



The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of 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, programs for children and young people, community development activities 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.

REFUGEE TRANSITIONS

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

Issue

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REFUGEE TRANSITIONS

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REFUGEE TRANSITIONS

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 that address the health and social needs of refugees, to debate and campaign for changes necessary to assist refugee communities in their settlement process and ultimately bring together a vehicle for personal expression.

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Director’s Message

Welcome to the 25th issue of Refugee Transitions.



Torture is a terrible and desperate tool, a favourite of regimes that lack legitimacy and popular support in order to perpetuate themselves in power. While bringing hope and an opportunity for much needed change in places where they were successful, the popular uprisings taking place in many countries in the Middle East have, where not successful, been met with obscene excesses of force and widespread use of torture.

This happens in an international context where funding for the prevention of torture and for services for survivors of torture has been seriously curtailed in the wake of the global economic crisis, with many torture and trauma services around the world that depend on international funds struggling for economic survival. While Australia has one of the best models in the world to support survivors of torture that settle in this country, its contribution to the global anti-torture movement still leaves much to be desired.

Unfortunately, not all the issues that impact adversely on our clients’ psychological readiness to settle successfully are directly connected to their overseas experiences. Increasingly, as the proportion of our clients that have experienced immigration detention grows, we find that the effects of prolonged detention feature more and more prominently as a factor that complicates the already complex presentations that define our client group.

Without wishing to make light of the political complexity behind Australia’s immigration detention policy, it is distressing to see how some of the problems that we spend considerable time and energy assisting our clients to overcome are directly related to the time spent in detention in Australia. This

is not because Australian Immigration Detention Centres are designed to be particularly evil or punishing environments; quite the opposite in fact. Considerable time, energy and resources are focused to provide for the health and welfare needs of the growing number of detainees. But the reality is that no matter how humane we try to make immigration detention, it is still detention, and if people spend enough time in such an environment it will affect them adversely.

Any moves to shorten detention times through more effective processing, to increase people’s locus of control while in detention and to provide alternatives to detention centres such as community detention are welcome developments. Minimising the psychological impact of detention results in people being better able to access their internal resources and think constructively, resulting in better resettlement outcomes for those that stay in Australia, and better prospects for those who may find themselves removed if their claims for protection are not accepted.

I hope you enjoy this issue of Refugee Transitions, which once again succeeds in throwing light on a variety of ongoing human rights issues and situations, new developments in the science of assisting survivors to heal and prosper, and the international political environment influencing our work.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jorge Aroche', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jorge Aroche
Chief Executive Officer
STARTTS

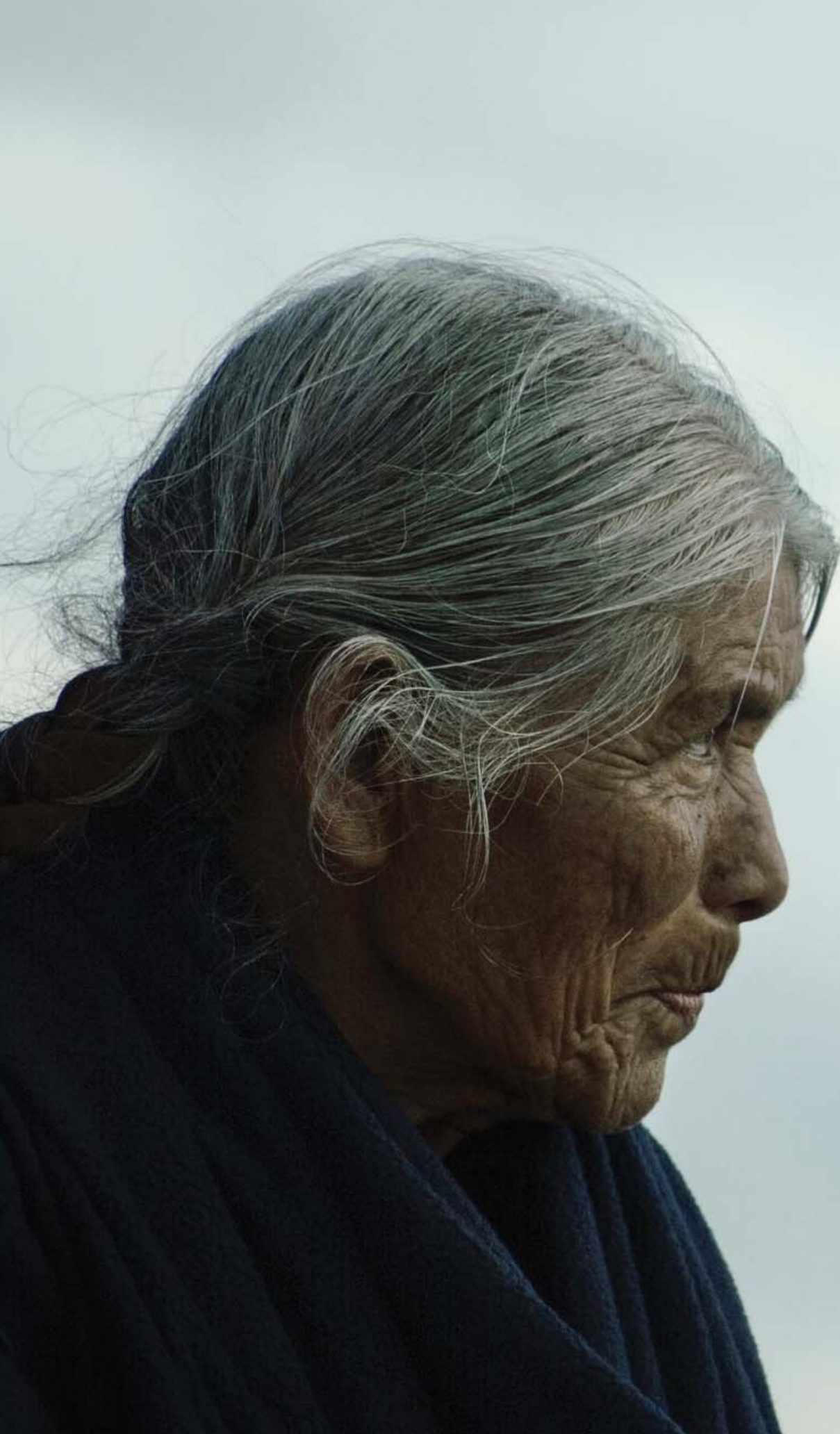


PHOTO MARTIN VINAOUR

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The Banality of Violence –

The Failings of Mexico's Drug War

MEXICAN BORDER CITIES HAVE BECOME epicentres of drug violence. These are places where people disappear mysteriously and bodies appear with mundane frequency, as drug cartels battle for control of smuggling routes. They are some of the world's most dangerous cities. But violence is now spreading north into the US and south into Central America. **OLGA YOLDI** writes.

Two years ago, hooded gunmen burst into a drug treatment centre in Ciudad Juarez, on the Mexico-US border. The attackers gathered together those inside, lined them up, ushered them into a central patio and opened fire with semiautomatic weapons. Eighteen people were killed, two survived to tell the tale. But these crimes, like many others in this city, were never solved. They rarely are.

The attack followed assaults on at least four other rehabilitation clinics in Ciudad Juarez during the previous months, according to news reports, while in the previous week at least 74 people had been killed, including a man who was beheaded, another suspended by handcuffs from a chain-link fence and four people whose bodies were piled on the sidewalk.

Last February, 40 people were murdered in drug related violence in less than 72 hours in Ciudad Juarez. What is remarkable about these killings is how unremarkable this type of brutality has become. It is just part of everyday life.

Escalating turf wars between rival Sinaloa and Juarez cartels and government corruption have taken violence to a different level, not seen before. Since 2006, more than 6,000 people have lost their lives in Juarez alone and 35,000 people have died in Mexico in drug violence -- mostly cartel criminals. Some were killed fighting the army, the police, the military, other cartels, or in power struggles within the same cartel.

Ciudad Juarez, a border city across the Rio Grande from El Paso, is one of the most dangerous cities in the world. In the last seven years, 230,000 people have fled the city, 100,000 homes have been abandoned, about 10,000 businesses have closed down and more than 100,000 jobs have been lost.

“Brutality and death have replaced law and order, and drugs and cash have replaced commerce and banking,” says Charles Bowden, journalist and author of *Murder City*. “Murder is the new way of doing business.” According to Bowden, there are 500 to 900 “armed, murderous, unschooled and unemployed young people” fighting one another and the police in Juarez alone.

The arrival of 7,000 federal army personnel and 5,000 police did little to deter Juarez’s underworld. “The killings did not stop, they increased fivefold. Only they are more sadistic and violent,” says Oscar Acosta, President of the Law Bar. “The arrival of the army only increased the abuse and violation of individual rights ... Civilians are now victims of kidnapping, extortion and murder, but they are too afraid to complain for fear of retaliation.”

Human-rights groups have accused the military and police of unleashing a reign of terror – carrying out acts of torture, forced disappearances, illegal detentions, kidnappings, assassinations and fabricating evidence – not only to fight the cartels but also to suppress dissidents and even ordinary citizens.

With the rule of law broken, the police have turned into another group using violence on behalf of the powerful. According to Human Rights Watch, abuses by the armed forces have increased sixfold in the past three years. Two thousand complaints were brought before Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission, but not one has resulted in the prosecution of a single soldier.

“What was initially a war on trafficking has evolved into a low-intensity civil war with more than two sides,” writes Philip Caputo in the *Atlantic Monthly*. “The ordinary Mexican citizen – never sure who is on what side, or who is fighting whom and for what reason – retreats into a private world where he becomes wilfully blind, deaf and above all, dumb.”

As long as there is demand for drugs the violence will persist. The US State Department estimates that 90 per cent of cocaine entering the US transits through Mexico, while Colombia is the main cocaine producer and Mexico the major

supplier of cannabis, methamphetamine and heroin to the US.

In spite of the government crackdown, the drug industry continues to thrive. As much as 30 per cent of Mexico’s arable land is suspected of being under cultivation for clandestine crops, according to journalist Alma Guillermoprieto. The trade

is worth an estimated US\$323 billion a year.

The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) reported that drugs have never been cheaper, or of higher quality or more widespread in the US, where there are an estimated 19.9 million drug users. The Justice Department has identified Mexican cartels now operating in 230 or more US cities, as far away as Boston and Anchorage, and of course the border cities.

Mexican drug cartels have existed since the 1960s, when it became clear that there was great demand for drugs in the US and Europe. Initially Mexico produced heroin poppies. According to The Guardian journalist Ed Vulliamy, author of *Amexica, War along the Borderline*, two initiatives by the US government during the 1970s and the 1980s changed things and in part laid the foundations for the modern cartels.

First during the 1970s the US, through Operation Condor, attempted to destroy heroin production, incinerating and defoliating the Sinaloan poppy crops, but this failed because the Mexican government protected the heroin barons.

Second, in the 1980s Washington embarked on its covert backing of right-wing Contra rebels against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Vulliamy writes that the Contras would be armed with weapons secretly transported from the US, with the criminal underworld acting as a supplier and mediator. “But the arms had to be paid for in currency that would not call attention to itself, and it was: in cocaine from Colombia,” he writes. “Just as the US needed Colombia’s natural currency to procure and pay for arms to the Contras, cocaine was becoming the drug of choice in powder form for the American entertainment.”

Thus Mexicans became the courier service for cocaine in one direction and arms in the other. According to Vulliamy, Mexico’s cartels combined three things: their knowledge of smuggling routes, the unofficial acquiescence of the Reagan Administration, and their conviviality with Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had ruled the country since 1917.

At the same time, Mexican cartels have also become



more powerful since the demise of Colombia’s Cali and Medellin cartels. Colombia’s Pablo Escobar, the main exporter of cocaine, negotiated with Mexico-based traffickers to transport cocaine through Mexico into the US. At first the Mexican gangs were paid in cash but in the late 1980s the Mexicans and Colombian traffickers settled on a payment-in-product arrangement.

Transporters from Mexico usually were given up to 50 per cent of each cocaine shipment. This arrangement meant that organisations from Mexico became involved in the distribution as well as the transportation of cocaine and became formidable traffickers in their own right.

In the 1960s, Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo founded the Guadalajara cartel and became one of the biggest narco-traffickers in the world. But in 1989 he was arrested. From prison he divided his stake in various plazas or territories -- into the Juarez, Tijuana, Sinaloa, Gulf and the Beltran-Leyva cartels and encouraged them to collaborate with each other. Since then, they have been fighting one another for control of the plazas. Today they have acquired a military capacity that enables them to fight the army on an almost equal footing.

According to the DEA, in the 1990s the Tijuana cartel was among the most powerful but has fallen on hard times due to the arrests of several capos.

The Juarez cartel was among the biggest drug traffickers in the world, shifting almost 50 per cent of all narcotics consumed in the US. It controls one of the primary transport routes of drugs entering the US via El Paso, Nuevo Mexico. But since 2007 it has been locked in a vicious battle with its former partner the Sinaloa cartel for control of Ciudad Juarez. Its long-term connections with local police and politicians and its increasing use of gangs, like the Aztecas, have kept it from crumbling under pressure.

No crime group appears to enjoy more impunity than the Sinaloa cartel led by Joaquin ‘El Chapo’ Guzman. According to news reports, it is Mexico’s biggest, richest mafia group. Guzman is probably the most famous living drug trafficker in the world.

He has been described as a schemer with a talent for international relations. His ability to simultaneously co-opt the police and politicians, attack other cartels and find creative ways to get his drugs to market has made him a legend in the underworld. His cartel appears to remain the closest to political power and its tentacles extend into Central America, Europe, China and India, according to US government analysts.

Guzman was arrested but escaped from prison in a laundry cart in 2001 just as authorities were laying the groundwork for his extradition to the US. He has been fighting other cartels for some time.

An American diplomatic cable from 2009 released by Wikileaks reported that the Mexican army would like to see the Sinaloa cartel win in Juarez. The same diplomatic cable reported that the cartel had suffered the least losses and detentions. Last year numerous reports by the Mexican and US media claimed that it had infiltrated the Mexican federal government and military, and colluded with it to destroy the other cartels.

Journalist and author Marta Duran de Huerta agrees. “There is no doubt this cartel has official protection. It is a well-known fact. What the government wants is to have the Sinaloa cartel dominating the drug trade so that it is easier for government to negotiate with one cartel only.”

The Gulf cartel and its military wing, Los Zetas, headed by Osiel Cardenas, has been described as one of the most terrifying and formidable drug trafficking organisations in the world, with a mercenary private army estimated by the DEA to number 4,000 highly trained soldiers. According to news reports its leaders enticed former members of Mexico’s special airborne

anti-drug military unit, known as GAFE, to defect and train up others.

The Zetas, from Tamaulipas, claim as part of their territory the most lucrative smuggling point on the border across the Rio Grande between Nuevo Laredo and Houston, Texas, the busiest and most commercial border point in the world. They have also secured a route down the Gulf Coast and into Central America affording direct access to Colombia and new export markets in Peru and Venezuela. Last year Los Zetas became rivals of their former employer, the Gulf cartel.

Torture, decapitation and massacres are Los Zetas’ trademarks. Their ruthlessness poses one of the biggest challenges for the Mexican government and they have been linked with appalling violence in Mexico, Central America and the US. Last April 145 bodies were found in mass graves in Tamaulipas. The killings were attributed to Los Zetas.

La Familia is the new kid on the block. It is a syndicate of entirely Indigenous members from the state of Michoacan in western Mexico. It was headed by Nazario Moreno Gonzalez known as “El Mas Loco” – “the craziest one”, who was killed last year. They were trained by the Zetas. It first became known publicly in September 2006, when masked men burst into a discotheque in Morelia, the state capital, and bowled five decapitated heads across the floor, accompanied by a message that said: “La Familia does not kill for money. It does not kill for women. It does not kill the innocent. Only those who deserve to die.”

Against this mayhem Mexican President Felipe Calderon mobilised troops only days after he was sworn in as president of the National Action Party (PAN) by a narrow margin in 2006, succeeding PAN’s first president Vicente Fox. PAN’s victory in 2000 had marked the beginning of a new era in Mexican politics. It represented a radical departure from the PRI, which had ruled the country uncontested for the previous 72 years, by a system of government by corrupt patronage, turning a blind eye to the trafficking and the violence, and by protecting the drug lords.

Shannon O’Neill wrote in Foreign Affairs magazine, “The end of one-party rule set in motion a seismic political shift that undermined the cartels’ cozy relationship with government and their ability to intimidate its officials. Indeed things began to change under Fox.”

But Calderon’s resolve to reclaim the country from the drug lords has come at a cost. Before civilians were at least spared from drug violence, now it is affecting everyone, particularly journalists who live in fear of their lives. Most analysts say Mexico was not ready for such a war. Poverty, easy access to weapons, weak democratic

institutions and an underdeveloped infrastructure, have made it difficult for his government to break up the country’s vast and sophisticated drug cartels. At the same time, dismantling a system so firmly entrenched in the state economy has proved almost impossible.

“Calderon was perceived as a weak leader,” says Marta Duran de Huerta. “The need to overcome this perception may have been a key factor in his decision.”

While the number of cartel leaders killed or arrested has increased, the number of prosecutions has not, due to a deeply flawed and corrupt justice system. Some agents of Mexico’s Federal Investigations Agency (AFI) are believed to work as henchmen for the Sinaloa cartel, and the Attorney General reported in 2005 that nearly 700 of AFI’s 1,500 agents were under investigation or suspected of criminal activity and that 457 were facing charges.

Under “Operation Clean-Up”, which began in 2008, high-ranking officials have been arrested and charged with selling information, or protection, to drug cartels, and an estimated 100,000 Mexican soldiers have deserted and joined the cartels. However when it comes to corruption, journalist Charles Bowden says, it goes all the way to the top, and informed opinion has it that each of the major cartels now has ties with political parties.

Journalist and author Anabel Hernandez writes: “The drug traffickers would be nothing. They wouldn’t have a single cent without the complicity of the bankers, without the support of the businessmen, without the public security officers, the military and without the President.”

Indeed a culture of impunity and corruption has so far eroded all military efforts and the credibility of government institutions. At the same time, extortion and brutality are preventing the investment necessary for a legitimate market economy. Calderon has acknowledged that his militarised approach has not been enough. “We need an integral strategy of social restructuring, prevention and treatment for addictions, a search for opportunities for employment, recreation and education for youth.”

Indeed, higher rates of economic growth are needed to create legitimate economic opportunities.

The major sources of employment in border cities are the maquiladoras -- foreign owned companies, engaged in labour intensive assembly of goods and paying slave wages. They employ mainly women, and were established when the Mexican government implemented the Border Industrialisation Program in the 1960s.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) exempted foreign companies from paying any local taxes, this meant there was no money for infrastructure or services in border towns. However, in the last few years many jobs have been lost due to foreign competition from China and the Caribbean.

In today’s Mexico eight million young people don’t have access to education or other opportunities. “Joining the cartels is the only option to get money, respect and a sense of power and recognition for those without jobs, education or hope,” says journalist and author Marta Duran de Huerta.” They prefer to have money and die young than spend their lives jobless or in a factory.”

While a generation of young people might have been lost to violence, women have also been affected by it. “The burden of narco-violence is falling on women,” writes Marcela Turati in Proceso magazine. “They are the ones whose children or husbands are killed, the ones who bury their bodies, who knock on doors when family members disappear demanding the truth. When men die women are left to run households on their own and raise their children unsupported. And they still find the time to give support to other women. They are what I would call ‘the modern Antigone’.”

Six hundred women were victims of sexual homicides and 3,000 have disappeared in the last ten years in Ciudad Juarez alone. A book by Teresa Rodriguez, The Daughters of Juarez, implicates high-level police and prominent Juarez citizens in the crimes. Others believe it was mainly gangs. Nobody knows for certain.

The total and utter negligence in the investigations of these murders has caused much anger. Most investigations were hampered by the Chihuahua state authorities. Lost files, planted and trampled evidence and shifting conspiracy theories have ruined many police cases. Some of the men arrested were framed outright or

**They [the cartels]
are also involved in
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counterfeiting,
electronic fraud,
prostitution,
protection rackets,
software piracy
and extortion.**

Edgardo Buscaglia

tortured into confession, according to records reviewed by the Houston Chronicle. An Egyptian-born chemist Abdul Latif Sharif was arrested. He is still in prison but maintains his innocence.

Duran de Huerta says it is highly likely the police are implicated in the sexual murders. “It is always the police who threaten journalists and lawyers investigating these cases and family members demanding to know the truth ... many people have been threatened with death if they went further in their investigations.”

