

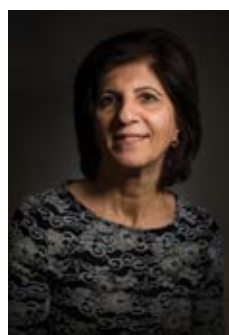
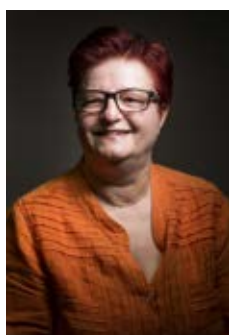
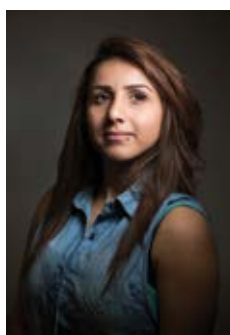
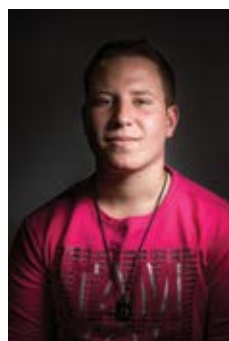
DECEMBER 2013

# REFUGEE TRANSITIONS

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

In conversation with **Juan Mendez** pg. 50 / **Egypt and the Quest for Democracy** pg. 54

Issue **28**



## 25 YEARS *of* STARTTS

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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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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## CEO's Message



### Welcome to the STARTTS 25th Anniversary edition of Refugee Transitions.

It is a pleasure to bring you another issue of Refugee Transitions to coincide with STARTTS 25th anniversary.

So much has happened since 1988, and so many lives have been touched in positive ways by the people that have been part of our organisation over the last 25 years. In turn, those lives have touched many others... contributing to and enriching our society in a myriad of ways.

Regaining health after torture is only the beginning. The real results of our work can be best seen in the thriving families of our ex-clients, in the contribution they make day by day to our society, and the certainty of a brighter future that can be seen in the faces of their children... To help bring this about has been STARTTS' mission for the last 25 years and will continue to be so.

STARTTS looks today like a very different organisation to the tiny service that pioneered a specialised approach to assisting torture and trauma survivors in Australia 25 years ago. We are truly state wide, offering services from four Sydney based offices and another four located in regional centres, and complemented through a range of external clinics. The scope of services we offer today has also grown, embracing the potential of our bio-psycho-social model to assist our clients to regain control of their lives and overcome the sequelae of torture and trauma. We have also grown in knowledge and experience, and in our capacity to pass these on to our new staff and our colleagues in Australia and overseas.

And yet, luckily, some things have not changed. Despite growing in scope, experience, geographical coverage and staff size, STARTTS has lost none of its commitment to assist survivors to reclaim their lives, to make our society a better environment for them to heal, and to continually search for better and more effective ways to assist our client group, learning from their experiences and perspective as well as from the best that research and clinical development can teach us.

This is just as well, because one thing that is a certainty in the uncertain environment that characterises the refugee field is that it will continue to throw new challenges at us, clinical, political, ethical and humanitarian. Some of these challenges relate to the horrific nature of the overseas conflicts that result in the violent deprivation of home and safety that prompts people to seek asylum and become refugees. Others relate to changes in our national policies, like the reintroduction of temporary protection visas, which as we know from previous experience of this policy, will result in a more vulnerable group of clients.

Reaching this stage in the maturity of our service also brings about a new challenge, the challenge to ensure that the lessons learnt in these 25 years go further than STARTTS, further even than the field of torture and trauma rehabilitation, and become available to assist survivors of other types of trauma, in the same way that the torture and trauma field has long benefitted from advances elsewhere.

This issue of Refugee Transitions explores many of the challenges faced by people in the context of conflict and refugee situations around the world, focusing on Egypt and interviewing Professor Juan Mendez, the current UN Special Rapporteur on torture. Closer to home, we bring you highlights of various aspects of STARTTS work, and, as seems fitting on our anniversary, we also take a view down memory lane, looking at STARTTS over the years.

I'm sure this special 25th Anniversary edition of Transitions will be of interest to you. Until our next issue, all the best!

**Jorge Aroche**

*Chief Executive Officer / STARTTS*



PHOTO: AFP PHOTO/MAHMOUD KHALED

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*Since the first client walked through the front door of its offices in a small, three-bedroom house in Fairfield 25 years ago, STARTTS has become a vital bridge in the successful resettlement of refugees in NSW from all corners of the world. ELIZABETH BAN, a writer and former child refugee, looks back at how a small band of dedicated health professionals in Western Sydney developed a unique, comprehensive model of treatment for torture and trauma survivors.*

# STARTTS *at* 25

**I** imagine you live in a village or town somewhere in the world, a member of a small, tight-knit minority group. Your life is in peaceful harmony with the seasons, your animals and fields, as well as all your neighbours who may be of different ethnic or religious groups. Then, there is a political change and the new leaders in your faraway capital bring in new policies that make your neighbours go wild: they begin to threaten to kill you, your family and all your kith and kin, until one day they actually start doing the killing. You gather the remainder of your loved ones and run. Sounds implausible? Of course it is. Unfortunately, it has happened to millions of people over the past 30 years, in many parts of the world as disparate as Afghanistan, Rwanda and in the former Yugoslavia.

