability, but on presenting a clear message to be presented to the larger groups.

The posters illustrate six key areas, which are:
1. The nature of the problem,
2. The impact of the problem on communities,
3. What is and isn’t available to assist communities,
4. Potential solutions, (If you were in charge of providing help for this issue, what would you do?)
5. Individuals or groups who might be able to assist, and
6. The hoped-for outcome of the action.

The questions which inform each of the stories can be altered to suit the needs of particular groups and projects.

The Story Board technique allows participants to name problems and issues within their communities in a positive and empowering context. It recognises the skills, knowledge and experience of participants and provides a human rights framework which acknowledges their rights to a secure life and social support. Storyboarding was first introduced to our work on the Thai-Burma border by Carole Shaw.

PLANNING FUTURE ACTIONS

This method works best when the researched community is given the opportunity to present the outcomes of the consultations to service providers, non-government organisations and other people in power. The Story Boards are an excellent vehicle and the researchers/consultation-facilitators can assist the groups to prepare their presentations. Often this is the first time that the researched group will have been invited to interact with those who have power over their lives as equals in a dialogue.

Key to the success of the methodology is verbatim documentation by researchers of the issues identified in the human rights training, from the stories and of the commentary given by participants when describing their drawings. The feedback and clarification undertaken by the facilitator and the discussion by the larger group of each presentation is also recorded.

Interviews can be undertaken to further explore themes which emerge from the analysis of the documentation. When combined with the data from individual interviews, it provides the framework for recommendations and future action.

The underlying premise is that everyone is capable of identifying and addressing community problems if the resources are available to support them. This method can be used with people of all levels of education, including people who are pre-literate and it has proved to be effective around the world.

For further information contact the Centre for Refugee Research at www.crr.unsw.edu.au

Now she tries to do her domestic work alone, but always thinking about her life, her future, etc.
FEELING SAFE or FEELING AFRAID: A THEORY BASED ON HUMAN EVOLUTION.

The University of Illinois’ Dr Stephen Porges is proposing a new way of conceiving the way our brain regulates our ability to feel safe and engage socially with others. He was recently in Sydney presenting at two STARTTS’ seminars.

By REBECCA HINCHEY

Shuffling into the counselling space, Fatima’s eyes are downcast, her eyelids drooping. Her face gives nothing away, infected as it is with the nothingness that sometimes characterises people who’ve endured a war zone.

It is session four and still she refuses to meet your gaze. Half the time you wonder if Fatima hears you at all, she seems to almost drift in and out of conscious listening. Will Fatima ever engage?

Reactions to trauma, even severe trauma, have traditionally been linked with the area of our nervous system associated with ‘fight or flight’ – our sympathetic nervous system.

Yet work by Dr Porges, Director of the university’s Brain-Body Centre, suggests a separate area of our brain may be responsible for the way we respond to the most extreme forms of danger associated with threats to our existence.

A CHALLENGE TO TRADITIONAL TWO-PART NERVOUS SYSTEM RESPONSES

According to Dr Porges, Fatima’s flat affect and distorted hearing are related to difficulties that occur when a very primitive part of our brain reacts to threats to our life.

According to Dr Porges, once this circuit in our brain is triggered, the ability both to detect safety and to be comforted by other people no longer works as it should.

This area of the brain, known as the brain-stem, regulates cranial nerves that connect the brain with both our face and our body. The
vagus, a cranial nerve, is critically important during risks to our life.

The vagus forms part of our autonomic nervous system – the part which is responsible for our involuntary reactions such as heart beat, sweating and breathing. Traditionally this has been divided into two parts, the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems thought about in terms of balance.

Balance theories posit a sympathetic nervous system – the mobilisation or ‘flight or flight’ system - weighed against a parasympathetic system – the one which calms us down, where we behave ‘normally’. The Polyvagal Theory is by contrast a hierarchical one.

Dr Porges’ Polyvagal Theory suggests that the way the autonomic nervous system reacts is hierarchical. The hierarchy follows the evolution of our autonomic nervous system. Basically, it identifies three autonomic reactions which help us perceive safe, dangerous or life threatening environments and then react appropriately to them.

**REACTIONS TO SAFETY**

The first part is invoked in safe environments and allows us to engage socially with others. In terms of human evolution, it is the youngest. It helps us to distinguish background noise from conversation; it allows us to make eye-contact with others we feel are friendly or harmless and it helps our facial muscles react in the positive ways which facilitate conversation and relationships. This part of the vagus is unique to mammals and is a key component in our socialisation process.

**REACTIONS TO DANGER**

The second dimension is linked with the ‘flight or flight’ response. It occurs when the social engagement described above does not succeed. This region helps us react to potentially dangerous situations. It allows us to mobilise, to be ready for action. This area of the vagus is turned on when our palms are sweating and our heart is beating faster because we are entering a room full of people we don’t know or we suspect we are being followed in the street.

The third and least discussed area is associated with reactions to life threats. These reactions are mediated by a very ancient part of our nervous system. It is the ‘freeze’ response usually related to a near death experience. The freezing coupled with this response is different to the freeze sometimes associated with a pre fight or flight reaction. It is actually a response that looks more like a ‘shutdown’. In the freeze or more appropriately named immobilisation response our blood pressure drops, our heart rate slows, facial expressions disappear, our pain thresholds are heightened and we may faint, defecate or dissociate. It is this response which sees mice feign dead when confronted with a cat. The response is not deliberate, but a programmed reaction developed over millions of years.

This section of the vagus is evolutionarily the eldest and is an area which we share with other vertebrate animals such as reptiles.

The three parts respectively can be termed immobilisation, mobilisation and social communication.

**WHO SAYS IT’S SAFE?**

Responsibility for our reactions to our environment is only half the of the vagus equation. This tube-like collection of neurons provides us with information about hazards in our environment. It lets us know whether it’s safe to proceed and engage, or whether we need to protect ourselves against danger or life threat. It will then match our autonomic state to the environment.

Without our conscious awareness the vagus is constantly scanning our surrounds. Safe, dangerous or deadly? Safe, dangerous or deadly? Safe, dangerous or deadly?

Dr Porges terms this vigilance ‘neuroception’.

**WHY IT’S SAFE FOR ME BUT NOT FOR YOU**

According to his theory, a faulty neuroception will interfere with our ability to feel safe in an otherwise secure environment. Conversely, it may react as if we are in safe surroundings when really they are very dangerous. A defective neuroception will therefore also inhibit our ability to react appropriately to the environment.

Fatima may not have any cognitive reason to be frightened, yet her neural pathways are telling her that it’s extremely dangerous, and they are recruiting that part of the vagus involved in physiological responses to risk to life.