These homicides, known in Spanish as feminicidios, have persisted in occurrence and frequency. Now bodies of women, tortured and mutilated, have appeared in other Mexican states, particularly in the State of Mexico. The disappearance of women has been linked to human trafficking.

According to former UN advisor, academic and expert in organised crime, Edgardo Buscaglia, drug trafficking is not the only crime perpetrated by the cartels. They are also involved in human trafficking, smuggling, counterfeiting, electronic fraud, prostitution, protection rackets, software piracy, kidnapping and extortion. “Around 48 per cent of their annual income is generated by drug trafficking,” he says. “Because organised crime is so diversified, legalising drugs will not have a significant impact.”

Violence is now spilling over into other Mexican cities. Monterrey and Mexico City are becoming a battleground for drug wars. It is also spreading into Central America, particularly to Guatemala, where Los Zetas are trying to foster alliances with the Maras Indigenous gangs as well as members of law enforcement and the military throughout the region.

The Zetas also have a presence in El Salvador and Honduras. These three countries are the most violent areas in the world outside war zones, according to The Guardian newspaper. “It [the Zetas] largely operates without fear, openly threatening to carry out high level assassinations of public figures, including the Guatemalan president Alvaro Colom,” writes journalist Benedict Hayes. “They have been known to leave severed heads in front of the Guatemalan congress to intimidate officials.”

Violence is also spreading into US border cities, particularly Houston. Political figures have warned that Mexico could become a failed state and the US could find itself with an Afghanistan on its southern border.

President Calderon says he cannot win the war unless the US does more to curb the insatiable demand for drugs and restrain the flow of weapons into Mexico.

The US entered into the Merida Initiative with Mexico which promised US\$1.4 billion in funding spread over several years, to help fight the war. The

funds would be spent in military law-enforcement training, surveillance aircraft and judicial reforms. “More helicopters will not be the solution; more tanks will not be the solution,” Bucaglia says. “They help, but what Mexico needs is to have intelligence services working hand-in-hand to mount a full frontal assault on all the organised crime groups - without showing favouritism for one or the other.”

US law enforcement agencies have warned that Mexican cartels are far more sophisticated and dangerous than any other organised criminal group in US law-enforcement history. Even though the US built a fence between the US and Mexico the border is still porous.

President Obama said he would upgrade intelligence gathering and improve cross-border interdiction, and also redouble efforts to diminish demand for drugs in the US and constrain the flow of weapons from the US to Mexico. The aid package also includes conditions for improvements to Mexico’s record on human rights issues. Up to 15 per cent can be withheld if Mexico fails to show progress on matters such as prohibiting the use of torture.

During visits to Mexico City by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the matter of arms trafficking from the US to Mexico was discussed. There has been acknowledgement that the root cause of the crisis is the addiction to drugs in American society.

In a recent poll by El Universal, 63 per cent said Calderon’s war strategy had failed. Last March thousands of demonstrators took to the streets to protest, following the death of poet Javier Sicilia’s son who was murdered in Cuernavaca along with six other people. It was the first national protest against Calderon’s war against organised crime. That same day 87 other people were killed. Last April 122 bodies were found in mass graves.

However not all efforts have been futile. There have been some successes. Calderon’s initiatives have begun to destabilise the cartels, and many leaders are now on the run, while a few have been captured, like Osiel Cardenas leader of the Gulf cartel, who was extradited to the US, and Arturo Beltran Leyva, a drug lord who was killed in Cuernavaca.

It is unfortunate that nothing has been done to interfere with the economy that the drug-trade generates. “The transportation and delivery networks, the structure remains intact and the infrastructure that has been established to launder money has been untouched,” UK journalist and author Ed Vulliamy writes.

Calderon is determined to win his war. Last March lieutenant colonel Julian Leyzaola became the new police chief in Ciudad Juarez. According to El Paso Times in his second day on the job he was welcomed to town by a message attached to a torture victim wrapped in a



PHOTO: JESUS ALCAZAR

blanket. “This is your first gift,” the message said. It was signed by the Sinaloa cartel.

Leyzaola, who became notorious for his excessive use of force and torture while fighting drug cartels in Tijuana in 2007, is now determined to cleanse Ciudad Juarez of undesirables. “The first thing we need to do is to unite society, government and business people so that a city as important as Juarez re-emerges,” he said. Leyzaola says his strategy is secret and will stay that way. So what can be done to win the war on drugs? Organised crime expert Edgardo Buscaglia says 17 of Mexico’s 31 states have become virtual narco-republics. The question is, how long will it take for the remaining 14 states to succumb to organised crime? How many more lives will violence claim?

Two decades ago, Colombia was faced with a similar daunting struggle in its fight against the most powerful and fearsome drug trafficking organisations the world had ever seen: the Cali and Medellin cartels. Yet within a decade the Colombian government defeated them with Washington’s help.

“The challenges faced at the time seemed unsurmountable,” writes Robert C Bonner in Foreign Affairs. “Colombia was on the verge of failure ... Today the trafficking groups are smaller, more fragmented and far less powerful -- and most important, they no longer pose a threat to Colombian national security.”

What worked well in Colombia? A multinational approach to the war, disrupting the cartels’ flow of money and weapons, were some of the strategies used. Perhaps

Mexico could learn a few lessons from Colombia’s successful campaign.

In the meantime there is a long way to go. “The violence will not end, there is no reason currently to believe it would,” Bowden explains. “The shooting and cutting and beating has become enmeshed in daily life as jobs disappear, addiction balloons, gangs multiply and the next generation is poised to take over where the older leaves off – after it is killed off.”

Bowden says that “three things would over time lower the slaughter of people in Juarez and all over Mexico: legalise drugs, rework NAFTA so it provides a living wage, protect workers, protect unions and cease giving the Mexican army half a billion dollars a year: it is the largest criminal group in Mexico and a growing player in the drug industry.”

Perhaps President Calderon should focus on creating a framework of anti-corruption programs, job creation and particularly judicial reform. “Violence won’t go away until corruption among police, judges and politicians is rooted out,” Duran de Huerta says. “If you want to win the war against drugs, you must confiscate cartels’ funds and assets, prohibit money laundering, so that cartels have no way of paying for arms or their henchmen and above all end impunity. Impunity triggers more crime. Incarcerate politicians with links to the cartels. Follow the example of Colombia, which prosecuted one third of its Parliamentary members and incarcerated many of its politicians, including the president’s cousin. If Colombia was able to do so, so can we.” **R**



Violence around Abyei, and rumors of an imminent attack on Abyei town have caused instability and the need for citizens to evacuate to villages farther south. PHOTO: COURTESY OF ENOUGH PROJECT/TIM FRECCIA

Refugees:

Innocent Victims, Illegal Immigrants, or Political Pawns?

DR EILEEN PITTAWAY, director of the Centre for Refugee Research, has travelled the world to listen to what refugees have to say. A fearless advocate of refugee issues and a senior lecturer at the University of NSW, in the School of Social Sciences, Dr Pittaway has conducted research on vulnerable refugee populations. Her work has been recognised through the Human Rights Medal, awarded by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, for her work on refugee women and children, and by the Premier's Award for services to refugee education in Australia. This is an edited version of a lecture she gave at the University of NSW.

When I was asked to provide a title for this lecture: Innocent Victims, Illegal Immigrants, or Political Pawns? I thought this title was relevant but I had absolutely no idea how relevant it would be tonight. I would like to begin by looking at the three questions of the title of my talk.

Are refugees innocent victims? I think all of us can relate to refugees as innocent victims. It is a comfortable way to relate. I think most people would think of refugees as the pathetic child, probably starving, as someone to respond to, but refugees are people who are far away -- they are not here in Australia.

Are refugees innocent victims? Are they innocent? Yes, they are. But if you say, victims of the circumstances in which they find themselves. In that case you would say the answer to the first question is absolutely no. I have the privilege of working on campus and on other sites around the world about three months a year. I also talk to refugees here in Australia and I can tell you, victim is a word I would never ever apply to any refugee I have met.

Victims are people who have lost hope. Victims are

people who do not know where to go. Refugee survivors are strong. They have the capacity to help themselves. They have just been placed in circumstances that are so bad that most of us couldn't even imagine how bad they are.

Are they illegal immigrants? The answer is categorically no. You cannot be a refugee and an illegal immigrant at the same time. Being a refugee means you are outside your own country because you have suffered from persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality or membership of a particular social group. You are outside your country because the government of your country is refusing to protect you or is persecuting you. Your rights as the citizen of that country have been suspended. And you are in so much danger that you have had to flee over the border to another country to claim asylum.

If this is the reason you have left your country, you are a refugee, full stop. As the Assistant for the High Commissioner for Refugees says categorically, "If you have grounds for persecution and have applied for refugee status, you are a refugee." Getting a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stamp in a document, merely confirms the fact that you are a refugee.

The term asylum seeker means that if you have had to flee your country because of lack of protection, you have a right to be received in another country that has signed the Refugee Convention, which was written in 1951, with an amendment (the 1967 Protocol) that extended the provisions of the convention, from European refugees to other refugees around the world. Australia was one of the countries that signed the convention, as did many others. In fact Australia contributed to the writing of the convention and we have to be proud of that, proud of the fact that we have supported refugees.

Refugees are not illegal immigrants; but are refugees political pawns? The answer is categorically yes, without any doubt. Because to be a refugee you must have suffered from persecution and persecution in itself is inherently political.

There are many reasons why refugees are persecuted: because their ethnic tribal group is living on the top of resources that powerful nations want, because of political intolerance, or for political reasons. Often, they are persecuted because of unresolved conflicts from the colonial era. If you look at the way retreating colonists carved up the world we see borders quickly drawn. We see people left stranded on one side or the other of the border. The colonial past is at the roots of so much of the refugee experience we see today.

So yes, refugees are victims of international politics.

Many countries decided it was a good idea to ratify the Refugee Convention. In an abstract sense it works fine. But increasingly, developed countries are finding it much more uncomfortable when the abstract becomes the reality and they have to abide by the convention. When refugees come to our shores and say "I have come to claim asylum", they have that right because of the international law, and yet, so often the developing world, including Australia, denies them that right. And we see refugees are being treated like pariahs. They are called 'queue jumpers' when there is no queue, as I will explain later.

Let's have a look at who the refugees are. I think very often the way the Australian media covers these issues is as if asylum seekers materialised out of the air, on our shores, on boats. We never talk much about what happens overseas. We never make the critical link between the refugee experience and the reasons refugees need to come to Australia, and either resettle here as part of our orderly program of entry, or as asylum seekers.

We use words like persecution lightly. But what does it mean? What does it mean to be drawn out of your country? One of the things we do in the Centre for Refugee Research is to help refugees by documenting human rights abuses and compiling reports, which we then take through to the UNHCR's Human Rights Council. We sit and listen to some of the most horrendous stories I have ever heard in my entire life. We document them and take these reports to the rest of the world.

So what is persecution? One of the saddest things about persecution, I often say, is that when I am listening to refugees speak from different parts of the world, whether they come from Afghanistan, Burma or Africa, so often the stories are the same. These stories are about people being persecuted and driven from their villages. In the south of Sudan where people are starving, food drops are sent in over the border from the north of Kenya. The Sudanese government will monitor when the planes come, then the people will come out of the jungle to pick up the food and that is when they bomb them. That is persecution! When you are bombed in trying to get the food that will keep you alive.

Persecution is when the Burmese Junta goes through villages burning all the huts and the crops so that they don't have anything to eat, taking the men away for forced labour, returning them broken, with their health wrecked and taking the women to be porters and sex slaves.

The saddest pieces of literature I have in my office are part of a report on a training manual issued by the



Eileen Pittaway with refugees and workers at the Kakuma refugee camp. PHOTO COURTESY OF CENTRE FOR REFUGEE RESEARCH, UNSW

Burmese Government in which it instructs its soldiers on how to perpetrate rape, how to impregnate women from ethnic minorities to dilute their ethnic purity. And this is written in a training manual. This is persecution! Rape and sexual assault of women is one of the most common forms of persecution and it is not just done to offend women, or even to have sex. It is deliberately done to destabilise families and whole communities. It is the enemy saying, “look at you, you are so weak you cannot even defend your own women! What sort of man are you?”

In communities where rape is shame, it shames the whole community. Women and their children are sometimes cast out because of rape. We heard refugees talking about large numbers of children being born from rape, in conflict and in refugee camps. It is massive. It is a really massive problem. Think of the implications. Some babies born out of rape are killed; others are kept. Some women do the most amazing job looking after their children. I am not just talking about African countries or Asian countries.

Some 20 years following the major conflict in the former Yugoslavia, we are hearing increased numbers

of suicides by women who were in the rape camps in Bosnia and Croatia, where they were held and repeatedly raped until they were impregnated. And then they were let free. Women who sometimes bore the child and then killed it, and other times kept it but were ostracised by their communities for caring for the child. These women now are committing suicide at three times the rate of other women in our communities. Such are the ongoing impacts of these types of horrors.

So persecution is something that we need to understand. Refugees run from persecution. They run to camps.

What are camps like? If we are to believe some of our politicians they are like holiday camps. Maybe not as nice as the ones we go to, but not too bad. We heard about how evil refugees tried to jump queues from camps. How evil people were, because they moved from one camp to try to find asylum elsewhere. We were told people get food, medical attention, in camps. There are schools in camps.

You might have seen photos of those camps. Camps are hell on earth. I can't think of a nice thing to say about a refugee camp. There is never enough food.

These are never nice places. They are huge institutions often stuck in the most inaccessible parts of a country. I have been to camps where there were hospitals without blankets, without sheets, with nothing but paracetamol on the shelves and the doctors come and go, so do the nurses offering pretty basic medical care for the sick who live in the camps.

I have also been in refugee camps when there has been what I would call ‘a fly-in and fly-out visit’ by some dignitary or important person. When a small plane will come into an airfield, the camp will have been tidied up enormously; hospital linen appears and might be white washed. Suddenly on the shelf there are medicines, antibiotics, needles for injections. Where do they come from? I asked myself. They were not there yesterday! And after the ‘fly-in and fly-out visit’ by the important person they are not there the next day either.

This is life in the camps. There are some schools. People do amazing things trying to provide education for refugee children but it is not good enough. You often have people who are not trained, struggling to impart basic knowledge.

In December 2009 the UNHCR estimated that there were 14.5 million mandated or registered refugees in the world. But in addition to that, there are 34.5 million people of concern to the UNHCR. This is an enormous number of people. Eight million mandated refugees have been living in refugee camps for between five to 20 years. Many have been there for 15 years. Children are born in camps and grow up in appalling conditions, where every normality is taken away.

The roles of men and women are taken away, even the traditional cultural roles of men as providers. The only way you get food is to stand in appalling heat for four hours a day to get it from a central kitchen. But the food they get isn't what they would traditionally eat. They get it once every two weeks and the size of the ration is about half of what the World Food Program says a person should eat.

You cannot keep your family healthy if you don't give them greens, eggs or any meat. And people know this. In the camps the role of caring for your family is taken from you.

Men no longer have a role anymore and most often they don't have work. So tensions arise in camps. There is violence between factions. Very often local populations do not like having the refugees there, so there are tension between the locals and the refugees. The worst aspect is rape and sexual abuse of refugee women and girls and young boys, which is endemic in the camps.

One of our research projects was looking at women at risk in refugee camps. We spent much time going backwards and forwards to a camp called Kakuma in the north of Kenya. The first time I went to that camp I went to meet with the head of the camp. He said, “Why are you here?” I told him why. He said: “Women at risk?”, “If you can find one woman in this camp who has not been raped I will give you a prize. So if they have all been raped, do you want to settle them all in Australia? I have about 35,000 women here. Do you want to take them all?”

It was a hard message, a very hard message. After that we decided to develop a High Risk Identification Tool, to identify those refugees living in the camps who

“Camps are hell on earth. I can't think of a nice thing to say about a refugee camp. There is never enough food. These are never nice places. They are huge institutions often stuck in the most inaccessible parts of a country.”

are most at risk. For instance, imagine two young girls living in the camp. They will be 15 or 16 years old. They have both been raped. They have both become pregnant because of the rape. One of the girl's parents may say: “We don't care about what happened, this is our daughter ... We are caring for her and her child even if the community disapproves.” Despite her terrible ordeal that girl is not at risk. The other girl may not have parents, or if she does, her parents might be forced by community pressures to reject her and put her outside the thorn fence and into prostitution. The only way she can raise enough money to buy a bit of oil, an occasional egg is to sell her body. And this again is the reality in camps. The second girl is a refugee at risk.



Sector 5, Shahbaz camp. 8000 families, who were taking refuge in government buildings after the Pakistani flood are now moving in this newly developed sector. PHOTO: OXFAM NEW ZEALAND/HIRA TANVEER/JAN 2011

Not all refugees live in camps. In fact increasingly, refugees live in other situations (in urban areas or in the country side). I think the balance has changed. Now more refugees live in situations other than in camps. Some of the projects we ran were in refugee sites in urban areas. Those areas are just as hard on refugees because they don't have rights. They don't have citizenship. Refugees don't have access to their civil and political rights or their economic and social rights. They don't have access to the law. So people come and exploit them and rape them and beat them with impunity. Refugees survive these experiences.

What keeps me going back to work with refugees is the incredible resilience, the courage of the people that live through all this and survive it all, and they still keep their families and their communities together. They keep their culture alive and they live for the future. I look at them sometimes and find them amazing. If it were me, I would curl up in a corner and I would die.

I sometimes spend four weeks in the camp and I am so stressed. Those people have been there for 14 years. The situation of refugees in urban areas also has to be addressed.

A couple of years ago I was in Cairo. There is a huge refugee population there. An estimated two million from the north of Africa and Iraq live there. I was working with a group of men because women had complained about domestic violence and had asked us to do some work with the men. So I started a training session with the men. Looking at what was happening with them. They talked about this and that. On the

second morning I said to the men: "...I have been told many women have engaged in survival sex to support themselves here. Is that the case? What do you think about it?" They said, "oh no, not in our community, no survival sex here". I said, "Come on! I am an elder myself, let us talk about it!"

Then someone said, "Okay, yes. There are some terrible women among our community who are prostitutes. They work as prostitutes and they bring shame on their whole community and we believe they should be put in prison."

"Is this really the case?" I asked. "Let us talk about this. Why do they work as prostitutes? Is your community intrinsically amoral?" I asked, and challenged the men to talk.

Suddenly in the middle of this very heated debate one of the men started crying. I watched him. I said to him, "would you mind telling me why are you crying?" He said, "Yes". "Can you imagine what is like when you are sitting down at night at your dinner and you are watching your children eat dinner and you know that the only reason your family is eating is because your wife works as a prostitute? Because your wife works as a housemaid and every single day the man of the house and their sons rape her. And if you stop her doing it, your children and your family will starve. That is why I am crying. That is what is like for so many men here," he said.

This is the experience of so many refugees in camps and other settings and this is the message I want to bring

to you tonight, because I think when we look at boats arriving on our shores, we see some sort of devils. We see people that come and want to have a good life in Australia. We don't see people who have experienced years and years of life in camps, years of persecution before camps, as well as horrendous journeys. We don't know much. We don't talk about it and we are not told. The people coming to Australia and claiming asylum are desperate people. For them this is a last resort. There is absolutely no doubt about that. Do people want to come to Australia? Are there so many refugees scurrying across Asia into Indonesia to come to Australia? It is just not true. If we took a helicopter across the shore of Indonesia, we would find it is not lined with asylum seekers trying to get here. There are some and these are people who cannot stand living in perpetual danger any more.

Over the years we have been told that refugees in camps and urban areas have to be resettled. That this is all they want, just to resettle in another country. That living in the refugee camps is just a stage until they resettle. The reality is not like that. I have been in this field for 14 years and have talked to refugees in the last 10 years, when I ask them: "What is it that you want?" They say, "to go back to my village, to go back to our land, to go back to my house, to go home." That is what the majority of refugees want.

So why do you want to resettle? And, why have you put your name in the resettlement list? They say, "Because I have been here for 15 years ... because the conflict in my country has been raging for 20 years and there is no end to it ... Because there is no end to being in this camp. Because there is no end with me living this hellish life in this urban slum ... because I have seen two of my children die of malnutrition, because my sister died in child birth ... because my daughter, my mother and sister were raped, and I cannot do anything about it ... because we don't have decent health care the children are not getting an education and we cannot go home." These are the answers. Wouldn't you do the same if you couldn't go home or care for your family?