In 2011 there were 40 wars around the world; today their number has dwindled to 12, yet the current war in Syria alone has already caused more than two million people to seek asylum in neighbouring Lebanon and Jordan (population 4.4 and 6.3 million respectively) and their number is increasing daily.

The number of people affected by military conflict and state sanctioned violence worldwide is staggering. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), at the end of 2012 there were 45.2 million displaced persons globally, including 15.4 million refugees. To put it into more manageable perspective, the UNHCR estimates that 4.1 persons become asylum seekers or internally displaced every second. That's 14,760 people an hour, which is the population of Newtown, NSW, where I live, or slightly more than the number of refugees resettled annually in Australia until last year, when the Labour government increased the intake to 20,000.

During the last election, Prime Minister Tony Abbott indicated that the Coalition would wind these numbers back to 13,500.

It's not the first time STARTTS has had to adjust to changing government policies or to changes in the political, cultural, socio-economic and religious backgrounds of its clients. For example, in the 1999 Operation Safe Haven outreach, when the Australian government offered temporary asylum to about 4000 ethnic Albanians from the Kosovo region of the former Yugoslavia, STARTTS was ready within two weeks to welcome the newcomers. And, in 2001, STARTTS staff geared up in a short time to help train mental health workers in East Timor and the East Timorese government to establish PRADET (Psychosocial Recovery and Development in East Timor).

STARTTS was established in 1988 after strong pressures from Indochinese and Latin American communities and a realisation by NSW Health that its existing services for trauma and torture survivors were simply inadequate. Starting with just 5 staff members, the organisation has grown exponentially over the years and, since 2009, has been operating as an independent Affiliated Health Organisation that now employs a permanent staff of 142.

STARTTS can respond quickly to changing circumstances and clientele, because of its unique approach that was developed by Chief Executive Officer, Jorge Aroche and Clinical Services and Research Coordinator, Mariano Coello, both clinical psychologists by training. They call it a 'bio-psychosocial systemic model' and it looks at every facet of a person's life, their family and community.

As Jorge explains it, refugees admitted to Australia

have a tremendous number of hurdles to overcome before they are able to acculturate and pick up their lives again. For some, it may take longer than for others, depending on their past traumas in their own country, their experiences in the refugee camps, and finally, on how they are able to face the normal challenges of life, as well as the difficulties of migrating to a new country where the language and culture is so different.

‘Trauma exists in everyone’s life’ Jorge explains, ‘and people heal from trauma the same way they heal from other things, otherwise, none of us would heal. However, [for some refugees] the extent of the trauma, the number of the challenges, overwhelms the capacity for that to take place.’ He says the job of organisations like STARTTS is to ‘help bring the people back to a situation in which that process is able to go ahead’.

‘We consider the person in relationship with the context as well’ – Mariano continues – ‘in the cultural, socio-political and religious context in which the trauma took place and the impact that the trauma had on their lives and the lives of their family and their communities. We take into account also what happened when they are going into exile and the interactions that the person, the family and the community has in this, perhaps first country of asylum. They could be in a refugee camp or a country of asylum, and then, when they arrive to Australia, which we can consider as the recovery environment, the interactions that take place here with all the levels: the individual, the family level, at the social level, at the community level.’ He says that the reception the refugees get where they settle in Australia also has an impact on recovery: for example, they react differently when they are welcomed as opposed to when they are resented.

Trauma is a life-long endeavour, Mariano says, but some people are able to cope and actually come out strengthened by their experiences.. This is called ‘post-traumatic growth’, and that is what STARTTS’ psychological interventions hope to achieve for their clients, according to Direct Services Coordinator Gordana Hol-Radicic. She says most of the people who come to them suffer from a variety of symptoms, including nightmares, depression, hyperactivity or anxiety.

Their needs may be assessed by referring psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors or social workers. Once they come to STARTTS, their psychological treatment is determined according to all the bio-psychological and social factors mentioned by Mariano and Jorge. Everything is personalised and designed to enable the client to ‘function well as a parent, a child, a daughter, a mother or a father and someone who can function as a member of the community’ – Gordana says.

The treatments have changed over the past 25 years, Gordana says, and every staff member is required to keep up-to-date with new knowledge in the field. In fact, counsellors are required to spend 50% of their time in

clinical activity, 30% in community development and 20% in research and learning. This serves two purposes: it helps avoid staff burnout, and clients get access to the latest therapies. As well, all STARTTS personnel are encouraged to apply theoretical learning to their work. This way, STARTTS clients always have access to the latest advances in psychiatry, clinical psychology and neurobiology, in addition to other, evidence-based alternative therapies, such as therapeutic massage, acupuncture and physiotherapy, as well as community development. It also allows STARTTS to grow and change and keep providing the best interventions for their clients.