His research suggests people with a range of psychological disorders, from autism to anxiety to bipolar, are suffering from defective vagus systems which are unable to detect safe environments.
Some disorders associated with a faulty neuroception are connected with autonomic states that promote fight or flight which aren’t compatible with social engagement or communication.

However, Post Traumatic Stress and other disorders associated with trauma reactions may be unique in recruiting the oldest vagal circuit that reptiles use to immobilise as a defence strategy.

To understand how Fatima’s vagus is betraying her is to understand how it works in a hierarchical progression, based on its evolution.

The newest part of our system, the one which allow mammals to socially engage, can only work when we are able to inhibit the reactions from the older parts of the vagus system, the mobilisation and immobilisation parts.

To build relations with others, we need to turn off those defensive functions of our vagus – the ‘fight or flight’ and the freeze.

Yet for some people like Fatima, that seems impossible.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TREATMENT

So how can the Polyvagal theory be used to help people with autism or post traumatic stress disorder or other faulty vagus-related conditions?

Put simply, early activity suggests the key is the relationships between the parts of our brain responsible for controlling our facial and listening muscles, our heart beat and our breathing and the physiological reactions they produce.

The third or social communication section of our vagus system directs our facial and middle ear muscles. For example there are neural mechanisms in our vagus which allow background noises to become weak so that even when we’re at a loud party, we’re able to distinguish the voice of the person we’re speaking with.

It also commands our heart rate and bronchial system.

When that part of the vagus is switched off or blocked, then people like Fatima are unable to discriminate between voices and background sounds or are easily startled by sudden or loud noises, among other social difficulties.

Early research by Dr Porges’ team among people with social communication problems is using computer altered acoustics to activate the ear muscles linked to the third, social communication vagus. If the theory is correct then this should also stimulate other social behaviours.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS LOOK GOOD

For now for therapists, it means paying attention to the environment, especially acoustically. Speaking softly or removing your client to a quiet space is likely to be helpful. Listening to music, playing an instrument and singing are all strategies which Polyvagal Theory might suggest.

In the future, it could possibly open a branch of vagus-inspired therapies related to exercising the neurons involved in positive communication and relationship building.
The Principle of Good: TIEP NGUYEN

Some people’s altruism receives applause and accolades. Others labour quietly in the background, achieving much but without the public awards. TIEP NGUYEN, STARTTS Vietnamese bicultural counsellor and one of our longest serving staff members is one of the latter people. He talks to REBECCA HINCHHEY about a life of service.

Justice – or its absence – is at the core of STARTTS work. Like millions around the world striving for fairness and equality, it enflames our passions to see human beings disregarded, denigrated and dealt with as unworthy.

Tiep first displayed this fire for justice while attending a high school for future priests in Vietnam. The spark was a new system for deciding which students were most devout and virtuous. A privileged group, handpicked by the school’s new spiritual advisor, became the core group of religious activity in the seminary. An indignant Tiep reacted to what he saw as blatant inequity. In the dawn hours following the announcement he crept into the classroom, scrawling on the board in Latin:

“Without discrimination the sun shines on everyone”

He was expelled for this act of disobedience.

Was Tiep born with this zeal, or was it a product of early discrimination and deprivation? Tiep shares his birthplace, Vinh Yen, in the province of Nghe An, with many other heroes of modern and ancient Vietnam. Before he’d reached double figures the young lad had already lived through tragedy, displacement and persecution. His mother died from illness when Tiep was just seven or eight. Not long after, the menace of communism began to impact his catholic majority village. A young man active in the community was set aflame by the Viet Minh forces. Soon after, his home was raided by four officers, who forced the family to pack their belongings away and never touch them again. Sensing the impending danger, his father bundled up part of his brood, heading north to the nearest village free from communist control. Arriving in the safety of Phat Diem, the young student completed his primary education.

Many years on, Tiep is compassionate and wise. His clients give him credit for helping transform their lives. He is an institution at STARTTS and in the Vietnamese community,

War is impermanent but you become immune to the risk, to the insecurity and lack of safety.

held in extremely high esteem. His influence among STARTTS and the Vietnamese community is quietly significant. Tiep declares that when he began he was humble and ignorant and felt inadequate among the western educated staff. Yet like other bilingual workers at STARTTS, Tiep learnt from life how trauma,
exile and cultural displacement can disrupt a successful resettlement.

Life experience has enriched Tiep's counselling, but a passion for learning has played a huge role. Notwithstanding his earlier school rebellion, Tiep was and is extremely studious. His aptitude for liberal and English studies combined with a dedicated learning regime resulted in the award of the South's top school prize, awarded by the President of the Republic when he completed his last year of secondary education.

By 23, Tiep was standing in front of 50 students, teaching them the subjects he himself so enjoyed. Early days were difficult, as he struggled to maintain discipline in class, but he enjoyed the experience overall. Perhaps more importantly, his career offered education opportunities that served as a foundation for his future life of service. The first of these was a scholarship offered under the Colombo Plan. With 70 other teachers from across the globe he travelled to New Zealand for nine months of English tuition, remaining behind for a further three months to instruct new students in one of his favourite disciplines. The following year, in 1971, a fortuitous training prospect presented itself. Returning to his former teaching ground he was sent on the country's first course in guidance and counselling. Arriving back at school, he headed the Office of Guidance, organising activities and information sessions while seeing a small number of individual students.

"It was less personal counselling and more educational guidance," Tiep clarifies.

Craving further knowledge and contemplating an academic career, the teacher began weekend studies towards a Masters in Education, covering research, psychology and testing.

This was all set against a backdrop of mounting menace and violence.

As Tiep described, "War is permanent, but you have become 'immune' to this risk, to the insecurity and the lack of safety. "You still have to survive; organise life, do your job as if it is normal."

On the 30th April 1975 – the month known by many Vietnamese as Black April – the President of South Vietnam surrendered to the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and Saigon fell to communist control. His country changed irrevocably and his life spun about. This sort of unthinkable, massive disruption stamps refugees forever, as it did Tiep.

**SURVIVAL CAME FIRST**

"We were sort of paralysed emotionally and physically on the day of the 30th," Tiep explained.

"My brother, father and I sat in the kitchen. We were crying. This was the collapse of everything. We thought it was over, finished. It came so fast we were totally unprepared for the event.

"On the second day, every teacher had to report to school. A military man was there to take registration. He knew we had been in the military [mandatory under the previous government] and we had to declare it," he said.