I was in Sri Lanka, in the midst of problems a few years ago, for a United Nations (UN) meeting on women's roles. We had been funded by UNICEF to go and talk to women in camps to get the messages that they wanted to convey to the UN on women's rights in the north of Sri Lanka. When we had the meetings with the women, we said we would help them to write a report that we would then take to the UN.

One of the problems we knew was that the post-birth death rate for babies was four times higher in refugee communities than in the general Sri Lankan

population. That was due to a number of reasons. The women didn't get the supplements that the other women got. There wasn't sufficient food in camps and the water was of poor quality. But this was not their main concern. "The biggest issue is our worries about our young men, our young teenagers," the women said. I was taken aback. "Why is this the biggest issue?" I asked. "Because our boys were born and have always lived in refugee camps. When they become teenagers, their hormones jump in like all teenagers everywhere in the world. They are angry. They have seen their fathers being killed. They have seen their sisters being raped. They haven't got an education. They haven't got jobs. They are bored and angry and we are terrified. We are terrified of what they will do. We do not want to lose our sons. So please, can we have a resolution? We have to protect our sons. They are our future."

In the course of the discussions I said: "What happens now?" They said, "Whenever we can find people who have some savings, the families will put together bits of wedding gold they still have and we will gather the little money we have got. They will sell their best clothes, anything, and the family will collect the money and will send one boy with the people smuggler.

I said, "to Australia?" They said, "We don't know. Just somewhere, anywhere where there might be a home for that boy to have a life for himself, just a home where he might earn some money to send some back, a home where eventually we might join him."

I can't argue with that. There are a lot of young people who are coming now on boats, whose whole communities put faith in them. I said to the women, "How often does it work? How often does a young man come to Australia?" They said, "About half of them come back and are put in prison. Half of them we never hear from again because they have drowned, just a quarter get through." And I asked, "Is it worth it?" They replied, "It is better than keeping them here."

And these are the sort of reasons why people use people smugglers. They use them because they are desperate, because there is no other way. Australia has a very proud record as a country of resettlement. We resettle each year about 13,000 people, half of them refugees and half of them on the special humanitarian program.

There is talk about a queue, the queue that refugees should get into in order to resettle in another country. Over 13 developed countries resettle about 76,000 people each year. There are 45 million people of concern to the UNHCR and 14 million refugees in the world. However, there are only 76,000 places a year for resettlement into a third country. Resettlement is never going to be the answer to the refugee problem.

“That is persecution! When you are bombed in trying to get the food that will keep you alive.”

There is no such thing as a queue. A UNHCR official describes it as a lottery, not a queue. If you are lucky enough to get your name in that list, you are very lucky indeed. A UNHCR official in Sri Lanka in desperation said: “Queue? There is not even a bloody table in this office, never mind a queue.”

There are 95,000 people sitting in Kakuma refugee camp in 45-degree heat. They know that only 5,000 a year, if they are lucky, will get out and will be resettled, but more than 5,000 new refugees a year come into the camp fleeing persecution.

What can we do about the refugee problem? Something has to be done. The obvious answer is world peace. It would be good.

The number of refugees is swelling. The number of people of concern to the UNHCR is also swelling. We don't have any easy answers. Going back home is not a viable solution. Often, safety is an issue. Local integration is another option. However, we are asking the poorest countries in the world to resettle millions of additional people.

So, what are we going to do? Political will is needed to address this problem. Without political will nothing will happen. UNHCR is often criticised but it does an amazing job, sometimes in the most difficult of circumstances. I have absolute admiration for them. But it does it with no funding, virtually.

They have some funding of course but they never have enough. Donor countries won't give UNHCR what it needs to provide basic services in refugee camps so there are no basic services in camps. There is never enough food. The food program doesn't have enough food. The High Commissioner for Refugees used to say that if every government in the developed world gave US\$1 per year per capita to the UNHCR, it would be able to provide for every refugee in the world. Some measures indicate that we are not asking for too much.

The poorest countries in the world hosting refugees are asking for the burden to be shared. It is a responsibility we are sharing when we signed the Refugee Convention, which says refugees have rights and the international community has responsibilities for fulfilling those rights. That is what we agreed to when we signed the convention.

I would like to say that we can improve situations

for refugees but it is going to be hard. Refugees need to be able to work, access services, and often this is very difficult for poor countries because poor countries themselves don't have basic services.

So what is needed often is not to focus just on the refugee population in India or in Bangladesh, but on the entire population in which they are sitting. It is not good being refugees in privileged conditions compared to the local people. That causes conflict. We have to look at the provision of development services and they don't cost that much.

We need to improve the way we receive refugees from overseas. The UNHCR is very keen to ensure that people use better country information. Often, the information used to determine whether it is safe for the people to return to their country is fraudulent. It is not safe for refugees to go back to Sri Lanka or Afghanistan.

One of the problems that refugees experience, particularly those who have been in protracted conflicts, is adapting to family life and the family laws in Australia when they first arrive here.

For instance a single woman, who has lived in a camp with her children for years, comes to Australia and decides to lock her children in the flat when she goes shopping. In the refugee camp she would do so to make absolutely sure nobody abducted, harmed or raped the child.

But here it is illegal. When this refugee mother comes here it is totally a new experience for her. She has been put in a flat by herself. She does not know anybody. She doesn't know where to go. She has to go to the shops. She is not used to the buses. She does not speak English. She does exactly what she did in the camp. At that moment, along comes child welfare, and that is when problems start.

For Australians who lived here all their lives this is bad. But before we put those children in foster care, we need to ask, why is this happening? Has anybody explained to them the Australian ways? Is there sufficient support for refugees when they come to Australia? And the answer is while we have good settlement services we don't have enough.

When we work in camps we use a methodology we have developed to be ethical in what we do. In the course of conducting our research, if refugees want, we provide human-rights training and they always

want it. Because many people are pre-literate, we use graphics and we colour code the graphics. When we talk about human rights we do a symbolic exercise to show that everyone is entitled to all of their human rights. We then pick up some beads and we do a human-rights necklace. Each bead is the colour of one of their human rights. They are entitled to all their human rights. It is purely symbolic. It is a game, and refugees enjoy it.

Two years ago I was in one of the worst refugee camps in the world, in Bangladesh. We were invited to go to the camp by UNHCR Geneva to do a situational analysis of the camp and then share the information with service providers. UNHCR sent a team of six people over to observe. UNHCR Dakha also sent a team. This was a horrendous camp. It was very poor; there was child prostitution. Just about everyone suffered from malnutrition.

At the end of the week it was arranged that the refugees themselves would present to UNHCR their concerns about the camp. They would talk to the pictures they had drawn. The women's group picked an elderly woman to make the presentation. She had never been to school. She was not literate in her own language, or in another language.

So on the day of the presentation she stood up, very brave to talk about her story. She had a dirty robe, as they had not much water there. She stood up, looked at the pictures then looked to the stage and said: “UNHCR, look, I have a necklace on. All the women have got their necklaces on. Do you know what this necklace is? This is our human rights necklace. We have just been studying this. Every bead in it represents a different human right and we are all entitled to all of our rights.”

She said, “When we lived in Burma 25 years ago, we lived in the village. Everyone in the village wore their necklace with pride. Everyone: the men, the women, the children, then the State Peace and Development Council came. They burnt our village. They took the men for labour, raped the women and burnt the crops. We had to run. We were persecuted and we came here to this camp in Bangladesh.

“Here in Bangladesh it is hell. It is even worse. We don't know what to do. Do you UNHCR? Do you know what happened to our rights?” Then she took her necklace and tore it and said: “That is what happened to our rights. We are up here and they are scattered everywhere. UNHCR, we want you to help us to get every right to make our necklace. We want to wear our necklace again with pride.”

I want to finish with that note because I think this is our challenge. We have to help refugees to get their rights back, including the right to asylum in Australia. **R**

CENTRE FOR REFUGEE RESEARCH

This is an interdisciplinary research centre that focuses on international refugee flows, internally displaced people, forced migration and resettlement issues, as well as social policy, law, health, both physical and mental, and direct service provision as it applies to the phenomenon of refugees and past migrants.

It conducts education and advocacy programs, partnering with community-based refugee organisations, in relation to the nexus between refugee circumstances overseas and the resettlement experience in developed countries, identifying and responding to the needs of the most vulnerable refugees, in particular women and girls at risk.

Established in 1999 by Paul Ferguson, Dr Eileen Pittaway took over as director in 2001. The Centre's research over the past decade in Ethiopia, Kenya, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand has resulted in a UNHCR conclusion (part of international law) to strengthen the protection of refugee women and girls. They have also developed a Heightened Risk Identification Tool to assist personnel on the ground to respond to the most vulnerable refugees. The Centre adopts a human-rights framework and engages principles of community development and social justice in all its work.

This achievement led to an invitation from the UN Development Program to work in Sri Lanka after the tsunami in 2005, and that led in turn to the UN resolution on the protection of women and girls after such disasters.

Dr Eileen Pittaway and her deputy Linda Bartolomei attend the UN Economic and Social Council's meetings, which includes the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, its Human Rights Council and the Commission on the Status of Women, and they use that access to feed their research into international law and policy.

Apart from research, Dr Pittaway in the past decade has provided training to refugees, and UN and NGO staff in refugee camps and urban settings. She has acted as technical advisor to a number of projects, and has evaluated humanitarian and development projects in Kenya, Thailand, Ethiopia, Bougainville, Egypt, India and Sri Lanka.

A major focus of her work has been on the ethics of research on vulnerable populations. Just as importantly, here in Australia, the centre's work with recent refugees has focused on improving the help given to children who have been tortured, or traumatised by the torture of their parents. In addition to that research, the Centre provides over 60 internships for University of NSW students who are able to undertake refugee training, and support projects in India, Thailand and elsewhere and in some cases to accompany Dr Pittaway to meetings of the High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva.

Today refugee camps come in many shapes and forms. Some are very large accommodating up to 90,000 people. Some are built in the most inhospitable, isolated and barren areas. Many refugees now living in camps have lived there for a long time and cannot go home.

Although camps can save lives in the emergency phases, as years go by they progressively waste these same lives. The policy of encampment denies refugees the right to move freely and engage in productive activities. Eighty per cent of camp dwellers are women and children. Living in camps also poses problems for the socialisation of children who are obviously going through the most crucial phases of their development.

A black and white photograph of a man wearing a white turban and a patterned shawl, looking down at a document he is holding. The document is a 'CARTE DE REFUGIE' (Refugee Card) from the 'DELEGATION GENERALE DE L'IMMIGRATION ET DU COMMERCE' (General Delegation of Immigration and Commerce). It contains handwritten information: 'DELEGATION: ALGER', 'CENTRE: ALGER', 'NOM: ALI B. ALI', and 'Lieu de naissance: KALAMON'. The man's expression is serious and focused.

PHOTO: UNHCR/WRIGHT/1961



As colonialism came to a close, conflicts erupted in many parts of Africa in the 1960s including, not for the last time, strife in the central African state of Rwanda. This group of Rwandese is seen waiting for the distribution of food at a refugee centre in Uganda's Oruchinga Valley.

PHOTO: UNHCR/W.MCCOY/1964



The flight of Vietnamese refugees began after the fall of Saigon to North Vietnam forces in 1975. An estimated 3 million, including these Vietnamese boat people arriving in Malaysia in 1978, fled in the wake of the various conflicts in Indochina.

PHOTO: UNHCR/K.GAUGLER/1978



The exodus of more than 6 million Afghans started in 1979. People fled to such sites as the Ghazi Refugee Village in Pakistan.

PHOTO: UNHCR/H.GLOAGUEN/1984



Drought and war resulted in a massive influx of Ethiopians into Sudan during the 1980s and tens of thousands of people died before a relief effort became effective.

PHOTO: UNHCR/M.VANAPPELGHEM/1985



The Gulf War in the early 1990s was followed by the exodus of 1.5 million Iraqi Kurds. Some refugees, including these children, were able to return home within weeks.

PHOTO: UNHCR/A.ROULET/1991



Within days of NATO's air strikes against Serb positions in 1999, nearly 1 million civilians fled or were forced into exile from Kosovo, including these civilians at a border crossing with the neighbouring Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

PHOTO: UNHCR/R.LEMOYNE/1999



An estimated 250,000 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar began arriving in Bangladesh in early 1991. Many returned home where UNHCR provides assistance and monitors their wellbeing.

PHOTO: UNHCR/H.J.DAVIS/1992



The Psychology of Politics



EMERITUS PROFESSOR
VAMIK VOLKAN
was nominated four times for the Nobel Peace Prize.

A pioneer in the field of the psychology of politics, he is an emeritus professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, a senior scholar at the Erikson Institute for Education and Research of the Austen Riggs Centre in Massachusetts, and was founder and director of the Centre for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction. He spoke to JANSET BERZEG.

PHOTO: JASON HYUNG-GU KANG

When and how did you develop an interest in political psychology?

VV: In 1979 the then Egyptian president Anwar Sadat went to Israel. When he addressed the Israeli Knesset he spoke about the existence of a psychological wall between Arabs and Israelis and stated that psychological barriers constitute 70 per cent of all problems between these two people.

With the blessings of the Egyptian, Israeli and American governments, the American Psychiatric Association's Committee on Psychiatry and Foreign Affairs followed up on Sadat's statements and brought together influential Israelis, Egyptians and later Palestinians for a series of unofficial negotiations that took place between 1979 and 1986.

While I was part of this committee I initiated a number of studies on large-group psychology, enemy relationships and the interactions between political leaders and their followers. That is when I began contemplating developing strategies to tame aggression between enemy groups.

What did the Centre for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction (CSMHI) do?

VV: CSMHI applied theory and knowledge to explain how issues such as ethnic tension, racism, national identity, terrorism, societal trauma, leader-follower relationships, and other key aspects can trigger national and international conflicts.

Because no single discipline can fully illuminate such deep-seated and complex issues, CSMHI's faculty and board included a wide range of experts in different fields such as psychoanalysis, psychiatry, diplomacy, history, political science, and environmental policy. Their combined perspectives and their experience provided the centre with in-depth analysis of political, historical, and social issues that contribute to political conflicts as well as the psychological processes that invariably exist beneath the surface of such conflicts.

How did you get involved with processes of negotiating for peace and Track II diplomacy?

VV: When the Egyptian-Israeli unofficial dialogue series ended in 1987, I opened the CSMHI at the University of Virginia's School of Medicine. The CSMHI's interdisciplinary team (made up of psychoanalysts, former diplomats, political scientists and historians) became involved in bringing together influential

Americans and Soviets for a series of dialogues at the time when the Cold War was ending. Later, we worked in the Baltic Republics, especially in Estonia, facilitating talks between influential leaders from the Russian Federation, particularly the Baltic Republics and Russian-speaking people living in Estonia.

These were dialogues outside official diplomatic talks intended to help Estonia emerge as a healthy democracy. A faculty member of the CSMHI and former American diplomat, Joseph Montville called our activities Track II diplomacy.

Later my CSMHI friends and I were involved in peaceful activities in other locations, including the Republic of Georgia.

Apart from bringing opposing political representatives together for psycho-political dialogues at different locations, we also evaluated the psycho-political environments in societies that had experienced massive traumas. For example, we studied Albania after the death of dictator Enver Hoxha and Kuwait after Saddam Hussein's forces were removed from that country.

I also participated in the former US President Jimmy Carter's International Negotiation Network (INN) activities in the 1980s and 1990s. This helped me to meet many political leaders in various countries and investigate political leader-followers psychology.

After CSMHI was closed down in 2004 the Erikson Institute of Education and Research of the Austen Riggs Centre has been the administrative home of my psycho-political activities. A small group of experts and scholars from diverse disciplines and countries have gathered for a series of meetings to discuss topics and examine processes related to international tensions, especially between the Islamic world and the West. We call ourselves the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI) group. The IDI is a sounding board and a support group for those members of the group currently engaged in consulting with governments and other social groups. IDI develops a common language between psychologically trained participants and diplomats, politicians and academics from other disciplines. This provides a model for transferring psychological insights in understandable ways to those who are actually responsible for diplomatic communications.

I was born to Turkish parents in the island of Cyprus. I guess that the large-group conflicts in Cyprus played a role in my leaving psychoanalytic practices behind to try to understand better the human behavior shared by thousands or millions of people.

“Political psychology is not new. Even the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, wrote about the psychology of wars and war-like conditions. What is new is the realisation that we need to understand large-group psychology in its own right.”

Why is political psychology becoming popular now?

VV: Political psychology is not new. Even the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, wrote about the psychology of wars and war-like conditions. What is new is the realization that we need to understand large-group psychology in its own right.

Previously, most psychoanalytic studies focused on what a large group meant for an individual and did not examine in detail the rituals between different large groups in times of peace and conflict.

Large tribal, ethnic, national, religious or political ideological groups do not have one brain to think or two eyes to cry. When thousands or millions of members of a large group share a psychological journey such as mourning, following a massive trauma at the hands of their enemies, we see particular societal, cultural and political processes.

Large-group psychology means we can explain the conscious and unconscious motivations of the shared psychological experiences within a large group that in turn initiate social, cultural, political, ideological processes. Such processes are specific for each large group and when manipulated they influence the large group's internal and external affairs.

There are various types of shared psychological phenomena that are present within a large group. For example, the shared mental image of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo only exists in the Serbian large group. It was reactivated by Slobodan Milosevic with tragic consequences.

What Greeks call the “Megali Idea” (The great idea to conquer and recover all lands that belong to the Greeks), what Turks call Pan-Turanism (to bring all Turkic persons together in the Middle East and in Central Asia to create a Turkish “empire” and togetherness), what extreme religious Islamists of today call ‘the return of an Islamic Empire’ and what people in the United States call “American exceptionalism”, are examples of political ideologies that are specific to large groups. Such ideologies may last for centuries and may disappear and reappear when historical circumstances change.

Of course war and war-like situations do not start due to psychology. But when conflict erupts, psychological processes are reactivated. “Entitlement Ideologies” tend to contaminate the legal, economic, military and political systems and they create obstacles for peaceful negotiations. When CSMHI brought political opponents together for dialogue we tried to find out the existing psychologically motivated social and political processes of each large group, and deal with them.

We should also remember that there is no single theoretical or practical point of view or application of political psychology. Since I am also a psychoanalyst, I tried to examine both conscious and unconscious motivations of how people with different large-group identities behave in peaceful or in stressful times. Other types of political psychologies depend more on the “logical” evaluations of conflicts and on “logical” solutions.

Can you tell us a bit about shared transgenerational transmission of trauma and how it affects international relations?

VV: When a massive disaster occurs, those who are affected may experience its psychological impact in several ways. Firstly, many individuals will suffer from various forms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Secondly, new social processes and shared behaviors may appear within the affected communities, which are initiated by changes in the shared psychological states of the affected persons. And, thirdly, traumatised persons may, mostly unconsciously, oblige their progeny to resolve the first generation's own unfinished psychological tasks related to the shared trauma, or the mourning of their losses.



A woman and her exhausted children at the Turkish border, Iraqi Kurdistan. PHOTO: CHRIS KUTSCHERA/1991

During recent decades, mental health professionals have learned much about the transgenerational transmission of shared trauma and its link to the mental health of future generations. This development owes a great deal to studies of the second and third generations of Holocaust survivors and others directly traumatised under the Third Reich.

I hope that this issue will continue to be considered by those official international organisations and NGOs that deal with the psychological wellbeing of refugees, internally displaced individuals, and societies who have experienced the horrors of war or war-like conditions. Here is a very simple example of transgenerational transmission: During our work in the Republic of Georgia following the fights between Abkhazians and Georgians I examined a Georgian woman from Abkhazia and her 16-year-old daughter who had been refugees for over four years. The two were living with other family members under miserable conditions in a refugee camp near Tbilisi.

Every night, the mother went to bed worrying about how to feed her three teenaged children the next day. She never spoke to her only daughter about her

concerns, but the girl sensed her mother's worry and unconsciously developed a behavior to respond to and to alleviate her mother's pain. The daughter refused to exercise, became somewhat obese and continuously wore a frozen smile on her face. As our team interviewed both of them, we learned that the daughter, through her bodily symptoms, was trying to send her mother this message: "Mother, don't worry about finding food for your children. See, I am already overfed and happy!"

There are many forms of transgenerational transmission. Apart from worrying, anxiety, depression or elation, there are various psychological tasks that one person may "assign" to another. It is this transgenerational conveyance of long-lasting "tasks" that perpetuates the cycle of societal trauma.