**DEMOPTION OFTEN FOLLOWED**

"I wasn't looking after the guidance office anymore. People from the North and people from the South trained in the North came along to manage all the institutions," he told me.

"I was sort of a second class citizen," he emphasized.

After one month, school term ceased, and the teachers were sent for a 30-day stint in political indoctrination, where they were told about the crimes of the US imperialist government and the victories of the PAVN. For now, supplies were available in cities, but rural residents were reaching desperation. Fears of similar shortages lead metropolitan households to amass supplies; rice, oil, water, sugar and the distinctive fish sauce. According to Tiep, this habit still influences many Vietnamese families living in Australia today.

The process of moving from the country of origin to resettlement is usually
protracted and arduous. For Tiep it took seven years.

After his first bout in prison, Tiep taught in school for a further two years, replacing traditional teachings with compulsory subjects in Marxism, Leninism and communist literature. At the close of the second year Tiep and his peers were destined for internment number two in political propaganda. Before the appointed day Tiep attempted his first escape from the oppression and persecution of Vietnam. As with the hundreds of thousands of other Vietnamese who took the same risk, the boat wasn’t fit for the task.

“We were afloat for several days and we ran out of water and food, fourteen or so people,” Tiep shared.

“We could see land, we were moving between two islands. The engine didn’t work and we didn’t have oars. Finally we had to organise people to swim. We used the petrol containers; others sat on these and used small pieces of wood to row ashore.

“The first group of three swimmers didn’t return. After one day we sent another group who had wives on the boat so we knew they would return,” he said.

Even today, dreams of those terror-filled times sometimes slither in at night. It’s rare in recent years, but like most refugees Tiep knows how past horrors come haunting after dark.

The next leg of his journey would bring nightmares as well as guilt.

Rescued and then interrogated, Tiep was imprisoned in a stinking, teeming cell. Denied sufficient food and surrounded in filth, Tiep couldn’t distinguish the night from the day. After two months he was freed, courtesy of his sister’s bribe.

Unemployed and penniless, Tiep shrunk from the world around him. He stayed with family, alert for the chance of escape.

It came soon but it once again failed, this time without him even leaving the shore. Interrogated, imprisoned and released once more, he became homeless.

His dear father, who had also tried to flee, fell ill. Medical attention of the most serious nature was necessary. They parted in hospital.

“That’s the last time I see my father for four and half years.

“They arrest me, put handcuffs on and take me away.

“People had to tell him I was going overseas, had already gone. I still have the guilt. I feel distressed, pity for my father. When I was released in 1982 my father was very old.

“Years of suffering, years of unnecessary suffering.

“I feel guilt that my father had lived a delusion, lived a lie. Thought that I was safe when in fact I was not,” he lamented.

Guilt lives with most refugees. Guilt that they’ve escaped guilt they’ve left others behind, guilt that they’ve survived. That some survive while others do not is often just luck. The reality of refugee survival is a daily miracle.

Personal characteristics can also help carry some through. Courage and resilience stand out, but there are many other influences. Fortitude, perseverance, ingenuity, dreams and values were part of the mix keeping Tiep alive.

The brutality of the infamous Vietnamese ‘re-education camps’ is ugly and true.

“We had to go into the fields with empty bellies. Only two meals a day, one at midday, one after work,” Tiep remembered.

“They use fear to control you; they use hunger to control you. Intimidation and deprivation are their tools.

“When there is a good crop you get a bowl of rice and watery vegetable soup. When the crop is bad we have to eat the corn they feed the cattle.

“If you found a potato in the field you would have to eat it raw but if you got caught eating it you would be severely punished. This didn’t happen to my group but some of my clients have told me. If you got caught eating raw potato they made you eat two or three kilos,” Tiep elaborated.

The Vietnam War and its aftermath killed hundreds of thousands. Millions were scarred physically and psychologically. The burden has destroyed countless.

Not Tiep.

In part the explanation lies in an epilogue from a verse novel by Nguyen Du.
It has been a guiding principle throughout his life and sustained him throughout the horrendous years in the concentration camp.

Each of us has a burden to carry. Let’s carry it and not accuse Heaven of what might happen to us. The principle of good comes from our souls and a good heart is much worthier than all the talents.

Dreams helped as well, but they also hindered. As Tiep has written, his dreams ‘soothed and calmed’ but also ‘troubled and disturbed’ him.

“The first trauma nightmare, it’s recurring, it’s symbolic. The first dream was the loss of my motorbike right after April 1975. It was a dream of loss,” he told.

The second inserted the dreadful daily reality of camp into the blackness of night.

The third reassured and relaxed. It was also real, set in the bliss of early childhood when both mother and father were alive.

The last, which came on Christmas Day, 1982, was a dream of release, a dream representing hope for the future.

From that day until his successful escape in September 1983 Tiep lived an invisible sort of existence.

He was: “Without fixed accommodation, without a place in a household register, without a job, without income, without social status. You are nothing in that social structure,” he explained.

“I have nothing. No identity paper. You are a person without an identity,” he said.

Attempt three was fruitful, but petrifying.

“It was very cold and rainy under the dark sky. I don’t know if I pray or it’s a just a faint hope that the boat wouldn’t come and I would never try again,” Tiep recalled.

“It was so scary. The dogs were barking all around. We were afraid the security police would come and get us.

“It was very hard to find our way. The plants were above the surface of the water, sort of like a forest. We moved around for hours before we found the sea,” he remembered.

After five nights the starved and dishevelled crew arrived on an Indonesian island and were eventually brought to a United Nations processing centre at Galang. Processing was quick, but Tiep chose to remain, and to be of service. As voluntary organiser of a school, Tiep helped hundreds of Vietnamese with their first foray into the English language, among other things. It was a two-way street. Being of benefit to others was cathartic for Tiep.

“From 1975 to 1983, eight years of wasted time. Non-productive years,” he said.

“This short time was most fruitful, most happy. I was very useful.

“It was something to make up for lost time. I was respected by the Indonesian and American management and my compatriots” he continued.

Six months later, on the 29th of March 1984, Tiep and his nephew touched down in Australia. The Endeavour Hostel, Coogee became their home. Loneliness plagued them.

“I was one of the longest stayers, five months,” Tiep explained.

“We could stay six months but most people left earlier to stay with family or friends. I didn’t have family.

“The first weekend was very sad because they had family or friends to take them out, there were only very few left in the big hall.

“I was sad and a bit lonely,” he mourned.

Like in many Vietnamese people, self-sufficiency and independence are deeply ingrained in Tiep. As soon as he arrived he was exploring the city, Gregory’s in hand. It wasn’t long before he found his first job. In 1984 services for refugees were immature and few. The government was only just beginning to realise the importance of non-material support for people who had survived so much.

Tiep became one of the first Bilingual Vocational Support Officers for the Department of Education, liaising between school, student, and family.

This was quickly followed by employment with Anglicare supporting unaccompanied refugee minors. The two are a perfect match. Tiep brings his education and experiences as a teacher, refugee and school counsellor to the role. The position brings him more counselling experience and knowledge of refugee
services in Australia.

It was the perfect preamble for his position at STARTTS.

Over 20 years Tiep has made a deep impression on STARTTS, our clients and the Vietnamese community in Sydney. At the launch of the 2nd edition of the Vietnamese Resource Book, written extensively by Tiep, STARTTS Executive Director said

“We’d like to be able to clone Tiep, but since we can’t, we want to make sure other staff are able to absorb some of his wisdom and experience.

“Tiep Nguyen has been at STARTTS since its inception, and has been unstring in his work to assist Vietnamese clients,” he said.

As his words suggest, the credit for STARTTS’ close relationship with the Vietnamese community goes largely to Tiep. STARTTS can also thank him for helping us to reflect on how ethno-cultural factors influence the treatment and rehabilitation of torture and trauma survivors.

Perhaps one of his most significant contributions has been the successful application of western models of psychotherapy with non-Western individuals, proving for hundreds of bicultural counsellors that followed that not only can it be done, but it can filter through the community, helping the individual at hand as well as their peer group.

Since his humble beginnings in 1988, Tiep has seen more than 600 individual clients originally from Vietnam. There are few who have left unchanged or unimproved. For example, there is Minh Nguyen, who thinks that Tiep and STARTTS are the best thing that ever happened to him, or Loi Nguyen, who describes Tiep as “the best listener… someone to help when we need it… we can talk to him about all the things in life.”

Although Tiep originates from what might be described as a more ‘community-orientated’ culture, he sees work with individuals as part of the continuum of community.

“In our community there are many, many people suffering, including individuals and families,” he stated.

By working with as many of those single units as possible, he believes he’s helping to heal the suffering of the whole. Despite his success, he admits that the Bicultural Counsellor’s path is not always clear; it is missing in parts, overgrown in others, and each counsellor must travel with care. The first challenge is often limited understanding about working psychotherapeutically with survivors of trauma.

Discussing his lack of confidence in the early days, Tiep says, “When I first started I read … collections of articles on post-trauma stress. I read to upgrade my knowledge and skills.”

The two-worker counselling model, where new bicultural workers are teamed with experienced therapists during their first year or two, increased his confidence.

“The first person I saw with Robin … during the trip from Vietnam to the asylum country he lost one son. He never allowed his kids to go on school excursions if it were to the beach or sea; he had never taken him to the seaside himself. … That helped me to understand the effect of trauma. It’s a story of loss and grief. Of course he still had other trauma but that’s the main thing,” Tiep shared.

With this client, as with all, Tiep doesn’t explain what westernised professional counselling is.

“I say I’m a helper; emotional, family, trauma. If by sharing with me they feel relief or in the long-run they can resolve difficulties or symptoms subside, that’s my work.”

It’s an approach he advocates for other staff.

“Clients are sensitive to our caring attitude. Make an attempt to understand and show you are generally caring. That’s the first step to accessing people from a different culture,” Tiep advises.

“There are implications and complications when presenting yourself as a helping friend.

“I’ve crossed the boundary.

“I accept a gift if it’s not too expensive. In Vietnamese culture when they give you something out of their own heart, freely, you take it, because if you don’t take it, it might be hurting people.

“In counselling, sometimes you cry with the person crying. It can be a very strong advantage. It could be the highest and best sign that you are together with your client. But that might not be acceptable to western counsellors.

“Sometimes the training asks you to be neutral, but sometimes taking sides can help you build rapport,” Tiep advised.

He also employs strategies to avoid becoming unprofessionally close.

“We can make home visits, but not during holidays, and not during weekends.”

“I’m a friend in need but I avoid seeing them outside of working hours.”

Ending the counselling relationship when it’s viewed through the prism of friendship can also be tricky.

“If you’re a friend, how can you terminate, you have been on a journey, been through a lot together? When they feel they can go on by themselves it’s not hard to terminate because they don’t want to be a burden, they can go on.”

“All when I discuss it with them I tell them – ‘this is a temporary ending. You can come back whenever you want.’ That sort of termination is not very harsh,” he clarified.

Harsh is not a word you’d associate with Tiep, yet there are times he believes a severe application of counselling theories have been detrimental to his clients. One in particular stands out, a Vietnamese man who had suffered extreme humiliation and physical punishment.

“The wound has to be cleaned before you can apply the ointment. I felt I could heal the wound by opening it up and applying something there but it didn’t work that way. I was too fast and hurried. I followed the theory without considering the individual,” he castigates himself.

Tiep today is mellower. He’s more accepting of diversity, more flexible and patient. His personal life is as full as his professional one. A young son and wife keep him busy at home. Family life has necessarily decreased time devoted to work, but the core of the man remains service.

“STARTTS has given me a sense of achieving life goals,” he states.

Goals epitomised in the words of Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore.

“When I’m asleep, I dream that life is enjoyment. When I wake up I find that life is service. I have rendered service and found that service is enjoyment.”

 Loneliness is often the refugee’s friend
A publication of the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS).

Refugee Transitions exists to report on a wide range of refugee and human rights issues of relevance to the work of STARTTS. It aims to:

• focus attention on the impact of organised violence and human rights abuses on health
• provide ideas on intervention models to address the health and social needs of refugees
• debate and campaign for changes necessary to assist, empower and strengthen refugee communities in their settlement process
• provide a vehicle for cultural and personal expression.

To receive a one year subscription (Two issues of Refugee Transitions per year) please complete the following form and send it to:

Refugee Transitions PO Box 203 Fairfield NSW 2165

Name
Address
State                          Postcode
Home telephone
Business telephone
Mobile number
Email

Method of Payment
I have enclosed a cheque/money order (made payable to Friends of STARTTS) for $25 (GST inclusive)
Please charge $36 to my credit card

Bankcard    Mastercard    Visa

Cardholder's Name
Card Number
Expiry date
Cardholder's Signature
Date
Refugee Reform: The Next Chapter

By DAVID HOLDCROFT

The changes to Australia’s asylum policy announced last week by the immigration minister, Chris Evans, were as inevitable as they were sensible. They are also incremental: they remove some of the worst aspects of a cruel system but leave intact much of the deterrent apparatus inherited from the former government.