After a massive trauma at the hands of enemies or after a period of political oppression by a government, the people in the victimised group experience a shared sense of shame, humiliation, and even dehumanisation. They cannot be assertive, because expressing direct rage toward the oppressors would threaten their livelihoods and even their lives. Their helpless anger interferes with their mourning over losses that touch every aspect of

"...in one generation the shared task is to mourn the previous generation's loss and to feel their victimisation."

their lives, ranging from their dignity to their property, relatives or friends. Shared unfinished psychological tasks are then passed on from generation to generation. So guilt experienced by people belonging to the victimising group may also be involved in transgenerational transmissions.

My colleagues and I have carried out clinical studies in detail to illustrate how transgenerational transmissions take place and how mothers, fathers, grandparents and other adults unconsciously give tasks such as "remove my shame, go through my mourning process or tame my guilt" to children in the next generation.

Of course, every child's personality is different, but when thousands or millions of children are given the same task, shared large-group attitudes and activities emerge. Depending on external conditions, shared but mostly unconscious tasks may change function from generation to generation. For example, in one generation the shared task is to mourn the previous generation's loss and to feel their victimisation. In the following generation, the shared task may be to express a sense of revenge for that loss and victimisation.

Do you believe that political psychology can change the world for the better?

VV: We are entering into a new type of civilisation due to an unbelievable advance in communication technologies, the evolution of a new type of globalisation, the massive voluntary and forced migrations, terrorism, and other events. Old diplomatic methods often may not be appropriate or applicable to many current international problems. Therefore, an understanding of the influence of the psychology of shared human behaviour has become a necessity.

After the European colonialists left Africa, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia, with the independence of India, Georgia and the events in South America, Northern Ireland, Turkey, the Republic of Georgia and elsewhere, we see ethnic, national religious and ideological groups becoming preoccupied with one question: "Who are we now?"

In the attempts to stabilise, maintain or repair

large-group identities we see psychological obstacles getting in the way of a peaceful world.

It is difficult to define large-group identity — whether it refers to tribes, ethnicity, nationality, religious or political ideology as defined by those who say "We are Apache", "We are Ossetians", "We are Polish", "We are Muslims," or "We are Communists".

It refers to the subjective experience of thousands or millions of people who are linked to a large group by a persistent sense of sameness from childhood on, while also sharing some characteristics with others who belong to foreign groups. Members of a large group share what we call "cultural amplifiers", which are concrete or abstract symbols and signs, ranging from physical body characteristics, language, nursery rhymes, food, dances, flags to myths and images of historical events.

Very early in my career as a "political psychologist" I noted how one's large-group identity becomes the most important factor in individuals going through a large-group conflict. During the third year of the Israeli-Arab dialogues that I mentioned above, for the second time, four Palestinians joined us. We were meeting in a neutral country, Switzerland. By that time we had learned that by dividing the participants and facilitators into small groups, we could obtain better results. I was in charge of one small group. A young Palestinian physician from Gaza happened to sit next to retired Israeli major general Shlomo Gazit. General Gazit was an Israeli hero due to his participation in the Six-day War, and defence minister Moshe Dayan had given him the authority to run the political, security and economic affairs of the newly captured territories.

I noticed that the Palestinian physician was nervous. I could understand how difficult it was for him to sit next to a former Israeli general as an equal in a neutral country. He turned to General Gazit and said that he did not like living under Israeli occupation. He then explained that General Gazit, who was the first Israeli general assigned to run the Gaza strip, was a man with high integrity. Because of this the Palestinian physician respected Gazit. He continued by saying that after general Gazit all other Israeli generals who were assigned to Gaza

were “bad” administrators who had caused increased shame, humiliation and helplessness among Palestinians in Gaza.

As he was talking I noticed that the Palestinian physician had put his right hand into the right pocket of his trousers. I could see the frantic movements of his fingers under the cloth. I thought that sitting next to General Gazit had induced what psychoanalysts call “castration anxiety” in him and that he wanted to be sure that his manhood still existed. But then the Palestinian physician, almost screaming, declared: “As long as I have this, you cannot take my Palestinian identity from me.”

When I inquired what “this” was, I learned the following: He had a little stone in his pocket painted with Palestinian colors. We learned that Palestinians in Gaza at that time carried little stones such as this in their pockets. Whenever they saw Israeli soldiers or felt humiliated and threatened by Israelis, they would put their fingers in their pockets and touch the stones. This way they would know that their Palestinian large-group identity still existed.

In a large-group setting a “normal” degree of shared narcissism (loving oneself and one’s own group) attaches itself to large-group identity and creates a sense of uniqueness in cultural amplifiers and usually makes them a source of pride. When large-group identity and its amplifiers are threatened, the result is a shared narcissistic hurt associated with shame, humiliation, helplessness or feelings of revenge.

An exaggerated large-group narcissism is a process when people within a large group become preoccupied and obsessed with the superiority of almost anything connected to their large-group identity, even when such perceptions and beliefs are not realistic. A society’s assimilation of chronic victimhood, and the utilisation of a sense of suffering to secretly feel superior or at least entitled to attention, represent the existence of a masochistic large-group narcissism. Malignant large-group narcissism explains the initiation of a process in which members of that large group wish to oppress or kill “others” either within or outside their legal boundaries. This is a process motivated by a shared spoken or unspoken notion that contamination by the devalued “others” is threatening their superiority.

The above definitions of large-group exaggerated, masochistic or malignant narcissism are only simple definitions. In reality they are usually mixed. A study of shared sentiments, how they originate and how they influence a large-group identity is a very complex process. However, I believe that understanding large-group processes from a psychodynamic angle is necessary. For example, we need to ask what is it to be



Prayers to Gaza. PHOTO: BURCU SÖNMEZ/2010

a Georgian or a South Ossetian or an Abkhazian. Why do people accept suffering or kill others in order to stabilise, maintain or repair their large-group identities? How can we accomplish turning narcissistic investment in large-group identity to “normal” and thus remove psychological obstacles to peaceful solutions?

Do you think globalisation has positive effects in the context of eradication of torture?

VV: During the last few decades globalisation has become the buzzword in political as well as in academic circles. It personifies a wish for prosperity and wellbeing of societies by standardizing economic and political elements and by bringing democratic freedom everywhere in the world. Globalisation as a humanistic concept for helping everyone around the globe is an idealised one and we should continue to support its aims. I hope that in the new civilisation we are entering into there will be no way to stop its good aspects such as bringing human rights to every corner of the globe and eradicating torture.

The new type of globalisation process however, at the present time, seems to threaten large-group identities globally. This has played a role in the development of preoccupations with the “Who are we now?” question. Sometimes such preoccupations and the wish to reverse humiliations associated with large-group identities allowed torture to take place. Even the United States, after September 11, 2001, conducted activities that could be described as torture and were sanctioned officially.

It is generally thought that global transformations take place along three major dimensions: economic, political, and social. As I mentioned before, such

transformations not only affect the adult populations, but also the children and youth and future generations.

When there are crises in these transformations, we usually look at a number of hard, macro-level and logical factors to explain the causes of social problems. For example, in an economic crisis what comes to our minds first are visible factors such as austere budget cuts, high interest rates, and strict monetarist policies. In my studies I have been trying to identify the softer, micro-level and illogical psychological processes hidden behind the hard, macro-level and logical considerations.

Psychologically speaking, a healthy society is one where the citizens trust one another while interacting among themselves under culturally accepted guidelines and democratic legal rules. Basic trust among citizens disappears when a society is not healthy. Basic trust is a concept that describes how children learn to feel comfortable putting their own safety in a caretaker’s hands; by developing basic trust, children discover, in turn, how to trust themselves. In a healthy society, adults also depend on trusting themselves and others to remain functioning citizens. As we enter into a new civilisation and accept globalisation we must pay the necessary attention to how to develop basic trust in large groups and in their relations with their neighbors.

Recently, 146 torture rehabilitation centers in 73 countries (organised by the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims and the Physicians for Human Rights groups) have called for Obama to hold Bush accountable for torture and to help the victims. What are your comments on this topic as a doyen on the psychology of politics?

VV: I am aware of this. My belief is that this wish will not be granted since such a process will destabilise the internal affairs of the USA and stain its large-group identity. What will be important is the United States’ re-declaration of respect for human rights, and showing its determination to protect and maintain it.

You have been invited to deliver a keynote address at the 9th International Capacity Building Workshops and Conference on Health and Human Rights in Tbilisi, Georgia, in October 2011. Can you tell us about your keynote address in Georgia?

VV: My CSMHI colleagues and I worked in the Republic of Georgia for six years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We tried to open a people-to-people relationship between Georgians and South Ossetians, especially between Georgian and South Ossetian psychologists, teachers, and university professors who worked with traumatised persons. We

focused on changing the depressive atmosphere at a refugee camp at Tbilisi Sea near Tbilisi and also visited Tskinali. We also brought together Georgians, Armenians, Abkhazians, South Ossetians and Turks to examine the violence against women and what could be done about this serious problem.

It will be a great pleasure for me to return to Tbilisi, meet many friends and also deliver a keynote address. I will explain, with references to my work in that part of the world, and to the psychology of large-group identity and the role massive traumas have in shaping it.

I will also refer to the importance of psycho-politically informed dialogues between influential representatives of opposing groups that will help the participants to separate realities of existing situations from the psychic realities that are filled with prejudices and fantasies. I will stress that if such an unofficial dialogue can be established among influential

persons with different large-group identities in that part of the world there may be a better atmosphere for future official dialogues. However, I am aware that political tensions may not allow the development of such a project right away. **R**

“Psychologically speaking, a healthy society is one where the citizens trust one another while interacting among themselves under culturally accepted guidelines and democratic legal rules.”

The Laws of War



DR HELEN DURHAM IS the Australian Red Cross National Manager of International Humanitarian Law. She was a member of the International Committee of the Red Cross

delegation to the Diplomatic Conference in Rome that helped to create an International Criminal Court. She was special legal adviser to the Australian government at negotiations in Geneva to create a third Additional Protocol. She spoke to **OLGA YOLDI** about the Geneva Conventions.

The Geneva Conventions have been ratified by every country in the world. However, they appear to be severely tested by modern warfare and the efforts to combat terrorism, which have sparked debates on issues such as the definition of ‘armed conflict’; the qualifications of individuals as ‘unlawful combatants’; ‘terrorists’ or ‘participating civilians’, or what degree of force can be considered appropriate. These challenges seem to have contributed to a growing lack of respect for international humanitarian law. Is this causing problems for the International Committee of the Red Cross since it is responsible for interpreting these laws and applying them? Do you think the principles behind the Geneva Conventions are becoming obsolete?

HD: There has certainly been much public debate in recent years about whether the Geneva Conventions, their Additional Protocols and the other treaties can be applied in modern warfare.

The Red Cross would strongly disagree with the notion that they are becoming obsolete. The Conventions and all international humanitarian law are fundamentally based on the balance between military necessity and

humanity – the idea that in military operations, soldiers must take into consideration the impact of their actions on the civilians and on the people who have removed themselves from the combat, as well as their military objectives.

This basic idea remains as relevant today as when the Conventions were originally drafted, and can easily be applied to the current armed conflicts. The key principles found in this area of international law, like the requirement to distinguish between combatants and civilians and the need to be proportional in attacks, are essential to ensure that those engaged in military activities actually represent their countries views and values.

On the other hand, terrorists can often be seen to be using force without any reference to the laws of war or the international humanitarian law because they tend to attack indiscriminately and disproportionately against civilians.

I must say that civilian participation in armed conflict is an interesting one. Civilians have always contributed in wars in various ways, by providing food and shelter for combatants, or by offering political or financial support. But, it’s true that nowadays civilians are increasingly taking on traditional combat roles. This was not unknown when the Geneva Conventions were drafted, and this situation is dealt with under existing international humanitarian law.

The fact is that existing law doesn’t get in the way of the ability of soldiers to target civilians if they are taking part in armed conflict – they can be targeted in the same way as a soldier would be, for the duration of the time that they are engaging in hostilities. They can also be detained for as long as they are reasonably deemed a security threat, and can be tried for their actions under the domestic criminal legislation of the state.

International humanitarian law does not prevent soldiers from carrying out their duties - all it requires is that they abide by basic standards of humanity. This includes the prohibitions on torture, sexual violence and other forms of mistreatment, and the guarantee of a fair trial by a competent court.

Removing or relaxing these standards would do nothing to advance any legitimate military objectives; rather it would simply validate the use of abusive and brutal tactics in war.

The International Committee of the Red Cross is certainly aware of the need for international humanitarian law to keep up with developments in modern warfare, and has recently conducted a two-year study aimed at identifying areas where the law could stand to be strengthened. This includes the protection of the natural environment, protection for detainees, particularly



A joint conference by the FCO and the British Red Cross called “The 1949 Geneva Conventions - 60 Years On” was held in London, 9 July 2009. PHOTO COURTESY OF FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE/2009

those detained during the course of non-international armed conflicts and protection of internally displaced people. Hopefully there will be political will among the international community in coming years for these areas to be strengthened and made truly robust.

You were a member of the Red Cross delegation that contributed to the International Criminal Court (ICC) negotiations. What crimes can it prosecute? How can you bring a case before the court? What cases are currently before the ICC? And, what are the implications of this court for the future?

HD: The ICC has jurisdiction over genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and aggression – these are described in the Rome Statute as ‘the most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole’. Cases can be brought before the court in three ways; by a state party to the ICC; by the Prosecutor and finally by the Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

In the first two cases of referral it is a requirement that either the state on which the crime was committed,

or the state from which the accused is a national, have accepted the court’s jurisdiction. This is not required in the situation of a referral from the Security Council.

The ICC has launched full investigations into five situations of armed conflict; Northern Uganda; the Central African Republic; the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Darfur and Kenya. Indictments have been issued against 16 people so far, all senior politicians, militia leaders or high-ranking soldiers accused of bearing responsibility for such crimes as willful killing, forcible displacement, sexual slavery, use of child soldiers and numerous other charges.

The Prosecutor is also currently conducting preliminary investigations in a number of countries, with a view to monitoring ongoing issues there and determining whether a full investigation is warranted. These countries include Afghanistan, Georgia, Colombia, Palestine, Cote d’Ivoire and Guinea.

The existence and operation of the ICC has enormous potential implications for the exercise of international justice. As a permanent body with wide-ranging jurisdiction and relative autonomy from states and the UN, it has the potential to drastically reduce or to end impunity for grave international crimes, and increase

compliance with international law in the field.

The ICC has the potential to strengthen national capacity to prosecute war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. It is intended to function as a complementary court. I need to clarify that its jurisdiction is only triggered when the courts of the relevant country are unable or unwilling to prosecute alleged perpetrators.

Where states hold credible and vigorous trials of all plausible allegations of war crimes, their citizens will never need to appear before the ICC. ICC member states therefore have a solid incentive to put in place strong frameworks to support the exercise of their own domestic jurisdiction over war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.

As part of the ICRC delegation in negotiations in Rome for the ICC I witnessed the genuine goodwill amongst many countries to ensure that those accused of terrible atrocities do not go unpunished. There is much politics that needs to be worked through in the area of international criminal law, especially when leaders in countries are accused of crimes whilst still in positions of power. However when the ICC was created the world made a step in the right direction towards the goal of ending impunity.

Are members of the UN Security Council members of the ICC? Can they refer cases to the ICC?

HD: Members of the Security Council do not automatically become members of the ICC – states must independently sign and ratify the Rome Statute. Permanent Security Council members, the United Kingdom and France have done so, and have acted as vocal supporters of the court's work. Of the 10 current non-permanent members, eight are full ICC member states and one (Japan) has assumed individual responsibility for approximately 20 per cent of the court's funding.

It is important to understand that the ICC is legally and functionally independent from the Security Council. However, the Rome Statute does give some powers to the Security Council, as appropriate within the scope of its mandate to maintain international peace and security. The Security Council can refer situations to the court which would otherwise fall outside its jurisdiction.

So far, it has done so once, with regard to the conflict in Darfur. The ICC would not otherwise have been able to investigate, as Sudan is not a member state. The Security Council can also request that the court delay or suspend investigations into a matter for a period of 12 months – this request can be extended indefinitely by resolution.

How successful have been the tribunals created by the United Nations Security Council to prosecute war criminals? I am referring to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR).

HD: The ICTY and ICTR have both made enormous and important contributions to the development of international humanitarian law over the last decade or so. These tribunals have, among other achievements, tried two former heads of state for their respective roles in the conflicts. They have solidified the law surrounding sexual genocide and incitement to commit genocide, and have brought justice to thousands of victims during their relatively short periods of operation.

While neither body is structurally or procedurally perfect by any means, both represent an enormous leap forward in the enforcement of international justice, which will hopefully be continued in the work of the ICC. These enforcement mechanisms also remind states that they have the primary responsibility of prosecuting those accused of war crimes and other serious international crimes and both the ICTY and ICTR have certainly raised attention to the importance of taking this responsibility seriously.

There are a number of protracted conflicts, particularly in Africa, where many of the groups fighting at some stage have been victims as well as perpetrators of crimes against humanity. If individuals cannot bring cases before the ICC, in such cases, how could those responsible be brought before the court?

HD: When a situation is referred to the ICC, the prosecutor will investigate all crimes alleged to have occurred within its jurisdiction, regardless of which side committed them. In situations where there is crossover between victims and perpetrators, the prosecutor will still examine the actions of all parties to the conflict, taking into account only the gravity of the alleged crimes and the credibility of supporting information.

A good example of this impartial approach can be found in the Prosecutor's investigation into the conflict in Darfur. All sides in the conflict are accused of having committed serious breaches of international law, including violence directed against the civilian population and attacks on peacekeepers. The ICC has issued indictments against senior figures in the Sudanese government and government-linked militia groups, and also against three commanders of a Darfuri rebel group, the Justice and Equality Movement.

The ICC also makes extensive provision for

“The use of sexual violence in armed conflict is both an individual tragedy and potentially a destabilising force for communities already traumatised by war.”

victims to be personally involved in proceedings before the court. Victims have the opportunity to participate at all stages of the prosecution at the discretion of the court, and can apply to introduce evidence, to access filings, to participate in hearings and to challenge evidence introduced by parties, among other actions.

Many victims have enthusiastically taken up this opportunity – over 100 victims are registered to participate in the trial of Thomas Lubanga, one of the first cases to proceed through the ICC. So although the victims cannot directly bring cases themselves, they certainly do have the opportunity to have their voices heard and to influence the direction of cases before the court. The victims are able to provide information to the Prosecutor to assist him in the consideration of indictments, so there is a stronger role for victims to play than many people think.

Sexual assault is a weapon of war. Is it considered a war crime?

HD: Rape is a war crime under the Geneva Conventions, along with indecent assault and forced prostitution, and humiliating and degrading treatment (which encompasses sexualised interrogation or detention practices). The ICC Statute also criminalises numerous forms of sexual violence, including rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization and outrages upon personal dignity.

Cases from the ICTY and ICTR have confirmed that rape can be used in war as a form of genocide, and have solidified the status of systematic rape and sexual enslavement as crimes against humanity.

The UN Security Council also adopted a resolution in 2008 calling upon all parties engaged in armed conflict to take action to halt rape and other forms of sexual violence against civilians, in recognition that sexual violence in war is a serious violation of the principles

of international humanitarian law, with the potential to devastate entire communities as well as individual victims.

The ICRC recognises the severity of all forms of sexual violence in armed conflict, and has a strong focus on prevention as well as support for victims. In the field, the ICRC works with parties to armed conflicts to ensure that combatants are fully aware of their obligation under international humanitarian law to refrain from using any form of sexual violence.

They also work with victims of sexual violence to ensure their access to appropriate medical treatment, including emergency contraception, preventative treatment for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, and other physical and mental health support.

The ICRC provides specialised training, supplies and ongoing support to healthcare and counselling workers, as well as encouraging communities to accept and understand the needs of victims of sexual violence. All of this is in recognition of the fact that the use of sexual violence in armed conflict is both an individual tragedy and potentially a destabilising force for communities already traumatised by war.

International humanitarian law cannot be applied if politicians are not willing to support its enforcement and the military isn't committed to uphold its principles in the field. How could the legal profession, politicians and the military work together to serve and strengthen one another in their common goal? Is this already happening?

HD: Promoting respect for international humanitarian law is an important part of the work of Australian Red Cross, and direct engagement with military, political and legal stakeholders forms a large part of that. Members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) need to have an understanding of this law, and to respect the limitations placed on their actions during deployments. I must say that well trained ADF legal officers are mostly responsible for providing international humanitarian law advice in the field.

Increasingly, the Australian Federal Police, government employees, journalists and the humanitarian sector are working in areas of armed conflict as well – it's vitally important that they also receive training and resources about their rights and responsibilities under international humanitarian law. The Australian Red Cross regularly runs courses and events across the country aimed at providing ongoing education for these groups, with an emphasis on the importance of humanity. **R**

THE US IS PUSHING FOR normalisation with Honduras, but violence and political repression are rising and the communities are in the crossfire. ROSIE WONG reports from Tegucigalpa.

Honduras: after the coup

Last June marked the first anniversary of the military coup that ousted the elected president Manuel Zelaya. On 28 June heavily armed Honduran soldiers invaded the president's home, forcefully removing him and taking him to a US military base where he was put on small plane and flown to the airport and then to Costa Rica. The same day the then-president of the congress Roberto Micheletti was sworn in by the congress as the new president of Honduras.

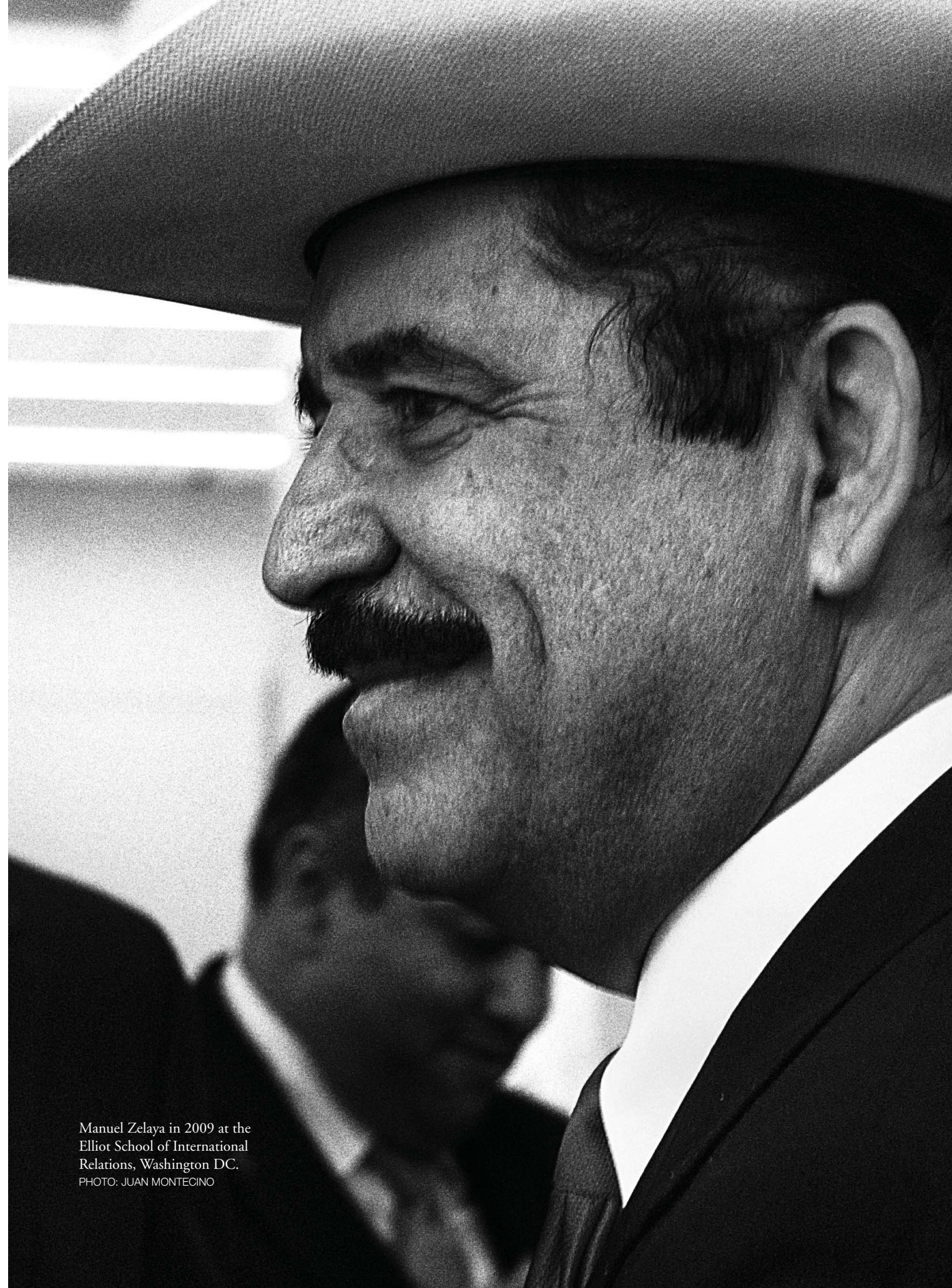
The coup was staged at a time when the government was initiating social and economic change in this country of 7.3 million, and the second poorest in Latin America after Haiti. Zelaya had surprised many Hondurans when he responded to grassroots demands and implemented a number of social reforms. These included increasing the minimum wage by 60 per cent, opposing the privatisation of the national telephone company, suspending mining concessions, banning open-pit mining and joining Petrocaribe – a scheme giving Hondurans access to cheaper petrol.

Zelaya also lowered interest rates, allocated funds for agricultural technology and provided free electricity

to 7,000 poor families. He joined the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas, the economic cooperation scheme that provides educational and health programs and promotes literacy, abolishes school fees and finances micro enterprises. During his term he increased the international reserves and opposed the devaluation of the Honduran currency. He also initiated land-reform negotiations in favour of the campesinos and replaced the US military base in Honduras with a commercial airport.

According to observers, he was not a radical, but his reforms were seen as extreme by the ultra-right, ultra-conservative ruling class.

Lisa Sullivan, Director of the Latin American Office of the School of the Americas Watch reported she had witnessed hope and excitement for grassroots driven change just a month before the coup. She had visited the president and other leaders to ask them to stop sending troops for training to the US Army School of the Americas, now renamed Western Hemisphere Institute of Security and Cooperation. This is a school that has trained over 60,000 Latin American soldiers and whose graduates have participated in torture, death squads, mass killings and military coups.



Manuel Zelaya in 2009 at the Elliot School of International Relations, Washington DC.
PHOTO: JUAN MONTECINO

Sullivan was impressed by the meeting president Zelaya held with grassroots representatives. The president wanted to include a fourth ballot box on election day in November 2009 to find out whether or not Hondurans wanted to form a national constituent assembly to reform the constitution. Zelaya talked with grassroots representatives about problems with the existing constitution and the need for reform led by a new constituent assembly.

But after the coup the proposal for the non-binding consultation was declared illegal. The Supreme Court ordered the reinstatement of the head of the military forces, Romeo Vasquez Velasquez, after Zelaya had dismissed him for disobeying orders to distribute the ballot boxes, and the Congress passed a decree to make illegal the holding of popular consultations 180 days before or after general elections.

State institutions were not alone in supporting the coup. The Honduran Business Council, the Civic Democratic Union, the Honduran Catholic Church, (led by Cardinal Oscar Maradiaga Rodriguez), the media and other international interests also supported it.

The International Republican Institute, for instance, allocated \$1.2 million alone in 2009 to think tanks and lobbying. Analysts say that these organisations campaigned to manipulate public opinion, making it believe that the proposed constituent assembly was just about Zelaya's re-election, and that by promoting the fourth ballot box the president had broken the law (since the constitution only allows representative democracy through the congress, rather than participative democracy) and that Zelaya had written a resignation letter. But these rumours had no substance. Despite misinformation by the mainstream media many people rebelled, organising daily marches.

International pressure was ignored by the new regime. The Organisation of American States (OAS) immediately suspended Honduras's membership. The United Nations General Assembly unanimously condemned the military coup, and did not recognise any government other than Zelaya's constitutional government, and continued to call on his immediate

and unconditional restitution. In July the countries of the European Union decided to withdraw their ambassadors from Honduras. But the Honduran Congress ignored the international pressure and ratified a decree restricting individual liberties. The European Union then announced it was to suspend aid.

Cardinal Oscar Maradiaga Rodriguez appeared on television and radio telling Zelaya not to return, warning there would be bloodshed if he did. When he tried to return to Honduras a month later, the military prevented his landing by blocking the path. Masses of people went to welcome back their president. Isis Obed was shot dead by the police.

A few weeks later, Zelaya made another attempt to cross into Honduras, this time by land from Nicaragua. On this occasion a massive military contingent prevented his return, the police captured 24-year-old Pedro Magdiel Salvador Munoz, who was found dead and tortured the next morning.

In September 2009, Zelaya clandestinely returned to Tegucigalpa. His arrival was announced after he safely entered the Brazilian Embassy. A curfew was announced that lasted 40 hours. He remained in the embassy accompanied initially by hundreds of supporters for four months. During this time the Brazilian Embassy and surrounding streets were closed off from journalists and controlled by the military.

At the request of the US government, Costa Rican president Oscar Arias mediated negotiations between representatives of the Zelaya government and the de facto

regime, but these failed after three rounds because the de facto regime said Zelaya's proposal of a return to power was unacceptable. A month later, a delegation of seven ministers and the secretary general of the OAS also tried to negotiate a solution with no outcome. Then Zelaya called for people to demonstrate for his restitution. The de facto regime responded by emitting a decree restricting freedoms of movement and expression for 45 days and forbade meetings.

In October the OAS began mediation between representatives of Zelaya and Micheletti. Zelaya demanded to be restituted by 15 October to ensure

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On the day that ousted President Manuel Zelaya was slated to return, thousands of supporters gathered at the Pedagogica University in order to march towards Toncontin Airport in July 2009. PHOTO: JAMES RODRIGUEZ

legitimate elections but had to extend the deadline several times.

Finally the US Sub-Secretary of State for Hemispheric Affairs, Thomas Shannon arrived in Honduras to break the stalemate. Micheletti announced congress would decide on Zelaya's return to power. Zelaya accepted on the understanding it would return him to power, but congress didn't make a decision until after the elections and the majority of the members voted against the return of Zelaya to power.

Since the election was carried out by an illegitimate regime under militarised conditions, none of the international organisations had sent observers. On election day many resistance leaders' homes were invaded by the military and many people marched in protest. Many were beaten and 80 people were detained. The local media reported having the highest ever participation rate in the election but the reality was different.

The inauguration of the new president Porfirio Lobo took place on 27 January 2010. The same day 300,000 people marched in Tegucigalpa alone, to

farewell Zelaya who left Honduras for the Dominican Republic.

The Obama administration initially denounced the coup but afterwards appeared to have a change in policy, lobbying Latin American governments to recognise the Lobo regime. Adrienne Pine, Professor of Anthropology at the American University explains, "The State Department has been pushing very hard for the recognition of this new president and they are doing this against the demands of the resistance movement and human rights organisations who are demanding justice and democracy.

"They are denouncing the human rights abuses that are still being perpetrated. Seven journalists have been killed and there is a need for a new constitution which allows for participatory democracy as the current one does not."

Pine says, "They [the US] talk about 'strengthening' the institutions of the police and the military, but it is the police and the military that are killing people every day in Honduras and when they are killing people they are doing it in a targeted fashion. They are killing those who have been actively involved in the non-violent resistance

movement, so pouring money into those institutions is going to do the opposite to what the State Department and the Obama administration say it is going to do.”

International pressure has continued. The South American Nations Union has opposed the coup and the Lobo regime. They have to date been successful in blocking the re-entry of Honduras to the OAS, and have boycotted the Lobo regime from a number of regional diplomatic conferences and events. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights and the United Nations have sent delegations and have issued reports condemning the human rights violations perpetrated since the military coup.

According to the Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared, there have been 83 assassinations against members of the National Front for National Resistance and countless numbers of people have been injured and wounded by the military. There is a constant flood of people leaving the country because they have been perceived to be members of the resistance and have been tortured and raped.

Last December the founder and coordinator of the Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared was awarded the prestigious Tulip award for her exceptional human rights work by the Dutch government. She immediately returned to Honduras for a celebration with the people. Awards such as that one are in fact helping to strengthen the credibility of the Honduran struggle.

The UN Development Program reports that Honduras has an extremely high murder rate of 61.3 per 100,000 people. Professor Pine has estimated a nine per cent increase in the murder rate since the coup, “I have never seen worse security conditions in this country... while in the previous decade, the victims of extrajudicial assassinations and other forms of state violence were disproportionately young men identified (often incorrectly) as gang members, today a large percentage of the victims fall into two primary categories: people who are involved in or are openly critical of drug trafficking, and individuals who are seen as being critical of the Lobo regime, which is controlled by two forces: the military, and a small group of powerful business elites, united in their opposition against anyone opposing the coup ... the atmosphere of impunity ensures there is virtually no investigations or prosecutions.

“Moreover, victims are posthumously slandered by the police and the media as having brought their deaths upon themselves, either for involvement in drugs or as calling for a more participatory democratic government.”

Meanwhile, the attack against freedom of expression and information continue. Anarella Velez of C-Libre – an

“Lobo’s government has awarded concessions to private companies to open 41 hydroelectric dams against the wishes of the communities including Indigenous communities.”

organisation that sends alerts about violations and crimes against freedom of expression – said that C-Libre’s work has multiplied since the military coup. She says alternative media stations, such as Radio Globo, Cholutat Sur TV, and Radio Progreso, were closed down after the coup, and the regime continues to persecute community radios and the feminist radio programs.

The Guardian journalist Jonathon Glennie reported that in 2002, before Zelaya took office, 60 per cent of Hondurans lived below the poverty line, rising to 66 per cent in 2005, with urban unemployment at 6.5 per cent, and 47 per cent of income being earned by 10 per cent of the population, while 2.1 per cent was earned by the bottom 10 per cent.

During Zelaya’s term, improvements were shown with slight reductions in inequality – in 2006, 42.4 per cent of income was earned by 10 per cent of the population, 2.5 per cent was earned by the bottom 10 per cent. In 2007, urban unemployment declined to 4 per cent and those living below the poverty line dropped to 60.2 per cent. The minimum wage increased by over 60 per cent and economic growth in Zelaya’s first three years averaged 5.6 per cent

However the economy contracted three per cent in the year following the coup. The Lobo regime has introduced countless neoliberal policies, including the casualisation of labour, a national plan to lock the country into neoliberal policies for the next 15 years that include anti-terrorist laws that force NGOs to declare information about any donation they receive that is over \$2,000 and allowing state powers to fine, imprison



Ousted Honduran president Manuel Zelaya, who returned to Honduras on Sept. 21, 2009, celebrates by waving the national flag.
PHOTO: INFOSURHOY

and suspend the legal status of any organisation whose activities are considered to be terrorist – the Security Minister Oscar Alvarez said that NGOs are not allowed to finance marches that de-stabilise the country.

Lobo’s government has awarded concessions to private companies to open 41 hydroelectric dams against the wishes of the communities including Indigenous communities. He has increased military spending and has decreased educational spending.

Wilfredo Mendez, Executive Director of Centre for the Investigation and Promotion of Human Rights, wrote a report in which he recommends the congress should elaborate on a master plan for the modernisation of parliament – which, according to Mendez, Micheletti appears to have turned into a rubber stamp for public-works contracts.

Mendez presents an analysis of the institutional output of the congress, showing that the congress under Micheletti and Jose Alfredo Saavedra is one of the least transparent, democratic, least representative and least

effective political institutions Honduras has had in the last 30 years.

While 90 per cent of the motions and projects passed have to do with contracts of public works, in 2009, 27 bills were left without approval, including the general law for the access of women to a life free from violence; the law that protects students in schools and the law to eradicate kidnapping, extortion and assassination.

The report also establishes that the president tends to manipulate congress to his whims because the legislation allows him to do so. The regulations governing congress are 25 years old. It grants complete power to its president. Reforms are needed to achieve a greater legitimacy and representation. “The process of national reconciliation will not be achieved without establishing a new social pact and this pact is the national constituent assembly,” he writes.

INTERVIEW WITH DR JUAN ALMENDARES >>>



DR JUAN ALMENDARES,
the director and founder of the
Center for the Prevention,
Treatment and Rehabilitation
of Torture Victims and Their
Families (Honduras) (CPTRT),
spoke to ROSIE WONG.

DR ALMENDARES seems to wear many hats. Apart from being the director and founder of the CPTRT, he leads the Movimiento Madre Tierra (Friends of the Earth Honduras), the Honduran Committee for Peace Action, and also runs a medical clinic for the poor. He studied medicine in both Honduras and the US, and had been the dean of the medical school and the director of the National University when he was discharged for political reasons. It was at that point that he decided to join the popular movement. Many of his friends and students were killed in the 1980s political repression. He was persecuted by death squads and was captured, interrogated and subjected to torture. The military prohibited him from practising medicine for four years and he used this time to link with communities. Almendarez is part of the resistance.

Tell us about CPTRT, what do you do?

JA: The centre was founded in 1996 and we have been working against torture and also working with campesinos and Indigenous people on human rights issues. We have been working in prisons too. However, the worst situation we have seen in all these years has been during and since the coup.

We worked with other groups at the beginning of the coup releasing political prisoners. There were around 50 prisoners who were being detained by authorities, including leaders like Rafael Alegria of the Resistance and Via Campesino, who was in Paraiso. We have seen some of the people who have been tortured by the coup regime. We are worried about the situation faced by the campesinos in Aguan, and also by the current situation nationally, because it is not only in the Aguan where there are land conflicts, but also in Zacate Grande, Comayagua, Siguatepeque and the southern and eastern parts of the country. Many members of these communities have been killed by the military and police forces.

US militarisation appears to be increasing. Honduras had one US military base before the 2009 coup – Palmerola – but now there are three.

JA: We are worried the military is trying to develop conflicts among our communities as a strategy to increase militarization in our area. We are witnessing a re-militarisation of Latin America. In particular, Honduras, Colombia and Costa Rica are now pressing for more militarisation.

Costa Rica had been one of the peace leaders, but they now have military troops from the US. Honduras has more military bases and so does Colombia, which has seven military bases. On the other hand, the media is trying to create conflict between Nicaragua and neighbouring countries, creating issues that were not there before. So, we are encouraging people to join the struggle for peace and avoid these maneuvers that try to put brothers and sisters against one another and which tend to interfere with the democratic processes within Nicaragua.

We are against war. We don't want war between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, or between Nicaragua and Honduras. We want peace. We are very poor countries, and we don't want to spend money on arms and or be militarily occupied by the United States.

After the coup what we are seeing is more violence, more human rights abuses, particularly against the campesinos, against indigenous people, against the Miskito people and against the Garifuna people. These people are going to be displaced by biofuels. In Honduras there are vast plantations of palm oil, instead of having the land dedicated to growing beans, rice and corn to feed the population. The campesinos

are displaced by the large landholders and are living in miserable conditions. We are also denouncing the human rights abuses by the Honduran military troops and police and also, by paramilitary and military groups from Colombia, who are participating in the torture and the killings of Honduran campesino leaders.

Do you think the military coup was part of an international operation to undermine Hondurans struggle for their rights?

JA: The military coup was part of a strategy. A military coup was an international operation. This operation was undertaken to interfere with the Honduran democratic process. As Honduran people become more aware of their rights, they want to have a different nation. They want to enjoy freedom and have justice. Another reason is because Honduras is the major military base of the US in Central America. One of the reasons for the coup was to stop any change to the constitution because the current one discriminates against campesinos, against Indigenous peoples, against Afrodescendent people. Also this constitution does not mention women; it is not concerned about gender issues, about women's rights.

In that sense, we are a non-democratic country. We are a country which is occupied by US military troops, and we are a country that has been used as a force against the rights of the people in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Cuba.

Hondurans are resisting and there has been an increase in people tortured, assassinated and exiled since the coup.

JA: Before the coup, it was, mainly like three people tortured, and immediately after the coup there were 19 people tortured in just one night. So we have had a tremendous increase in torture immediately after the coup.

I will say that more than 100 people who were members of the resistance movement against the coup have been killed by the military and police forces. There have also been massive increases in the killing of women; Honduras is part of the violence triangle in Central America with high levels of feminicides. Also, nine journalists have been killed. Very recently, more than 17 campesinos were also killed, and sexually diverse people have been abused, persecuted, tortured and killed.

Some of those killed are leaders of the Resistance. Some will be leaders of political parties from the Liberal Party, or the Unified Democratic Party. So the government of Honduras has no respect for human rights. It has been like this ever since the coup.

Under Lobo, is it the military forces, the oligarchy, or international forces with business interests who are in power in Honduras?