The introduction of mandatory detention is generally regarded as the work of Keating Government immigration minister Gerry Hand in 1992, although the policy direction can be traced three years previously to 1989.

The Howard Government strengthened it in response to what it saw as a sizeable increase in numbers of boat people making for Australia’s shores in the late 1990s. At the same time it introduced the infamous Pacific Solution, excising offshore islands from Australia’s migration zone, taking people to Nauru for processing, introducing temporary protection for those who had transited ‘safe’ countries for more than seven days and employing a narrow definition of the Refugee Convention with which to process claims. The aim was to deter applications for asylum ‘on shore’.

Undoubtedly, the Liberals will say their tough strategy set up the conditions under which last week’s changes became possible. There is some evidence for this. Recent research from the Australian National University indicates that deterrent measures such as limiting access to territory and those aimed at reducing the proportion of successful claims have played their part in reducing asylum applications worldwide.

However the policies were notable for the sheer cruelty they visited on those caught in the middle.

The same research attributes the overwhelming determinants of forced migration to so-called ‘push’ factors, namely oppression, terror and debilitating economic conditions in the countries of origin. Asylum seekers and refugees move because they have to.

Australia’s stance did nothing to address the causes of forced migration. It only shifted the burden elsewhere. The increase in overall numbers of displacement last year, to 38 million, further demonstrates this.

What the Coalition can take credit for is the high degree of cooperation with Indonesian authorities that has developed since 2001. However there is a perception in Indonesia that Australia is increasingly prepared to transfer its problems to its neighbour. There are people in Jakarta and Bogor who have been ‘warehoused’ after trying to reach Australia. Some have been there for years. Their low morale reflects the uncertainty of having been caught in limbo. Australia recognises some moral and financial responsibility for their welfare, and is encouraging Indonesia to accede to the Refugee Convention. Preventing people from coming to Australia is not the end of the asylum story.

Evans is acting cautiously. He wants to restore trust and cohesion to a discredited system. He also needs to manage public perceptions. People arriving in excised territories will go to Christmas Island for processing. Onshore asylum numbers will continue to be included as part of the overall refugee quota of around 7000.

And it remains to be seen the degree to which the move of claimants to the community will burden the sector. The role of measures such as the Community Care Pilot to manage complex cases across the range of their need is critical and needs expansion.

The vexed issues of work rights and ministerial appeal remain as the last vestiges of a system that punishes the victims and concentrates too much power in the minister’s office. The ANU research indicates that diminishing the socio-economic conditions of asylum seekers once here has little effect on deterring applications. But it has a huge impact on the community likely to bear the cost of their care in an ongoing manner.

More positively, Evans has moved to broaden criteria for refugee-like situations which will mean fewer people in protracted legal processes and a more transparent system of assessment.

Clearly the building of a cohesive system is a huge management challenge for this Government. Rest assured it will keep a close eye on the numbers of arrivals.

But any policy will only achieve its goals if the question around asylum seekers and refugees ultimately is recast. It is not a matter of how effective our border controls are and how many people we ‘let in’, as much as what is causing the people to seek refuge in the first place.

Is the Rudd Government willing to take on the causes of forced migration? If not, the victims will inevitably continue to suffer.

My first impressions of Addis are ones of being slightly shell shocked. There appear to be no traffic rules and pedestrians cross the major ring-road around the city by running across between traffic and perching on concrete barriers in the middle of the road! Donkeys carrying loads, sheep and goats often wander down the roads – they need sharp eyes and good reflexes!

The level of poverty is distressing – beggars, people sleeping on the side of the road and under overpasses, with only a blanket if they are lucky. Many live in tin shanties beside the road and there are many, particularly children, selling items to passersby. The contrast between those who have and the rest is stark and extreme – large houses with high walls and gates with a gate-keeper next door to tin shacks and those sleeping by the road. I trust I will never get used to this.

Welcome to the land of the coffee lovers! I’ve just returned from shopping where 25 grams of instant Nescafe cost 21birr, the Ethiopian currency (approx A$3.50) and 250g of real coffee cost 9 birr (approximately A$1.50) – guess which one I purchased! I have been offered coffee upon visiting a travel agent, computer place and other offices. A cup of buna be water – coffee with milk – is only 1.25 birr (approximately 21 cents Australian. I have to be careful how much I consume if I want to sleep.

To update you on my travels – I headed to Barhir Dar, 550kms north-west of Addis, last Sunday with Andrew Browning (a doctor from the fistula hospital). We left at 8 am and arrived at approximately 5.15 pm with less than one hour for stops. I am constantly impressed by Andrew’s ability to miss all the donkeys, goats, sheep, cattle, people and other vehicles on the road – no mean feat I may assure you. The road was a good sealed road, one lane in each direction (major highway north) apart from an area (about 50kms) through a gorge, across the Nile...
(you don’t take photos as there are soldiers there to confiscate any film taken) and up and out. The scenery was spectacular.

The countryside was quite dry as the “short rains” have been slow to come and the “long rains” don’t come till June/July and stay till September/October, after which it apparently is spectacularly green and lush. We travelled through many townships of different sizes. The trip back by air was spectacular – Ethiopia is a very mountainous country cut by steep gorges and rivers with people living in the most unlikely spots.

The Fistula Centre has been built in the grounds of the local hospital, which services 18 million people. The Centre is new and pleasant and Andrew has done approximately 50 fistula operations in the last month (which is very high). The ward takes 35 patients but often there are extras so mattresses are placed on the ground and there are two to a bed. The day I was there seven women and girls were being discharged and I took their photo on the digital camera. There was much giggling and exclamation as they looked at the photo of themselves. These women often face enormous challenges to get themselves to the centre. One woman who was operated on a year ago came to thank Andrew and to let him know that she was completely healed and very thankful. She walked for many days to get to the centre and was still wearing the dress to go home in – it had many patches and was obviously all she had.

Saturday, Wodunit (the cook at the Fistula Centre) arranged for a relative who is a “hippo caller” to find some hippos for us. Andrew, Wodunit and I set off with a car full of various people to see the hippos. What an amazing day – we walked by the Nile in the valley, met various people from the Gojam tribe, saw chat (local drug) growing, took numerous photos, were joined by children excited to have their photos taken, saw a few hippos in the distance, and walked with the cattle to the local drinking hole. I watched girls washing clothes in the river, saw the most spectacular scenery and ended up at the family home of Wondit. It was a memorable experience to share this time with this rural family in their huts made of timber with mud inside, shelves made from mud and sticks, dirt floor and few small rooms. How welcoming, gracious and generous they were. Again photographs were taken and enjoyed by the subjects who delighted in seeing themselves and each other. As Andrew was receiving calls from the hospital (and prescribing medications over the mobile phone when we could receive reception) we blitzed back to the car in the heat up and down the hills – all in all we reckon we walked about 10 km. Our hippo caller’s papyrus boat sank (while he was in it) but he was able to swim and made it back to shore, joining us for the trip back to Addis. Certainly not experiences one would have as a normal ‘tourist’.