JA: We say that the force determining the actions of the government is not the ruling government, it is those behind the government. We have the military forces, the oligarchy, in alliance with international forces who have business interests in Honduras. The business interests include mining, agriculture and also water resources, and they are building dams that will affect communities, so it is mostly economic interests who prevail over human rights.

What are the main challenges for CPTRT and do its members face persecution?

JA: We have several problems: we are experiencing persecution, the destruction of our structures, interference with our emails, and at certain times some of our members have been affected by persecution even in their homes, so we have a very high-risk situation in our centre.

We continue working despite the persecution because we have international solidarity which is very important, and also national solidarity. Of course, we are facing tremendous difficulties, even our water system was cut off for one month. Our telephone was cut off for two months. Our electronic systems were destroyed; our email and internet systems were interfered with for two months, through which we lost all our contacts. So, yes we are experiencing some difficulties. We have had to move office several times. Our humanitarian clinic we also face tremendous problems.

So what could be done internationally to assist you?

JA: We believe international solidarity is essential. Particularly, visiting Honduras is very important, as well as sending messages overseas about the political situation is critical, and also, being in contact with the communities. Any action towards peace and justice in Honduras is most welcomed by our people. **R**

JOURNALISTS ARE OFTEN AMONG THE first victims of dictatorships; but in some instances – as was the case in Argentina – a number of journalists became complicit in crimes committed by the military regime that ruled the country in the 1970s and 1980s, ANTONIO CASTILLO writes.

Argentinean Journalists Complicit in Crimes Against Humanity

A lot has been written about journalists as victims of the military dictatorships that ruled Latin America for most of the 1970s and 1980s. However, less extensive has been the examination into the role played by individual journalists and media organisations during military regimes – regimes responsible for the death, torture and disappearance of thousands of political dissidents.

Argentina, in contrast to Chile, Uruguay, Brazil and other post-dictatorship countries in Latin America where journalists who collaborated with the military regimes have never been investigated let alone punished, is doing just that.

The first step in the recognition of collaboration has already been taken in Argentina. Claudia Acuña, a journalist and human rights activist, said “the criminal plan of the dictatorship included the participation of media organisations and individuals”. She said the role of the media “was to justify and negate accusations of human rights violations”.

In the last few years, leading Argentinean human

rights organisations – such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and Justice Now – have put in the spotlight the names of a long list of individual journalists who, in an unholy link, collaborated with the past military regime. These are journalists who, in words of these organisations, “betrayed their own people”.

So far, this betrayal has not reached the Argentinean courts. However, it has been publicly exposed in what has been described as a “political and ethical trial.” It is an ethical trial against journalists who became accomplices in the so-called “dirty war” – a vicious military, and illegal, act of extermination of more than 30,000 political dissidents.

One journalist facing this public political and ethical trial is Samuel Gelblung, a well-known magazine editor. He still works in the media in Argentina. Gelblung was, during the dictatorship, at the helm of the magazine Gente (People). This magazine is part of a vast range of titles owned by the Atlántida publishing house, which is owned by the Vigil family, loyal supporters of the military regime.

Atlántida also publishes the now defunct popular



Argentina's last dictator, Reynaldo Bignone, has been sentenced to life in prison for crimes against humanity.
PHOTO: AFP/JUAN MABROMATA

magazines *Somos* (We Are) and *Para Ti* (For You). These three magazines were the key propaganda tool used by the Vigil family to support, justify and hide human rights violations. The collaboration of Atlántida's proprietors with the dictatorship was brilliantly exposed by author Eduardo Varela Cid in his book *Prensa Canalla* (Rotten Press). "The Vigils made up partial stories in collaboration with the navy," wrote Cid in the preface of his book.

During the military dictatorship, Gelblung was not only the star writer for this media group, but he was also a masterful media manipulator (in the 1970s the word spin doctor was not in vogue). After enjoying decades of impunity, and more than 30 years since the end of the dictatorship, one of his "masterful" media manipulations is finally threatening to bring him down.

This is the case of Alejandra Barry Mata. Alejandra was only three years old when her father and mother became part of the long list of victims of the military regime. It was the end of the 1970s and military repression was at its height. Her father, Juan Alejandro, was a political dissident who was killed on December 14, 1977, after he resisted arrest. Her mother, Susana Beatriz, decided to take her own life after being trapped by the repressive apparatus. Alejandra's mother knew that brutal torture was waiting for her if she had been caught alive.

It was a drama that gave Gelblung the raw material for one of the most shameful cases of media manipulation during the dictatorship. On December 30, 1977, Gelblung published in the magazine *Somos* a front-page photograph of Alejandra holding hands with the killers of her father. The story headlines reads: "The children of terrorism". Shortly afterwards, a barrage of similar stories continued in other publications owned by Atlántida and under Gelblung's direction.

On January 5, 1978, the magazine *Gente*, where Gelblung was the director, ran a story depicting the parents of Alejandra Barry Mata as "murderers" who "stopped being parents to fabricate orphans". The headline read:

"This is also terrorism: Alejandra is now alone".

Almost two weeks after this story, the magazine *Para Ti* published a story whose headline read: "To them Alejandra didn't matter". In the piece, Alejandra's parents were portrayed as "deciding" to leave their then three-year-old daughter an orphan. Nothing was mentioned about the regime of terror imposed by the military.

Alejandra who is now 35, has called for an investigation into the actions of Gelblung and Atlántida. "My case is about shedding light on the role played by civilians during the dictatorship," she said.

In Argentina, she said, "there was a civilian-military dictatorship and a genocide that was not the work of a mad and at loose military, but was a premeditated plan carried out with the complicity of the largest media conglomerates in the country."

The list of journalists who became accomplices of the Argentinean dictatorship is long. They were key players in the propaganda apparatus of the military legitimising the appalling human rights abuses committed in this country.

Two of these journalists – Rolando Hangling and Mariano Grondona – are symbols of this collaboration. Both writers became the loudest defenders and advocates of the military regime.

In the 1970s, Hangling was a prolific opinion writer for *Somos* magazine. In the magazine Hangling was given unlimited space to persuade the international community – that by then had become increasingly critical of

the escalation of human rights violations – about the positive actions taken by the military in rebuilding the country. In his stories and commentaries Hangling devoted long pieces to castigating international leaders and organisations for what he considered an "external anti-Argentinean campaign".

Hangling was not alone in this pro-dictatorship media crusade. He was accompanied by the notorious Mariano Grondona, whose support for the military regimes goes back to 1962. Grondona was well rewarded for his loyalty. Dictator Juan Carlos Onganía

Carballo, who ruled the country from 1966 to 1970, appointed Grondona as an ambassador. Years later, he became director of *Visión* – an ultra right-wing magazine owned by the Somoza family, the infamous clan of dictators in Nicaragua.

In the context of increasing international condemnation of the atrocities committed by the military dictatorship, Grondona was a passionate defender of the regime. When in 1979 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Argentina's leading human rights figure Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Grondona's articles furiously attacked the decision.

In an uncanny resemblance to the Chinese reaction after a similar award was given to dissident Liu Xiaobo in 2010, Grondona wrote that the Nobel committee's decision "distorted seriously the truth about Argentina". Human rights organisations in Argentina have ranked Grondona among the "top ten" journalists who collaborated with the dictatorship.

It was not only collaboration, as media organisations also profited from the dictatorship. When Argentina's president Cristina Fernández last year accused the country's two largest newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, of complicity and profiteering during the military dictatorship, she was stating a well-documented fact.

The profiteering conduct of these two papers during Argentina's dirty war was well-documented in *Papel Prensa: La Verdad* (Printing Paper: The Truth), a document released in August last year by President Fernández. The document exposes the close ties between *Clarín* and *La Nación* and the military dictatorship.

The 400-page document shed light on one of the most obscure cases involving the media and the military dictatorship. *Papel Prensa* is the only company that produces newsprint in Argentina. It is a monopoly, owned since the dictatorship by *Clarín* and *La Nación*. There is also a third proprietor, a newspaper called *La Razón*.

For a very long time this company was owned by the Graiver family. During the military regime, this family became part of the long list of enemies of the dictatorship. The family was accused of connections with left-wing armed groups and *Clarín* and *La Nación* played a central role in this accusation. These newspapers – published, almost daily, front-page stories accusing the Graiver family of connections with radical groups. The strategy worked.

In mid-1976, several members of the family were detained and taken to clandestine detention centres. After a dubious military trial, the company was illegally

confiscated by the military and then sold at a laughable prize to *Clarín*, *La Nación* and *La Razón*. The whole process was done with the full cooperation of these newspapers' owners.

Despite the arrival of democracy in 1983, the ownership of *Papel Prensa* is still under the control of *Clarín* and *La Nación*. They have a total monopoly on printing of newspapers and as President Fernández said: "it determines who it sells to, how they sell and at what price." In a frontal attack to this monopoly gestated during the dictatorship, President Fernández also said: "whoever controls it, controls the written word in Argentina."

The government is determined to put on trial the owners of *Clarín*, Ernestina Herrera de Noble and Héctor Magnetto; and the director of *La Nación* Bartolomé Mitre. President Fernández, who promised to hand over the case to the courts, said that the judiciary should decide whether these key figures of the media in Argentina should be charged with crimes against humanity.

Argentina is going through a major human rights legal process – called megacausa (mega-trial) – a trial that is exhuming Argentina's era of state terrorism, murder and torture. In this megacausa some of the key perpetrators of crimes against humanity are being taken to court one by one. Some of them, such as former dictator General Reynaldo Bignone, are already in jail.

They are mainly military though. Civilians who collaborated with the military regime have not been made accountable yet. Among these civilians are journalists, like Samuel Gelblung, Rolando Hangling and Mariano Grondona, whose crimes have not been punished in a court of law.

Not yet. But things are changing. "I'm certain that in times to come – soon – we will also see journalists put on trial for their justifications of torture," said Hebe de Bonafini, the leader of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. It seems that those journalists who "betrayed the people" finally will be made accountable for their willing and unflinching collaboration with Argentina's dictatorship, one of the worst of its kind. **R**

When the Journey Begins at the Destination

WHAT DO ASYLUM SEEKERS KNOW about their destination? DR KHALID KOSER, a geographer and associate dean and head of the New Issues in Security Programme at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, explains.

The main purpose of introducing more restrictive asylum policies – from stronger border enforcement, through limiting welfare payments, to detention – is to reduce the number of asylum seekers arriving in the country. Around the world – including in Australia – significant funding, resources, and political capital are expended on such policies to achieve this goal.

A good deal of research, however, suggests that these policies may be based on a flawed assumption, which means that they will not work, and are ultimately a waste of time and money. This assumption is that asylum seekers know about policies in destination countries, and thus will make the decision not to go there once more restrictive policies are introduced. But do they? And will they?

A survey conducted by the author and colleagues among asylum seekers in the UK in 2005, that included respondents from Afghanistan as well as several other countries, found that most had little knowledge of the UK other than general impressions. Many had heard of Princess Diana and David Beckham, but most certainly did not appear to understand how the asylum or welfare system worked.

The study identified five reasons for limited

knowledge among the respondents. First, few had family or friends in the UK; and for many migrants these are the most important source of information about conditions in other countries. Second, in some cases they had been provided misleading or false information, including in many cases by family members. Pride, or embarrassment, may encourage asylum seekers to mislead friends or family at home about their circumstances.

Third, many had departed their country in a rush; people fleeing for their lives rarely have time to undertake detailed research. Fourth, some were poorly educated and did not speak English. Finally, some had not actually chosen their destination, with this decision being made on their behalf by family members. All of these factors are likely to be relevant for some of the boat arrivals in Australia today.

In response to these sorts of gaps in knowledge, many governments, including the Australian government, invest significant resources in information campaigns in important origin countries, explaining not just how the asylum and migration system work, but also the risks of trying to enter without authorisation.

But research also demonstrates that these campaigns can also be ineffective. One reason is that governments and international organisations are simply not trusted by the people they are trying to reach. This may not be as a result of mistrust of a specific government in a particular country, but a more general mistrust of authority in general, arising from personal experiences in countries where corruption is rife and the rule of law poor.

Another reason is that dissemination strategies are often ill-conceived, for example not reaching beyond the capital city, or being prepared in only a limited number of local languages, or focusing on public spaces that may be inaccessible for example to women in certain societies. A final reason is that information is quickly out of date, especially when, as has been the case in Australia this year, asylum policies change rapidly.

Even if asylum seekers do find out about restrictive asylum policies in their intended destination, will this be enough to deter them? Again research suggests that there are a number of other variables that are just as significant as government policy in determining the choice of destination by asylum seekers. In Europe these include geographical proximity and pre-existing colonial, trade, or linguistic linkages, which are of less relevance in the Australian context. Another factor, which is of direct relevance, is the role of social networks, referring to the presence in potential destination countries of family, friends, and co-nationals or co-ethnics.

In practical terms, social networks provide information, lend would-be migrants money for their journeys, and can help with immediate challenges upon



Sydney Airport. PHOTO: LIBRARYMOOK/2010

arrival like overcoming language and cultural barriers, and finding accommodation and work. There is clear research evidence that once momentum develops around social networks, it is hard for policies to stop that momentum. Another important variable in explaining why asylum seekers go to particular places is the role of smugglers. One of the reasons people pay smugglers is to organise their trip for them, from escaping their home country, through surviving in transit, to getting into a destination country. In which case a more important question than whether restrictive asylum policies deter asylum seekers is whether they deter smugglers from delivering people to particular destinations.

Sometimes smugglers are only paid once they have delivered their clients to countries where they can gain physical access to the territory, enter the asylum system, stand a good chance of being able to remain (legally or illegally) in the country, and find opportunities to work. In such cases restrictive policies may well make smugglers rethink targeting a particular destination. But in other situations, where for example smugglers are paid in full upfront before departure, they have little incentive other perhaps than pride, honour, or establishing

a business reputation, for selecting between destinations. The suspension of processing for new Afghan or Sri Lankan asylum seekers in Australian territories was an irrelevance for the smuggler dispatching them there, as long as he had already been paid and could avoid personally being caught or penalised.

Finally, in reality asylum seekers go to countries not because of the leniency or otherwise of asylum policies, but because they perceive those countries as fair, decent, and safe.

Of course there are examples where border enforcement has reduced the number of asylum seekers arriving in particular countries, and where well-designed information campaigns appear to have had an impact. But normally this has been where these policies are part of a more comprehensive approach that includes combating migrant smuggling and human trafficking, and contributing directly towards peace and security in the countries asylum seekers are fleeing in the first place.

If a government's intention is to stop asylum seekers – and that is in itself an intention that requires closer scrutiny – then assuming that restrictive policies will make this happen is short-sighted and unrealistic. **R**

IN WHAT WAS TERMED ‘the decade of the brain’, in the last few years STARTTS has expanded its systemic approach to the healing of refugee survivors of trauma. Increasingly, techniques based on neuroscience are being integrated with psychological and body focussed therapies, with STARTTS establishing the world-first Neurofeedback clinic in 2007. **DEBBIE GOULD** reports on the presentations made by some international experts.

Using Neuroscience to Treat Refugee Trauma: Neurofeedback Training at STARTTS

Lately STARTTS has hosted several seminars reinforcing the need to therapeutically address the neuro-biological component of the trauma response. Presenters have included Bessel van der Kolk and Dan Siegel and most recently, Sebern Fisher. A psychotherapist and Neurofeedback practitioner, who presented a seminar in Sydney in August 2010, focussing on her work with Neurofeedback Training (NFT). This opened up the opportunity to discuss the use of NFT.

Along with Bessel van der Kolk, Dan Siegel, Lou Cozolino and Alan Schore, Sebern has been part of the emergence of neuroscience into the mainstream discourse in the field of trauma. Neuroscience is the interdisciplinary study of the nervous system and the area of research and practice that is guided by the position that neurology, emotion and the development of the mind are inseparably linked. Philosophically, it represents a shift away from a mind/body split that has characterised mainstream approaches to psychological healing.

This view has been put to particular use in conceptualising the impact of trauma on the human

mind and in developing treatments that best address this complex interplay of variables. NFT is one such treatment that Sebern Fisher has applied to the treatment of a variety of psychological conditions in a variety of treatment contexts. This sparked the interest of Bessel van Der Kolk, a leading researcher, author and clinician in the area of developmental trauma who consults with Sebern on his use of NFT.

Sebern is also a consultant to staff at the STARTTS Neurofeedback clinic. Although she is not specialised in refugee trauma, she provides consultation on the application of NFT principles in an area where there are no existing treatment protocols.

Sebern’s area of interest is development and attachment trauma. Her perspective is both psychodynamic and neurodynamic. In line with a growing body of ‘attachment neuroscientists’, she sees neurological development as being strongly influenced by the attachment relationship between infant and primary caregivers. The area of the brain primarily responsible for moderating the stress or threat response, the right orbito-frontal cortex, is deeply sensitive to the nature of this attachment that requires of the parent to



Neurofeedback in practice at STARTTS. PHOTO: PHIL CROSSIE

be attuned and responsive to the infant’s changing states. There are clear evolutionary benefits to this arrangement – out of the attachment relationship comes the capacity to respond appropriately to threat and thus to survive.

However, sometimes attachment is distorted and the maternal-child relationship does not protect the child from abuse or wilful neglect. This is pertinent when reflecting on refugee children. Many refugee children were not fed. Their caregivers were unable to provide safety, no matter how strong the attachment bond. In these cases, emotional attunement is still possible but difficult for parents plagued by their own trauma. This raises the issue of where to focus treatment.

While this article will focus on a direct, specialised treatment for trauma, it assumes the provision of prevention and early intervention services particularly those that facilitate having infants longer in the care of emotionally accessible and attuned parents.

In vulnerable families, like refugees, early intervention strategies would provide the support and containment to enhance parents’ capacity for attunement and responsiveness. This might involve support for parents in engaging with their infants, for example using

tone, gaze and touch to facilitate their capacity to self-regulate.

Disturbances in emotional regulation can emerge from developmental trauma as well as from severe, interpersonal trauma in the context of war, for example rape and torture. In post-traumatic responses, fear is the primary affect that has to be regulated. It is what maintains the trauma through a vicious cycle: “If I feel afraid there must be something to fear”. Areas of the brain responsible for thinking about (or ‘mentalising’) trauma and for dampening the continued trauma response are compromised due to the damaging effects of trauma on pathways between the cortex and limbic system: An over reactive limbic system maintains the sense of continued threat, while the frontal cortex is unable to evaluate it accurately and instigate appropriate responses. Dysfunctional responses alternate between physiological over arousal with concomitant anxiety and numbing with possible dissociation.

How to achieve regulation of this fear response is one of the fundamental differences between various therapeutic approaches for treating trauma, including early psychoanalysts, like Pierre Janet, and contemporary

“In post-traumatic responses, fear is the primary affect that has to be regulated. It is what maintains the trauma through a vicious cycle.”

psychotherapeutic approaches which recommend cognitive reappraisal, a containing therapeutic relationship and so on. All of them ultimately do prioritise safety for the traumatised person. A major component of this safety, from a neuroscience perspective, is a stable nervous system.

NFT is a method that has been developed to stabilise the nervous system, originally in cases of Epilepsy and Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder but increasingly so in trauma. It is a form of biofeedback guided by Quantitative Electroencephalogram (qEEG) readings. The qEEG provides a detailed picture of brain waves across several areas of the brain where specific as well as general impacts of trauma can be seen.

Most readers will be familiar with biofeedback using blood pressure measurement, skin temperature, breathing and pulse. When applying NF the client receives feedback about the electrical activities in their brain that accompany subjective experiences of state of mind, including both calm and alert states.

NFT appears to involve a person playing a computer game without hand controls. They fix their attention on the screen and observe changes in colours, sounds,

points in the games that reflect rewards that would be given in most hand co-ordinated computer games, for example swallowing the monster and outrunning the rocket. These rewards are given when the client engages areas of the brain needing stimulation or disengages those needing ‘down tuning’.

However, the current treatment protocols were not developed with many qEEGs of people who have suffered psychological trauma, particularly refugees. As part of developing a neuroscience approach, STARTTS has recently joined a large international study aimed at developing a database of qEEG patterns for this population. This provides opportunities to define and fine-tune protocols that will inform international NFT trauma protocols.

While several STARTTS staff members have been trained to use the method, two psychologists, Mirjana Askovic and Sejla Tukelija are the primary clinicians developing the programme, co-ordinating referrals and providing training to clients. Several case studies have been published in peer reviewed journals by the NF team. These, as well as international conference and workshop presentations, have been well received.



PHOTO: PHIL CROSSIE

The majority of the clinic's work is with children whose social, cognitive, emotional and behavioural lives show the impact of their own as well as their parent's trauma on their vulnerable nervous systems.

‘Non-verbal’ therapeutic approaches, including NFT, are more appropriate for children and provide a platform for quicker neurological stabilisation. The computer interface is also particularly engaging for children.

In addition, many refugees do not use the English language to express emotions so their route to healing is often not verbal. Trauma also impacts on the language centres of the brain reducing the ability to express feelings or access memories.

Where the person is able to talk, the act of speaking the trauma can stimulate the fear centres in the brain (primarily the amygdala) in the present. This state replicates the original trauma state and generates the need to react and/or defend in ways that would jeopardise the processing of the trauma – the person either dissociates or becomes hyperaroused and thus can't think or talk.

The success of NFT is measured by standardised tests, by changes in the qEEG and feedback from

clients and those around them. From a scientific perspective, these outcomes do not differentiate between the effectiveness of NFT and that of the relationship between the clinician and client. However, a therapeutic connection between the client and the clinician is crucial for emotional stabilisation. In this case, the clinician is a therapist as well as a trainer. They have to be attuned to subtle changes in the client's mood, level of arousal and to the EEG and must reflect these to the client. This attunement is experienced at a profound level by most clients as it parallels early experiences of attunement and response.

Sebern Fisher reports success in using NFT to treat affect dysregulation in people whose early experiences have undermined their neurological resilience. STARTTS' use of this technique further focuses on neuro-affective shifts that frequently accompany violent trauma.

NFT is fast becoming integrated into STARTTS' comprehensive services for refugee trauma survivors. With its dual role in “coal face” research and treatment, NFT is neuroscience in action. **R**



NEW ZEALAND HAS BEEN WELCOMING refugees for quite some time. Many receive assistance from Refugees as Survivors New Zealand, a lead agency for mental health services. Its manager G.E. POOLE visited STARTTS and spoke to OLGA YOLDI.

Refugee Services in New Zealand

New Zealand is quite a small country, not known for its multicultural society. What is its refugee intake?

GEP: New Zealand has a population of 4.2 million in the two main islands. About one third of them (1.3 million) live in Auckland, which is one of the most multicultural cities in the world. A quarter of its residents were born overseas, on the other hand, the city has the largest population of Polynesian people (Māori, Samoan, Rarotongan, Niuean, Fijian and Tongan) in the Pacific and 23 per cent of its population has an Asian background.

Even the remainder of New Zealand is also rapidly becoming multicultural. People from Asian origin make up 13 per cent of the population in Wellington, 11 per cent in Hamilton and 8 per cent in Christchurch, while Māori make up 14 per cent of the population. So yes, New Zealand is changing.

I must say that Aotearoa (New Zealand) bases its multicultural development on solid bicultural foundations. As you may know, the partnership between Māori and Pakeha (European) is founded on the Treaty of Waitangi. Honouring this Treaty is now taken very seriously by the people and the Government. Although

this is really a new trend. It did not always occur in the past. But now it is broadly understood that the Māori are Tangata Whenua, or the first people of the land, and their indigenous rights and needs must be honoured and respected first by the Crown, as Treaty partner, and by all subsequent settlers who come to live in such a wonderful country.

How is the settlement of refugees taking place?

GEP: Significant numbers of refugees (over 40,000) have been welcomed by New Zealand since WWII, with Polish, Jewish and European displaced persons arriving first. Later, Hungarian and others from Eastern Europe, Uganda, and Chile were welcomed. Between 1977 and 1993, New Zealand accepted more than 11,000 refugees from Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia. In 1987, a formal quota system was established by the government, and 750 refugees plus 300 family reunification cases are accepted annually. Approximately 1,500 refugees arrive each year. New Zealand is currently the fourth per capita country accepting quota refugees for resettlement.

Refugees are arriving from Afghanistan, Somalia,

Sudan, Colombia, Bhutan, Burma Myanmar, Iraq, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi, Congo, and a number of other countries. During the 1990s significant numbers came from Kosovo, Bosnia and other areas during the Balkan conflict.

New Zealand makes an effort to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to assist some of the most vulnerable and harmed refugees, with highest protection needs. This has implications for the level and nature of settlement support services required by these people when they arrive as refugee intake includes a very large number of medical and disability cases, high protection cases, and women and children at risk. In recent years, an average of 20 per cent of the intake has included survivors of torture.

New Zealand has a fairly unique system for welcoming refugees. All arrive through the national Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, at Mangere. This Centre is set on a 10-acre property and also houses government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on a single site as a 'one-stop-shop'. The purpose of housing refugees in this centre is to conduct comprehensive initial assessments and provide orientation. Groups of 120-150 people arrive every eight weeks and stay for a period of six weeks.

Immigration New Zealand operates the site and supervises selection, travel and entry provisions, and there is a refugee medical centre, carrying out health and dental assessments and treatment needs. Our agency, Refugees As Survivors New Zealand (RASNZ) conducts the mental health assessments, and initial treatment, and aspects of orientation such as road safety, drivers licensing, health promotion, and understanding and using the health system. Auckland University of Technology delivers general orientation, provides English as a Second Language courses, introduction, and language and childhood educational assessments. Refugee Services Aotearoa (RSA) delivers practical settlement support in the first six months including housing, school enrolments and other related aspects and the Red Cross is also on the Mangere site assisting with locating missing family members overseas.

Where do refugees tend to settle?

GEP: About 40 per cent on average of new quota refugees, plus virtually all asylum seekers and Convention refugees, settle in Auckland. The remainder are settled in Hamilton, Wellington and Palmerston North; and on the South Island in Nelson and Christchurch. The only specialist mental-health services for refugees are located in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

We are interested to learn how the more recent Australian experience of settlement in rural areas has been going.

Are New Zealanders open to newcomers?

GEP: My view as a former migrant is that New Zealanders are very open to newcomers. Kiwis generally have an open, friendly, and caring approach to migrants from all backgrounds, and refugees are no exception. Similar to the Australians, Kiwis believe that everyone deserves a 'fair go'. Generally the NZ Government demonstrates strong commitment to quota refugees and, for a small country, a fair amount of resources goes into resettlement.

I think that race and ethnic relations in New Zealand can show their sharp edges at times just as everywhere else in the world, but generally New Zealanders are, in my view, among the fairest and least prejudiced people of the number of countries I've lived and worked in. I think that a large portion of that openness has probably come from the bicultural journey with the Māori people, and a history of social consciousness, voting rights, equality, and social inclusion.

What are the government policies in relation to refugee quotas? Is there much of a debate about refugees? How are asylum seekers treated by the government?

GEP: Since 2004 about 896 asylum seeker claims have been approved. Nearly they are accommodated in the community. A small number (considered at risk of absconding) are housed at the Mangere Accommodation Centre (MAC). This is a hostel and not really a secure

“I would have to say that no, refugee issues are not anywhere near as politicised as they are in Australia, although they have the potential to become so, given the right conditions in the future.”



Participants at a photography workshop in Te Papa Museum made digital stories for 'The Mixing Room, stories from young refugees in NZ'. PHOTO: BECKY NUNES/2009

facility where people can come and go during the day. A very small number (six at present) are in secure detainment at Mt Eden Prison Remand Centre. The Refugee Council of New Zealand has strongly opposed housing any asylum seekers in a correctional environment and the Government has signalled its intention to end this practice as soon as a new facility at Mangere is built.

I would have to say that no, refugee issues are not anywhere near as politicised as they are in Australia, although they have the potential to become so, given the right conditions in the future.

There was one very contentious case of an asylum seeker named Ahmed Zaoui in which the government of the day claimed he was a security risk, but would not release the information or evidence around this. The case drew a lot of controversy but was resolved in favour of the claimant eventually. It led to a complete review and revision of the law, resulting in the new 2009 Immigration Act. A recent case of an attempted airplane hijacking by a former refugee also drew a fair amount of negative attention, but both of these incidences passed. Generally, there is public support for welcoming refugees and considerable goodwill.

Anyone who has ever sailed on the Tasman Sea will attest to how it presents a formidable natural barrier. But recently, political leaders have warned and predicted that a ship with asylum seekers may eventually make its way into New Zealand territorial waters. If or when that does occur, how prepared will New Zealand be to uphold international humanitarian standards and best-practice with regard to the accommodation and processing of asylum claimants, is an open question.

I think that in most developed Western countries immigration has become increasingly intertwined with politics due to concerns about national security, border control, and the fear of terrorism, as well as social issues around cultural diversity and tolerance. Of course New Zealand is no exception. The recent passing of the new reforms in the Immigration Act 2009 was partly in response to asylum issues, court cases, and related controversies. Concerns about Australia's recent asylum issues and practices and the Australian Government's response to the arrival by boat of a wave of asylum seekers, has also provoked public-policy debate on this side of the Tasman.

The evidence is well-established that the involuntary

detainment of human beings not only damages them but also brutalises the people and the societies carrying it out. The analogous historic context in the ending of indigenous land confiscations, or the ending of suppression of the Māori language, or, in more recent times, the ending of pre-dawn immigration raids on Pacific Island communities by Governments, these are all inescapable parallels. When such practices are ended, civil society is strengthened and civilisation advances a little.

I certainly believe that by preparing well in advance for what many people believe will be an inevitable sea arrival here, and by implementing best-practice models prior to that event with the present asylum seekers coming by other means, New Zealand could positively demonstrate its international commitment to humanitarian principles applied to the increasingly complex issues of irregular migration.

What are the main problems experienced by newly arrived refugees? Which countries do most refugees come from?

GEP: The problems here are very similar to those in Australia and many resettlement countries. The line-up of usual suspects are housing issues, barriers of language and culture, social isolation and unemployment. Our present quota composition consists of refugees from Burma (Myanmar) and Bhutan (Nepal), but also a number of people from Congo, Iraq and Afghanistan. Fairly recent intakes have included vulnerable women and children from Colombia.

Tell us about your centre? How many refugees do you assist per year? What kind of problems do they present? What services do you offer?

GEP: RASNZ was established as the specialist refugee mental health service in 1997 and has a multidisciplinary and multicultural staff of psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, body therapists, a social worker, counsellor advocates, and refugee community link workers. A number of our clinical and service staff have themselves arrived as refugees. There are 120 interpreters in 30 languages, and we do a lot of professional development with this important group.

There are two main refugee centres in Auckland. The first is the assessment team at the national Mangere Refugee Centre, and the second is the Refugee Mobile Team (RMT) which covers all of metropolitan Auckland. The RMT travels with hybrid cars and operates around the region. The RMT was recently a recipient of the Gold Award for Achievement at the recent conference in Sydney.

“The evidence is well-established that the involuntary detainment of human beings not only damages them but also brutalises the people and the societies carrying it out.”

There is a also a health promotion and community development team with 15 refugee community facilitators, who are leaders from multiple communities, and a research team which is presently carrying out a major national study on “Family Reunification, Mental Health and Settlement Outcomes”. It is just developing and a new Youth Team called RYAN (Refugee Youth Action Network) is about to be launched in 2011.

A large proportion of refugees are survivors of torture and trauma and have all the associated needs. We also do a lot of follow-up work with refugees with medical and disability issues. Because of the often high needs, and complex nature of the quota composition, much work is done with those just arriving as well as those settled in the community.

Are mainstream services equipped to deal with the complexities experienced by refugees? Is training on cross-cultural issues being provided?

GEP: Unfortunately mainstream services in New Zealand are not equipped to deal with the special needs. Specialist services, where they exist, fill some of the gap. Similar to Australia, refugees have difficulty accessing mainstream health and social services. In 2007 RASNZ and the Asian Health Services of the Waitemata Health Board developed the CALD (Cultural and Linguistically Diverse) training resource. This is a six-module course including cultural competencies, cultural self-awareness, working with interpreters, with migrants and refugees. It also has a practical component in clinical case review. Te Pou, the National Mental Health Workforce Centre, helped fund us to roll out the pilot CALD training across New Zealand in 2008. Now we have CALD training



Young Cambodian refugee and her child in Auckland. PHOTO: JESSICA MACCORMICK

being delivered in several government departments and health services. We have a big commitment to sharing knowledge, training and capacity-building.

Some of our team members recently visited the STARTTS Centre in Sydney and were very impressed with the scope, the range, scale and quality of the innovative work going on there. We were very grateful for the knowledge, the resources and expertise shared and for the bonds of collegueship. We have discussed with your Director about the possibility of some staff exchanges during next year if this becomes possible.

Apart from clinical services, do you provide community development and capacity building initiatives? Could you give us some examples?

GEP: Yes, Dr Arif Saeid and his team work in community development and they established a range of innovative and effective initiatives. One project is the Gardening for Health Initiative in which former refugees in the community are assisted with seeds, tools and mentoring to establish their own gardens for self-sufficiency at home. The RYAN (Refugee Youth Action Network) is another

major community development initiative coming from Arif's team. So far, over 90 young leaders of the future have been nominated to participate in outdoor-pursuits leadership training, run in Northland, by the Ngati Wai Māori Trust. This is in partnership with two refugee-run organisations, the Umma Trust (Muslim Social Services) and the Ethnic Youth Employment and Training Trust.

There is also a small youth project established in Hamilton. The Ministry of Social Development is very clued-up about grassroots models of community development and support a range of initiatives around the country. We've also transplanted the Victorian Foundation's Rainbow Programme for refugee children in schools, and are very grateful for the sharing of these resources.

There is also the RISI (Refugees In Sport Initiative) in which corporate sponsors help children and young people from refugee backgrounds get involved in mainstream sports such as soccer, swimming, cricket and netball. As part of this, RASNZ has its own highly successful football team, the “ALL REFS”. The All Refs have won some major tournaments, but as yet have not gone up against another famous NZ team of similar name. **R**

*Ninth International Capacity Building Workshops and Conference
on Health and Human Rights: Tbilisi, Georgia 6-9 October 2011*

Doing Justice and Building Capacity

By Janset Berzeg

We live in a world where human rights are being violated and challenged every day. In order to mitigate some of the effects of these abuses, the Secretariat of the International Society for Health and Human Rights (ISHHR) wants to strengthen the cooperation amongst professionals engaged in work with individuals and communities affected by human rights violations, as well as contributing to capacity building activities and best practice approaches in the area of mental health and social work.

ISHHR members are professionals who provide psycho-social, forensic, medical and advocacy services to both empower and heal survivors of gross human rights abuses and their communities. They are part of the world-wide ISHHR network of professionals working in the field of health and human rights.

The International Capacity Building Workshops and Conference on Health and Human Rights is a four day event that brings together health professionals, human rights advocates, survivors of torture and people affected by trauma from all over the world, to share

knowledge on how to combat the effects of trauma, torture and human rights abuses on mental health. Much effort, research and time go into organising this multifaceted, international experience. It is orchestrated by the ISHHR Secretariat in Australia with remarkable support from the Local Committee in Georgia as well as from numerous dedicated ISHHR friends in the Americas, Europe and Africa.

There is sufficient evidence that the consequences of trauma can be long lasting and highly variable and the training of fieldworkers and professionals alike, involves serious time and effort.

New and creative methods of analysing, diagnosing and treating survivors of torture and trauma are constantly being developed. The ISHHR Conference provides the ideal international platform to strengthen the capacity of accredited centres and professionals and improve evaluation practices and current torture rehabilitation techniques and networking.

The conference consists of two days of capacity building workshops followed by two days of keynote addresses and presentations focusing on skills acquisition for professionals working with survivors. ISHHR

unquestionably fills an important gap providing an international networking and learning opportunity in this field.

The conference takes place at a different location each time, not only to promote the exchange of information between the host country and international communities, but also to provide a learning space for professionals working in the field, from both developed and developing countries.

Our colleagues from the Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims and the Global Initiative on Psychiatry in Georgia prepared the winning bid to host the next event in Tbilisi, as a way of highlighting the plight regarding human rights violations in the Caucasus. ISHHR members supported this interest to also draw attention to conflict resolution processes that have been deadlocked for many years due to the contradictory positions and interests of the different parties and perhaps more importantly, to the ways the region has been dealing with issues of justice, reparation and reconciliation.

Colleagues from different countries can increase understanding and solidarity and exchange experiences of invaluable knowledge to assist their practice and management of clients. These four days also provide a significant personal benefit for individual participants who have survived human rights violations by enabling them to tell their stories and share their experiences with people who share common ground. Therefore, the title of the event is directly relevant to the aim of the workshops and conference; "Health and Human Rights: Doing Justice, Building Capacity".

The workshop to be held in the 6 and 7 October 2011 is called Community Consultations using Storyboarding and will be presented by Dr Eileen Pittaway from the Centre for Refugee Research (CRR) at the University of New South Wales. Dr. Pittaway has been teaching the use of this technique for many years and joined us in Peru in 2008 to deliver this workshop at the 8th ISHHR workshops and conference where it became one of the most popular short courses offered.

Dr Pittaway uses this practical research method as an introduction to human rights and gender issues, to provide a context to guide refugee participants of research projects or those affected community members, through an examination and articulation of issues of critical concern to their communities.

The aim is to work with participants to explore potential solutions and strategies for action. Some techniques used include community education, the giving of testimony, and "storyboarding", during which participants use a series of drawings to conduct

situational analyses. This workshop is a train the trainer and workshop participants will take part in the full process, and spend time analysing, exploring and practicing the skills needed to use the Storyboarding technique.

Another practical workshop prepares participants to design an awareness raising campaign to combat human trafficking. This workshop was added to the agenda due to high interest from ISHHR members throughout the world. It is a truly exciting workshop to be delivered by ICMC Indonesia counter-trafficking team. Participants of this two day workshop will receive a certificate, and more importantly, will have the capacity to design an anti-trafficking campaign in their home countries. They will spend time analysing, exploring and practicing the skills needed to design an anti trafficking campaign.

The interactive workshop on the implementation of the Istanbul Protocol will not only guide participants on its practical implementation, but will also explore the new guidelines regarding asylum determination procedures in Europe. They include the medical-legal reports with case studies from the Netherlands and the UK. The workshop will be conducted and sponsored by the International Rehabilitation Council for Trauma Victims.

Dr. Pau Pérez-Sales will deliver a keynote address during the conference and will also facilitate a workshop on the International Consensus on Minimum Standards for Psychosocial Work in Exhumation Processes in Searches for Disappeared Persons. Dr. Pérez is a researcher and author of 12 books and 50 national and international papers on psychosocial and community work in mental health and human rights. He says that though reparatory in nature, exhumation processes run the risk of retraumatising the victims' families.

STARTTS will facilitate a workshop that will provide an opportunity for clinicians to deepen their understanding of how psychological trauma manifests itself through a range of emotional and physical symptoms.

In this workshop participants will be able to observe how the complex relationship between the body and the mind is addressed through the integration of various techniques, especially with biofeedback approaches. This workshop caters to all interested clinicians working in therapy with children, adolescents and adults.

Therapist Amber Grey will facilitate a workshop on her inspiring work based on movement. Amber sees movement as a way of organising experience and a means of facilitating healing in traumatised individuals and communities. She has extensive experience as a movement therapist; working with the different ways trauma invades the body and our capacity to move in our worlds.

Her methods include drumming, ritual and dance-movement therapy. She refers to her framework as The

Centre Post Framework - bringing people towards their centres physically, spiritually and culturally. The clinical application of this work is known as Restorative Movement Psychotherapy. Amber provides training and consultation in the USA, Indonesia, Sudan, Lebanon, Kosovo, Peru, India, Croatia, Mexico, Australia, Rwanda and New Zealand.

Following the last devastating earthquake, she has been travelling regularly to Haiti, where she learnt the healing traditions applied to her work. There is no doubt that the scale of material and psychological harm caused by earthquakes and floods can be alleviated by mental health professionals. Their commitment and hard work under some very difficult conditions has been an inspiration for ISHHR to provide more opportunities for skills acquisition and capacity building.

The international cooperation in response to disasters makes the ISHHR membership and capacity building events more relevant and sought after than ever, filling in an important gap globally.

When a natural disaster takes place, shock, chaos and physical hunger can occur. The survivors need to mourn their losses even as they clean up their environment. For months, or even years, their minds may be preoccupied with images of death and destruction. They may exhibit what is known in psychiatry as “survivor’s guilt,” condemning themselves for having lived while others perished. A shared anxiety may also linger because the people lose their trust in “mother nature”. Prof. Dean Ajdukovic from the Society for Psychological Assistance in Croatia will deliver a workshop on this topic, titled Building Response Capacity to Disasters and Major Traumatization.