Since then it has been back to work and on Thursday I went with some of Bright Hope’s staff and a UNICEF worker who was monitoring some of their projects to the workshops. It was good to meet some of the trainees learning hair-dressing and garment making skills. We also visited some of the trainees receiving information about setting up their own businesses, and one of the previous trainees who now has a small book-selling business.

Tuesday this week I was involved in the final workshop for Bright Hope’s staff and I hope to finish it this morning. There is still so much to do, but I know that I have been able to be of use here in many ways. We have power cuts every second day now which makes it extremely difficult to get work done on the laptop and for
others to get their work done and to give me the information I require.

On the last Saturday of the month there is a Handicrafts market at the International Evangelical Church (known as the International Bazaar where the local foreigners come – I even met some who had travelled from 50 km away) where NGOs and organisation working with street kids, prostitutes, people living with HIV and disabilities sell the products of their work. It is a great way to be able to support those with needs in the community in a positive way – but it is so tempting! Retail therapy in a big way! I went today with a Canadian lady staying at the guesthouse – she took me the Ethiopian way, catching the local mini-buses (I don’t think I’m feeling confident enough yet to do so on my own).

I continue to be well looked after and I am enjoying my time with Bright Hope. Hode, the main person I work with, thinks very similarly to me on many issues relating to work so we are learning from each other and enjoying it. He is learning to cope with my sense of humour and teasing. I have seen some of their trainees at work and met a number of them as they come through the office. The organisation has a good level of credibility and is considered one of the better agencies working with street kids. There are so many NGOs here that I can’t get over it – it would be good if a similar amount of money (and energy) went into investing in the country, although apparently this is beginning to happen a little more.

Whilst staying in the Chaplain’s house for two weeks, I was able to offer hospitality to various people. It was wonderful to be able to renew previous friendships and establish new ones. For the two Saturdays before leaving Addis, I went with some women from church to visit and take out some of the people from Mother Therese’s home for people who are developmentally delayed, disabled physically, have various medical conditions and a few orphans. It is quite an experience to go into such a crowded, unattractive place, but the feeling of community amongst the residents and the care and concern shown for each other is very humbling. It is quite an experience pushing a wheelchair with a guy in pyjamas up the street to a café where we have drinks, cake and as much conversation as our limited Amharic (and their limited English) allows.

Yesterday I went to the Piassa area which was an amazing experience – I have never seen so many jewellers shops – either silver or gold every second shop I think – yet alongside that materialism/opulence were people begging and obviously very poor. It is a constant reminder to me of what I have and how fortunate we are in Australia. I am getting around a little in mini-buses (sort of a cross between a taxi and a regular bus) but usually with someone else – still feeling a little insecure about knowing where I am going and how to get them to stop! Addis doesn’t have street names or street directories – you find your way by landmarks, which creates some problems when you don’t know the landmarks. I can now tell people how to get to Bright Hope’s office via landmarks though!

Ethiopian food is good and I am enjoying it. I have no problems now remembering to eat injera and wat with my right hand only (no knives and forks). All eating places here have a special washing area so you can wash your hands before and after the meal.

Flying from Addis the landscape was quite dry and brown, but as we went further away (south and west) it became
very green with forests, mountains and gorges and green everywhere. As we approached Juba in Southern Sudan the terrain flattened out with a few sparse trees scattered around on dry land. Tukuls (mud houses) dotted the landscape as well – particularly as we approached landing. The weather here is hot and humid.

I must admit that Juba reminds me somewhat of a NSW country town – but with fewer vehicles, unsealed roads, no high rises, no-one obeying the road rules, and rundown buildings. We enjoyed watching birds darting to and fro and circling us and geckos and lizards of all colours and hues running up and down trees.

It appears I should visit every town and village in the country as well as Parliamentarians and government officials. I am starting to get a feel for what is happening (or not) as the area begins the slow process of re-building and restoration after many years of war, infrastructure demolition and trauma for the people.

Those we met have all returned from the Diaspora – I look forward to meeting more people who remained in the country or who fled to neighbouring countries and have now returned.

Politics dominates most conversations, especially here in Juba, which is the capital of Southern Sudan and the seat of Government – with a Parliament only one year old and needing a lot of input about how to run a country, how to be accountable to the people, the economics of running a country and dealing with so many overseas companies and organisations wishing to ‘make a buck’ out of the country’s resources. One of our conversations tonight centred around the issue of the Southern Sudanese government being told by an oil company that the government should pay two thirds of the cost of building a road which would be mainly used by the oil company (who you can bet would be taking the giant’s share of any profits.) It is a challenge for a fledgling nation and people not experienced in negotiation to deal with these things.

Where to start the day – we have just finished dinner and spent about half an hour in conversation with a young guy from Rumbek who has an amazing story about the war. He spoke about his memories of it. He has flashbacks when he sees a plane at the airport like the ones which bombed them, or hears truck tyres making a particular noise which reminds him of ammunition. He spoke about what happened to him during the war, how he managed to get an education despite his father wanting him to go to the cattle camp with many other young men. He is now trying to support his family after the death of his father. His father practiced polygamy and had 10 wives. His sisters have all been married off, but that still leaves 32 brothers, as well as the mothers to support. Wow – how does one hear this and not feel so incredibly blessed?

There is quite a lot of dust as vehicles churn up and down the dirt roads. There are few vehicles compared to Addis, which is choked with traffic. Virtually all vehicles are white four-wheel drives, many with UN and similar logos on the site. Alongside this are the abandoned, rusting wrecks of trucks, army vehicles and other left to rot at the side of the road. There are people walking everywhere and particularly striking are the beautiful slim bodies of the Dinka women carrying articles on their heads as they walk along determinedly with beautiful bright pieces of material wrapped around them. (I discovered today how they manage to balance trays, containers of water, other food items and large bowls brimming with fresh mangoes picked from the trees by the Nile, on their heads. They have a piece of material rolled into a donut shape into which the base of the object being carried sits. Zenaib assures me that even I could carry things on my head – but I would never be able to look as wonderful as these lovely women!)
Water is an issue here as the Nile is quite polluted and we have been advised to even brush our teeth with bottled water. However, many people here don’t have access to clean water or to water purification machinery. We watched a group of boys today drinking water from beside the road.