The last workshop, Forensic Psychology Strategies in Cases of Sexual Violence in Situations of Internal Armed Conflict, will explore the common goal of seeking truth, justice and reparation, taking into consideration the extent of personal and social damage caused. This workshop was developed by colleagues from REDINFA (Network for the Development of the Child and the Family) Peru, in collaboration with the affected peoples and their families.

Workshops will be followed by the ISHHR Conference; keynote addresses and roundtable discussions will gather all participants in the plenary and paper presentations will run simultaneously for interest groups.

Emeritus Profesor Vamik Volkan will deliver the key note address (see article page 36). He has dedicated seven years of his life to assist Russia and Baltic countries separate in the friendliest manner possible, and has extensive research and studies on the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict.

Another keynote address is Dr. Pau Pérez-Sales, yet

another pioneer in psychosocial and community work in mental health and human rights.

It takes a fair amount of yerba mate and fair trade coffee to design a conference that is relevant to the Asia-Pacific, Latin-American, African, Australian and Middle Eastern contexts, in order to provide this unique platform for an interdisciplinary learning encounter for lawyers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and other activists that work in the area of health and human rights. Indeed, I feel much lighter knowing that all around the world approximately 50,000 torture survivors every year benefit from the services of colleagues that learn new skills at ISHHR events.

I also take great pride in coordinating an international capacity building event where participants will support governments, local initiatives and human rights in their home country to improve reconciliation processes and accountability for torture, disappearances and other cruel treatment and gross violations of human rights.

At ISHHR Capacity Building Workshops our members and participants will get to meet an exclusive international network; will receive accredited training about the latest developments in rehabilitation techniques to be applied to create healthier communities; exchange information with colleagues from all around the world working in different settings, and add to the literature.

Following ISHHR events, we find that the majority of participants start using their new skills straight away. The outcomes of ISHHR Conferences help health professionals to invest more in networking in their regions and as a result their services are more accessible to people and communities that need them. Their efforts have a great impact in building stronger societies during or after conflict situations, and therefore, are priceless within the context of sustainable development.

As a Circassian of origin, it is flattering for me to coordinate a project of this nature that is held near my historical homeland, a region that offers an amazing landscape and a wide selection of UNESCO heritage sites.

Registrations are now open at the ISHHR website.
I hope to see you all in Tbilisi!

www.ishhr.com



PHOTO: MIKHAIL SAMKHARADZE/DEC 2008



WORKING WITH SCHOOLS has been crucial to assist refugee children, young people and families settle into a new culture. SAMANTHA MCGUFFIE from the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture gave this presentation at a STARTTS Clinical Masters Evening.

Implementing a Whole School Approach

Working with schools is crucial to supporting children, young people and families of refugee background. Schools have the potential to not only assist students disadvantaged by disrupted formal education, but also to be the sites where the impact of trauma on learning and wellbeing can be addressed. The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (also known as Foundation House) aims to help schools build on refugee background student's strengths and ambitions and to advocate for the opportunity teachers and schools have to support recovery from trauma. In a presentation given at a STARTTS Clinical Masters Evening last June, Samantha McGuffie outlined the way that the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House) works in partnership with schools in both metropolitan Melbourne and rural Victoria using a whole school approach.

Prior to 2007, Foundation House's history of working with schools included secondary consultation and support, counselling and advocacy for individual students, group work, development of resources and professional development. In 2007 Foundation House

began working with school communities through the Refugee Action Network (RAN) strategy, and in July 2008 entered into a formal partnership with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) which included a four year business plan and funding agreement. 'Strengthening Outcomes; Refugee Students in Government Schools' (DEECD 2008), stated that "without particular interventions at a systemic and local school level, many students from refugee backgrounds are likely to experience considerable disadvantage and are unlikely to achieve their educational and social potential." This document is significant as it reflects both an acknowledgment that students of refugee backgrounds are at risk of being marginalised, as well as a commitment to a systemic approach to addressing this.

The Foundation House Schools Support Program is about raising awareness of the refugee experience and supporting those working in and with schools to recognise the role they can play to support refugee students' recovery from trauma (by providing opportunities in the classroom and the yard for students to rebuild connections and trust, restore safety, meaning, identity, purpose and dignity). This is done through developing and delivering professional

"Without particular interventions at a systemic and local school level, many students from refugee backgrounds are likely to experience considerable disadvantage and are unlikely to achieve their educational and social potential."

Strengthening Outcomes; Refugee Students in Government Schools' (DEECD 2008)

learning, producing resources for and with schools, and working in partnership with schools and local agencies. Building relationships and partnerships with schools takes a lot of time, refinement of tools and skills throughout the process, and creating a shared history that includes trust, good experiences and outcomes.

Schools are in a unique position to play a significant role in resettlement, supporting recovery and building aspirations for the future. This is because many strategies that support recovery are already inherent in the daily practice of good schools: providing a safe environment, building attachments and connections, working with themes of identity and dignity and building skills for the future. We are working alongside schools assisting them to reflect on their current good practice and giving them some extra strategies and resources to support refugee students.

Some of the strategies might be quite small. For example, an individual classroom teacher might use rituals and routine in the classroom as a way of creating boundaries and predictability, and focus on creating a sense of safety, rather than the focus initially being placed on achieving academic milestones. Broader strategies

include mapping what is already in place across all areas of the school and identifying priorities to address gaps (eg; supporting Transition between English Language Schools and mainstream school, supporting family programs in the school, improving the ESL program at the school, etc)

The focus of our work is setting up regional networks of schools - the Refugee Action Network Strategy (RAN). The RAN strategy recognises the expertise and skills that already exist within the school and strives to build on this. We aim to build capacity at a local community level, so we work with a group of approximately ten schools in a geographical area and we ask each school to nominate staff to become part of a Refugee Action Team. We work with the teams from each of these schools for about 18 months. We do an audit with the school and training with the teams and help write an action plan. It is based on a whole school approach, so we're looking at everything from policies and procedures, ethos and environment, partnerships with families and agencies and curriculum teaching and learning. Part of that process is having workshops with the Refugee Action Team members. In the workshops staff themselves can identify issues or guest speakers and we work through the whole school process. Those Refugee Action Team members lead this change process in their school.

Evaluation has shown that through the RAN process people became more aware of the refugee experience and the impact of trauma on learning and wellbeing and that this resulted in practice changes. Cross-school committees were formed to assess their support for refugee students and this resulted in schools making changes such as; developing new policies, developing new such as enrolment processes and modifying curriculum content.

School staff appreciated the high standard of professional development, delivered in flexible ways and designed to fit in with their work schedule. Schools became more aware of the role of external agencies and were able to form partnerships to improve support for refugee students.

At the close of the last financial year, 2531 teachers had participated in the Foundation House Schools Support Program. We currently have 43 schools engaged with us across four metropolitan areas of Melbourne and one area of rural Victoria.

For more information please visit:
www.foundationhouse.org.au

Looking for New Experiences

PHOTO: RICHARD WALKER



*Spanish psychology student **ANGEL LASANTA** came to Australia looking for new experiences. He spoke to **RICHARD WALKER***

What made you want to work at STARTTS in Australia?

AL: I'm studying psychology at the University of Mallorca. I did some placements there, but I didn't feel motivated by the type of work I was doing. A good friend of mine was coming to Australia, and she asked me to come with her. I thought, "Australia must be really nice", and I had never really travelled before, so I thought, "Let's give it a try".

But I was studying, and had to complete my studies, so I thought I would not be able to go. But I started to investigate what options there were in Australia, and I found out that my tutor knew people in Australia. And I saw this centre [STARTTS] and I thought it was amazing what you do here. I thought I could learn so much from the people here. I thought that I would find the work here more motivating and feel that I am helping people.

What have you been doing so far at STARTTS?

AL: So far I have been attending all the clinical meetings, I have been doing a community profile of the Fayli Kurds. Also I have been doing interviews with people here to understand how STARTTS works, and I have been at Intake, seeing how they work and I have been trying to do it.

I came here without help, the university said, "OK we can arrange this", but it is very new, and for STARTTS too it is very new. There are no scholarships or anything at the moment. I think this is the first international exchange that STARTTS has done, certainly with Spain at least.

How have you found working at STARTTS so far?

AL: The people at STARTTS are terrific. They have been very helpful. What I feel most at this centre is the harmony between departments, how people in different fields work together. I think that it is ideal. For example in Spain, it is more like everyone has their field which they think is the best, but I have never been in a centre like this where they have Neurofeedback, counselling and other things working together. It's pretty amazing.

What will this experience mean for you in your future studies or career as a psychologist?

AL: I think this [trauma counselling] is maybe the most extreme situation in psychology, so it is like a type of test. If I can manage it then I can be confident that I can manage other situations as well. I may go back and work in the same field in Spain. There are a lot of problems there with people who come as refugees. But I'm not sure that the work there will be as good as it is here – I will need to investigate what is happening there.

I think it is important for people from overseas to come here and share this. I think the work you do here is quite unique – I have never seen a centre like this one before. I think it would be beneficial to develop a more organised system of exchange. There are people in my university who are really willing to do things. They would really want to come here and learn.

It would be positive if STARTTS could organise a system for student exchanges. Also it would be a good way to communicate STARTTS' way of working and their philosophy to all countries. The students are the future, so the more people that come and share what they are doing here, the more they can help around the world. **R**

Senators and MPs Attend Refugee Ball 2010

By Janset Berzeg & Richard Walker



Nearly 300 guests, from community leaders to politicians, advocates, volunteers and supporters, enjoyed a variety of performances and entertainment at the second Refugee Ball, a fund-raising event organised by Friends of STARTTS.

Award-winning comedian David Smiedt hosted the evening, a night of dancing, celebration, culture and performances, from groups like the Burundian Community Choir, Minority Tradition, and the Cuban band JJ Son.

The event was an opportunity for people to show their support for STARTTS and for refugees in NSW. The success of activities during the evening, such as the trivia, the silent auction, the raffle and pledge auction, showed the incredible support of those present for refugees and the generosity of the people who work with them.

VIP guests included Senator Kate Lundy, the Hon. Carmel Tebbutt MP, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, the Hon. Scott Morrison MP and the Hon. John Murphy MP, all of whom were vigorous bidders at the charity auction.

Supporters of the night included ACL, Serco, NSW Police, Constellation Wines, the Australian League of Immigration Volunteers (ALIV), the Australian Tamil Congress, and STARTTS.

The event was organised by a dedicated group of volunteers, lead by Alex Lee and Brendan Quek.

STARTTS and Friends of STARTTS deeply thank all the volunteers, the table sponsors, prize sponsors and guests for sharing this enjoyable and meaningful night with us.

Close to \$10,000 was raised, all of which went towards the many STARTTS programs running in NSW and ensuring that STARTTS can continue to make the challenges experienced by refugees less overwhelming. **R**

“*The Boat*”

by Nam Le

Published	2 March 2009
Format	Paperback 336 pages
RRP	\$24.95
ISBN-13	9780143009610
Imprint	Penguin

“You could totally exploit the whole Vietnamese thing”, a friend tells Nam, the protagonist in the first story of *The Boat*, “But instead, you choose to write about lesbian vampires and Colombian assassins, and Hiroshima orphans — and New York painters with haemorrhoids”

There are unfortunately no lesbian vampires in *The Boat*, but the rest of the cast are there. For his stunning debut collection Nam Le takes the reader on a global journey, and presents us with a remarkably varied cast of protagonists.

What is most remarkable about the collection is Nam Le’s ability to believably and deftly inhabit such a variety of characters. Each of his protagonists speaks with authenticity and the reader does not for a moment doubt their voice.

If there is a common theme in his stories, it is the struggle of each of his protagonists to survive in a world suddenly without boundaries and where all that they know is ripped from them, leaving them floundering for survival.

The opening story of the collection, *Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice*, is a clever play on fact and fiction, with the

narrator Nam seeming to reflect the life of the author.

Nam Le has placed his protagonist at the prestigious Iowa Writers Workshop, which he himself attended; both were born in Vietnam, and raised in Australia; and both left a lucrative career as lawyers to become authors.

We meet the fictional Nam at a particularly low point in his life. He is suffering from writers block, and he is forced to play a reluctant host to his distant, disapproving father.

Nam longs to write stories about faraway people and places, but is urged to write a story about Vietnam. “Ethnic literature’s hot”, he is told. “And important too”. Nam, at a loss, decides to write his father’s story.

What follows could easily have become a conventional story of father-son reconciliation; the reader may feel in familiar territory here, but Nam Le adroitly sidesteps any expectations.

Nam’s father recounts his story of surviving the My Lai massacre as a 14-year-old boy, buried underneath his mother’s dead body. He is then conscripted into the South Vietnamese Army and fights with the American Army.

When asked how he could fight on the side of the Americans, he replies: “I had nothing but hate in me, but I had enough for everyone”. He then endures a re-education camp, where he is tortured and indoctrinated. In 1979 he organized the family’s escape to Australia by boat.

As the story unfolds, it becomes more than a meditation on a father and son trying to find a common ground, and Nam is sadly left with the realisation that though they may be closer in understanding, the gulf created by experience is something that cannot be overcome.

“Here is what I believe,” Nam says, “We forgive any sacrifice by our parents, so long as it is not made in our name. To my father there was no other name — only mine, and he had named me after the homeland he had given up.

“His sacrifice was complete and compelled him to everything that happened. To all that, I was inadequate.”

The second story is *Cartenega*, a painful exploration of loyalty and friendship, and the heartbreaking sacrifices that our circumstances call on us to make.

Cartenega immediately subverts any expectations the reader may have of the author’s intent, and sets us up for the rest of the collection. We are swept away from the workshops in Iowa, to the slums of South America and to the world of our narrator, Juan Pablo, a 14-year-old hitman from Medellín.

Juan, like the others in this collection, is at a painful crossroads in his life. To date he has been a loyal and efficient killer, but when he is ordered to kill one of his closest friends, he finds himself unable to do so, and is summoned before the boss, known as “El Padre” to answer for his transgression.

Juan’s tension and dread of the upcoming meeting set the backdrop to the story. Juan is well aware of his dire situation; his fear of his inevitable demise resonates throughout, giving the story a heavy sense of oppression. The language Le uses, at once lyrical and idiomatic, is utterly convincing, and never for a moment does the reader doubt his voice, or that of the narrator.

Le vividly paints the grime and poverty, and Medellín, and how they force children into untenable choices. But Le does not mire Juan or the reader in hopelessness. Even through his fear, Juan maintains a sense of hope and a will to survive; a dream that he may escape his life and, with his friend, go to the seaside of *Cartenega*.

In *Meeting Elise* we are again back in the US, to meet Henry Luff, an ageing, vain, Manhattan painter, grieving the death of his muse. Henry has recently been diagnosed with possible cancer, and is attempting to reconcile with his estranged daughter Elise on the eve of her cello performance at Carnegie Hall before it is too late.

The indignities of Henry’s illness

and his outrage and shock are presented with both pathos and humour. Henry’s narration is at once comic and pathetic, and his world is beautifully rendered. And in Henry’s desperation to reach his indifferent daughter and his angry determination to stave off his demise, we recognise a flawed, all too human creation that we can be sympathetic to.

Le all too believably portrays the desperation of Henry, his vanity and arrogance; and that ultimately Henry’s need for reconciliation is less about his daughter, and more about holding back his own mortality.

Tehran Calling again sweeps us across the globe, to Iran. Sarah, a young American lawyer, is overwhelmed by a recent romantic break up, and travels to Tehran to visit her college friend Parvin, who works for women’s causes, and is regarded as a political dissident.

Sarah has idealised her days of friendship and looks to Parvin as a refuge, refusing to recognise that circumstances will have forged changes in her friend, and is unable to let go of who she needs Parvin to be. Sarah finds herself caught up in an oppressive world, where every safety she has taken for granted is an illusion, and her naïve assumptions about friendship, and the cost of freedom are questioned.

Le portrays Sarah as any one of us; outsiders in a foreign and frightening landscape, trying to define that foreign world by our own rules and judgements, and always failing to do so.

Loss and change are the central themes of *Halflead Bay*, the collection’s longest story, set in a small Victorian coastal town. The protagonist, 15-year-old Jamie has for the first time won recognition at school as a football hero, and has attracted the flirtatious attractions of the glamorous Alison.

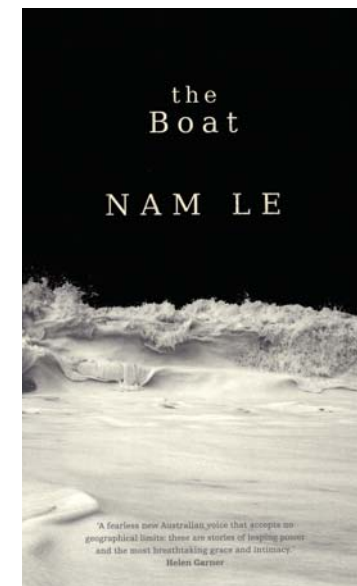
Jamie encourages her flirtations, and now her boyfriend, the town bully with a brutish and murderous reputation is coming after Jamie.

What seems set to be a simple coming of age story is upset by the deeper changes in Jamie’s life. His mother is dying of Multiple Sclerosis,

and he, his brother, and father, struggle daily to deal with her impending death.

His father also risks losing his livelihood as a fisherman, because the river has been overfished. Everywhere in the story there are references to death, and the language, both idiomatic and languid, paints a picture of a world slowly stifling and dying and being replaced by another.

Hiroshima is a haunting, brief story told from the perspective of eight-year-old Mayako, a young Japanese girl living in Hiroshima during World War II, on the eve of the dropping of the bomb. Mayako’s choppy, stream-of-consciousness narrative is so believable, her innocence of what is to come so



clear, that it fills the reader with dread, as we await the inevitable catastrophe.

In the title story of the collection, *The Boat*, we return again to Vietnam, and the impact of the war and its aftermath. *The Boat* is a horrifying and haunting story of fleeing refugees, crammed into an overcrowded boat, bound for Malaysia and freedom.

The protagonist, Mai, is a teenage girl, sent on the boat by her father, who had spent five years fighting the communists and two years at a re-education camp. The boat breaks down and drifts at sea for two weeks, with

dwindling supplies and no medicine, and the death toll rises daily.

Dead bodies, nothing but bundles of skin and bone, are thrown in to the shark-infested waters. The heat beats down unrelentingly, and there are overwhelming descriptions of people packed into heated holds reeking of urine and sickness, and of bodies blistering on deck in the unforgiving heat.

In her loneliness and despair, Mai forms an alliance with another woman as they try together to help a desperately ill child. Mai’s desperation throughout the journey is palpable; her attempts to cling to a semblance of what she knows, in a world suddenly and completely out of control, is heartbreaking.

After days on board the boat, Mai finally understands why her father, on his return from re-education camp, chose to live his life on the surface, never looking forward or inside.

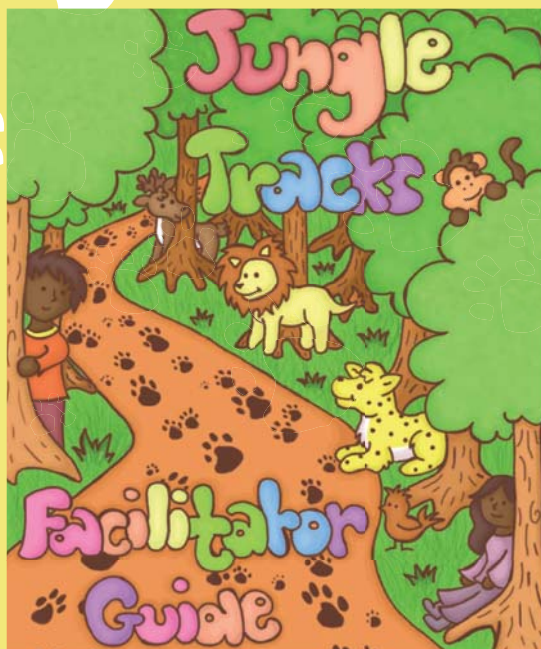
“Because beneath the surface was either dread or delirium. As more and more bundles were thrown overboard she taught herself not to look — not to think of the bundles as human — she resisted the impulse to identify which families had been depleted. She seized distraction from the immediate things: the weather, the next swallow of water, the ever-forward draw of time.”

The Boat is perhaps the most difficult and heartbreaking story in this collection. Le portrays the psychological and physical tribulations of the refugees in searing detail, and the story is so vividly realised that it is impossible to shake the memory of Mai’s journey.

At a time when “boat people” are subject to scorn and rejection, this story is particularly relevant, and should be required reading for all policy makers and politicians who choose to demonise “boat people”.

The Boat is an often difficult and heart-breaking read, but it is most highly recommended. **R**

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