I have become aware today that the possibility of HIV/AIDS being introduced and spread here is very real, as apparently there are quite a few girls from Kenya and Uganda who have arrived with HIV/AIDS working as prostitutes due to the number of men here without their wives and families.

I realized today just how many of the tukuls in town are being lived in by displaced people, and how many bombed out, abandoned buildings are living quarters for the many that come to the city for whatever reason. There is obviously much poverty here but I have yet to encounter anyone begging. Even in the markets I felt totally safe and carried my handbag freely.

One thing I am impressed with is the way in which the anti-corruption, exploitation and bribery message is out there. My friend Mayom tells me that the President is really against these and is determined that members of his government will not be involved in any of these behaviours. He seems intent on ensuring that the new Government gets things right and doesn’t fall into the same problems as some other African nations.

It is interesting being in this hotel as many people in government and other organisations are living here and there are constantly meetings going on with Parliamentarians and others who come. I have met so many VIPs. Interestingly, the flag of the New Sudan flutters from most buildings – even the most humble of tukuls or displaced persons camps – it is obvious what it means to people here, and there is a great depth of feeling for what they fought for and won. We also hear whatever news is going around, for example on Saturday there was an explosion in an army barracks in Khartoum (apparently unexploded ammunition overheated or something similar) and yesterday an engine in a plane at Juba airport had a fire in it as it was taxiing out onto the runway. Rumours abound until an ‘official’, and usually correct, version is put into the system.

Our last day in Sudan was quite busy, interesting and emotionally exhausting. Breakfast was spent chatting with various policy advisers and Government officials about the situation in Southern Sudan, what needs doing, what happens in Australia and other related topics. One can only feel a part of the beginning of the rebuilding of a country – it is very exciting to see and be a part of it. The afternoon was spent visiting a number of government officials. Then off to visit the Secretary-General (returned from Canberra), where we spent a bit of time chatting about the situation, the rebuilding and the fear that war might break out again – there still is little trust of the Northern Sudanese and their motivations.

The rains came on our last evening and day in Juba. What a blessing – the rain poured down, the dirt turned mud, the Nile River rose, the frogs were croaking, the weather cooled down considerably and everyone rejoiced.

It was sad to leave Southern Sudan. I kept wondering how different the place will look in another year (many people kept telling us how different things are now to only one year ago). At the airport I met the widow of John Garang. Many of the Australian Sudanese came to the airport for farewells and it was sad to say goodbye but I trust I will see them again. We have been constantly asked to return – even if only for a short time.

The rains came on our last evening and day in Juba. What a blessing – the rain poured down, the dirt turned mud, the Nile River rose, the frogs were croaking, the weather cooled down considerably and everyone rejoiced.

It was sad to leave Southern Sudan. I kept wondering how different the place will look in another year (many people kept telling us how different things are now to only one year ago). At the airport I met the widow of John Garang. Many of the Australian Sudanese came to the airport for farewells and it was sad to say goodbye but I trust I will see them again. We have been constantly asked to return – even if only for a short time.
There are few more challenging things than organising a conference in Peru, on behalf of a Norwegian-born institution, currently being run from Australia, with hundreds of participants from all over the world, in English and Spanish. But that is exactly what has been happening for some time now from the Carramar offices of STARTTS in Sydney NSW.

By ALEJANDRA SZCZEPANEK
The International Society for Health and Human Rights (ISHHR) will hold its 8th International Conference in Lima, Peru, between the 15th and 18th of October.

ISHHR was established to share knowledge, skills, experiences and concerns regarding the impact of persecution, torture and other human rights violations. This organisation was born out of the need to bring together health professionals, human rights advocates, refugees, survivors of torture and people affected by trauma and human rights abuses from all over the world. Every few years, ISHHR organises a major conference to combat the effects of trauma, torture and human rights abuses on mental health.

Violations of human rights have consistently become more sophisticated and widespread and therefore issues and problems relating to torture, trauma, and poverty have changed and become more complex. This has inadvertently meant that the ways in which these issues have been dealt with has also had to change. New and creative methods of analysing, diagnosing and treating survivors of torture and trauma are constantly being developed.

The ISHHR Council chose Peru as the host country as a way of highlighting that country’s recent plight regarding human rights violations, and perhaps more importantly and admirably, the way it has been dealing with issues of truth, justice, reparations and reconciliation.

Throughout the 80s and 90s, Peru was subject to extremely violent and bloody internal conflict, born out of clashes between the government and the People’s Guerrilla Army, the official name of the communist party. Violations of human rights have consistently become more sophisticated and widespread and therefore issues and problems relating to torture, trauma, and poverty have changed and become more complex. This has inadvertently meant that the ways in which these issues have been dealt with has also had to change. New and creative methods of analysing, diagnosing and treating survivors of torture and trauma are constantly being developed.

The mix of participants expected will be from all over the world, and many will fully relate to Dr Lerner’s closing remarks regarding the catastrophe that has scarred predominantly the Shining Path, but also among civilians and peasants who were supporters of either side, which also scarred innocent civilians, including children, who were unluckily caught in the middle.

The Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (CVR) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) was established in June 2001 to examine the atrocities committed in the 1980s and 1990s. Its work was formally concluded in August 2003, when the Commission, made up of many sectors of Civil Society, including scholars, journalists, sociologists, priests and artists, presented its final report to the then President Alejandro Toledo. The Commission found in its 2003 Final Report that 69,280 people died or disappeared between 1980 and 2000 as a result of the armed conflict and that over half of the deaths and disappearances reported to the Commission were caused by Shining Path. According to a summary of the report by Human Rights Watch, “Shining Path... killed about half the victims, and roughly one-third died at the hands of government security force. The commission attributed some of the other slayings to the MRTA (Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement), smaller guerrilla groups and local militias.

In this light, Peru proved to be a highly appropriate choice as host country for the 8th Conference, and even more so, when the organisers managed to secure Dr Salomon Lerner as one of the keynote speakers at the Conference.

Dr Lerner is a leading Peruvian academic and former president of the Committee for Truth and Reconciliation of Peru. He received the honorary medal on behalf of the Peruvian Congress to honour the work he undertook within the Commission.

He will speak about the challenges faced by Peruvian society after the social chaos and political unrest which shook Peru for two decades, and which still manages to rear its ugly head and remind Peruvian society of the violence and sadness of yesteryear, with small rebel cells making their presence felt in recent months.

Reconciliation, justice, rehabilitation, renewing community harmony and concerns about mental health and recuperation, are some of the cornerstone issues Dr Lerner will speak about in his opening address to the expected 300 delegates.

In the ceremony marking the end of the Commission’s work, Dr Lerner, as chairman of the Commission, stated:

“The report we hand in contains a double outrage: that of massive murder, disappearance and torture; and that of indolence, incompetence and indifference of those who could have stopped this humanitarian catastrophe but didn’t.”

The mix of participants expected will be from all over the world, and many will fully relate to Dr Lerner’s closing remarks regarding the catastrophe that has scarred
Peru and its people forever.

Many participants have suffered violence and trauma themselves, and others are professionals who are experienced in helping survivors to cope and move on.

To make the conference even more interesting and far reaching, the conference will be translated live into Spanish and English, and recorded by PsycheVisual, an Australian multimedia company that will film the Conference and make the content available on their website (www.psychevisual.com.au)

Several international leaders in the field of treatment of torture and trauma survivors and refugees will also be attending, among them Eileen Pittaway, the Director of the Centre for Refugee Research at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, and Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Work. She coordinates and teaches in the Masters Programs of International Social Development, and Refugees and Forced Migration. She has notched up countless awards and international recognition for her work as a trainer and as an academic. Her curriculum is as expansive as her passion for human rights.

She will be addressing the delegates in Peru as keynote speaker as well as running a capacity building workshop.

Dr Pittaway’s workshop will be one of nine being run over two days prior to the conference. The workshops aim to train and provide specific skills and capacities, prioritising the exchange between less developed countries.

Experts from all corners of the world, travelling from Europe, Australia, the US and other countries in Latin America will gather in Peru to shed some practical light on some complex issues.

These workshops will add a whole new dimension to the conference, as the advantages of including training sessions were recognised when the India Conference took place in 2005.

The workshops will include: Analysis of the Istanbul Protocol; Therapy through exploration of artistic expression; STARTTS’ own groundbreaking Neurofeedback Therapy; Therapeutic workshops as tools for group interventions; intercultural treatment of complex posttraumatic damage; Overcoming barriers to social reconstruction in a divided community; and Historical memory as a part of the reconciliation process.

One of the interesting aspects born out of putting this conference together from Australia is that it has given those involved in the conference a very particular perspective on things. We are geographically at a vantage point that provides unequal perspective through distance to examine contentious issues that involve people’s lives and human cruelty.

Inadvertently it also provides scope for examining one’s own backyard, and the role that Australia plays in a globalised world, particularly issues relating to refugees and the rather heavy burden they carry when they arrive in Australia, and the manner in which this affects everyone.

It is perhaps a little disappointing that it is necessary to organise a conference of this magnitude that focuses on health and human rights in order to get people thinking about how widespread the problems are and how diversified the field has had to become in order to deal with the complex and sophisticated ways in which people are made to suffer. But then again, it is comforting to know that every couple of years or so, hundreds of professionals and survivors of torture and trauma have the chance to gather, exchange views and learn from one another.

The conference promises to be a success on many fronts. We’ll keep you posted.
This vivid and compelling story of a young girl fleeing Afghanistan with her family is inspired on a true story.

Mahtab and her family are forced to leave their home in Herat after her grandfather is killed by the Taliban and her father is beaten. The family feels it is no longer safe to remain in Herat so they embarked on a dangerous and arduous journey initially to Pakistan, through the mountains, hidden in the back of a truck, in the middle of winter. Their only hope is a better life in another country.

When they arrived in Pakistan her father is advised to travel to Australia by himself initially to Pakistan, through Afghanistan with her family is inspired on a true story. Mahtab convinces her mother to embark on another journey to Indonesia, and then, by boat to Australia. This is her first experience at sea. At night storms rock the crowded boat and at times it looks like they won’t make it. But they do.

Finally one clear morning they arrive in Australia. Her first impressions of the new country are disappointing: “No dad. Of course he wasn’t there. No leaping from the deck onto the land. No running down the gangway, smiling, welcomed. Official men in short trousers, their legs hairy for all to see, came on board and strode up and down, searching for someone who could understand their language …”

They are then put into a detention centre to face a long and agonising wait for freedom and news of their father. This story certainly provides us a fresh view of life as a refugee, especially while living in detention. We are given an insight into the boredom, the difficult conditions, the segregation, the intense fear, isolation and despair experienced by a family living in no man’s land, where their lives are determined by things outside their control. However the characters still retain the certain innocence, naivety, and hope, while demonstrating how adaptable we can all be when the situation demands it. Slowly events begin to go well for the family and they are finally released and reunited with her father.

The issues uncovered throughout the book are corruption, political contempt for refugees and family separation, trauma and displacement. But Gleeson writes about them with a very deft hand, with some of these issues only hinted at.

This is a story of struggle, family, love and reunion but along the way it poses many questions about the nature of human beings, the potential for good and evil and the strength to be found in all of us. The emotions evoked in this reading will stay with the reader for a long time, encouraging sympathy, acceptance and tolerance. This story may appeal to primary and lower secondary school readers and it would be accessible to readers aged 10 year and more. It could be used as teaching material as it illustrates the recent experiences of many young refugees attending high school.

Libby Gleeson is one of Australia’s best loved children’s authors. She has published 20 books and has been shortlisted for the CBCA Award. Libby’s interest in this subject grew after 9/11 when she realised how difficult it must have been for Muslim kids in Australian schools. Her visit to Holroyd High School inspired her to write this book. She met with a group of students from a Year 11 class who were refugees and had lived in detention centres. They spoke of their stories of persecution and fear in their own countries and their escape to Australia. However she was attracted by a girl who felt passionate about telling her story. Her name is Nahid Karimi. The author visited Nahid a number of times and her parents, who were also eager to tell their story. They became friends and Mahtab’s Story was created. Gleeson says that this is not a biography of Nahid, since she has varied the events, added and subtracted to shape the story.

Although Nahid went to school for the first time when she was 12 years old, she managed to complete her high school. She is now studying Medical Science at the University of Western Sydney and plans to study Medicine in the future. For her life is positive now.

The book was launched by the Governor of NSW Marie Bashir. Nahid spoke at the launch about how fortunate she was to be in Australia where she was able to gain an education. “There are so many girls around the world that cannot have access to education,” she said.

I feel positive that Nahid will make a great contribution to Australia.
The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of a Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) helps refugees deal with their past experiences and build a new life in Australia.

Our services include counselling, group therapy, group activities and outings, camps for children and young people, English classes and physiotherapy.

We also work with other organisations and individuals to help them work more effectively with refugees.

Opened in 1988, STARTTS is one of Australia's leading organisations for the treatment of torture and trauma survivors.

Photography by Mohsen Soltany