One of the most exciting areas of research is in the neurosciences as it is giving STARTTS a better understanding of how the brain works, says Gordana. Trauma

changes the biochemistry of the brain and affects memory as well as behaviour. She says it is now possible to actually ‘see’ how the brain changes when it is exposed to trauma. Some parts of the brain become overactive and others underactive in response to traumatic events and this accounts for many of the problems that torture and trauma survivors face. STARTTS is using neuro-imaging to inform its application of different therapeutic techniques and evaluate outcomes. This has enabled the development and utilisation of new treatment techniques such as Neurofeedback that rely on EEG information to help retrain the brain to overcome the effects of trauma and in turn place people in a better position to face life after trauma. STARTTS was the first to apply Neurofeedback to assist torture

and trauma survivors and has found it to be a very effective complement to the existing array of therapeutic interventions. To further understand the impact of refugee trauma on brain functioning, STARTTS has recently commenced a research partnership with the University of NSW.

As Jorge and Mariano explained, STARTTS regards the experiences of its clients as part of a number of systems, one of which is the community – the communities they left behind, the communities they transitioned with and, finally, the Australian community they settle in, both local and national.

The Community Services Coordinator is Jasmina Bajraktarevic-Hayward. She comes from a refugee background from Bosnia and started as a bi-cultural counsellor with STARTTS. Bicultural counsellors were a part of STARTTS from the earliest days of the organisation. From its very beginning, STARTTS recognised that employing bi-cultural counsellors who came from the communities they worked with, spoke their language and understood their culture and history was critical to working successfully with its client group. Originally, Bicultural Counsellors were paired with qualified social workers or psychologists in a two-way learning relationship - as the bicultural counsellor learned clinical skills from the psychologist, they at the same time imparted vital cultural knowledge to the psychologist.

While the paired counsellor model doesn’t operate these days, STARTTS has continued the idea through the Trainee Bicultural Counsellor Program. This is a program developed in recognition that the clinical skills required of STARTTS counsellors may not be readily available among smaller newly arrived communities and may need to be developed on the job. Counsellors employed under this program bring to STARTTS their cultural and language skills while undertaking both in house training and being encouraged and supported to complete relevant formal qualifications.

Another innovative program developed by STARTTS to support the resettlement experience is the FICT Program. FICT - Families in Cultural Transition - trains and employs bicultural facilitators to run a nine-week program for new refugees. They are called

facilitators and not educators, ‘because what we teach them is to facilitate as opposed to just deliver information’ – Jasmina explains. FICT is designed to provide a safe environment in which refugees are guided to get an understanding of the conceptual framework that underpins Australian society such as welfare, and government services. Coming from countries with little or no social services, they need to understand why these services are available and how the whole system works, Jasmina says. At the same time, FICT is also very practical. It enables participants to learn how to get access to these services, how to use public transport, how to use and save money. In addition, it also engages the participants at the emotional level to enable them to reconcile past events and anticipate the difficulties of settling in Australia.

Another STARTTS innovation is the Enterprise Facilitation Program based on Ernesto Sirotti’s Trinity of Management concept that brings together would be entrepreneurs with marketing, finance and administration professionals. Most people are not good and passionate in all three. The idea is to find people who are. ‘Often, people who come from different countries have good ideas for different products’ – Jasmina says, ‘but they wouldn’t know how to market it in the Australian context, or would have no understanding of the Australian system, the administrative or financial aspects of running a business’.

One of Enterprise Facilitation’s most successful outcomes is the Amazing Family Day Care business set up by Deejo Omar, a refugee mother of five from Somalia. In 2010 Deejo came to STARTTS for help to set up a family based day care service for low income migrant families in Western Sydney, that would provide employment for refugee women who would otherwise be unable to find work. She entered the world of one of Australia’s most regulated businesses with passion and the business opened in early 2011. Within a month she employed 80 carers. Their number has risen to 150 and continues to rise. Deejo also found funding for 80 carers to study for Certificate III in Child Care. More recently, Deejo has had requests from Queensland and the ACT to expand the business there.

Jasmina coordinates a seemingly endless range of



STARTTS staff and supporters in 1992. Many of the people in this picture are still working at STARTTS.  
PHOTO: Courtesy of STARTTS

community services. There's Communities in Cultural Transition (CiCT), which focuses on enabling emerging communities to set up community organisations and join Australia's network of multicultural communities and services. CiCT is backed by a large panel of experts in areas of community development, such as governance, finance, law, and communication. Whereas other agencies would employ a single community development worker whose job was to organise community development workshops on an ad hoc basis, CiCT is able to respond to each community's needs as soon as the need is identified. So, the CiCT project officer's job is to canvass communities about their needs and match them with consultants from the panel.

Other projects are aimed at community cultural development, the arts, young people and the elderly. There's Capoeira Angola, a Brazilian martial arts dance that helps young people develop self-confidence and social skills. It is now available regularly in five schools where Principals and teachers have identified refugee children who need help. Other programs for young people are three night residential camps where children

learn how to communicate, play, live and learn together and make lasting friendships. There's the annual Refugee Arts Exhibition during Refugee Week, and there are a number of other extremely successful community cultural development projects, including the annual Dance Africa Dance showcase, and STARTTS' support for the Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe that had sold out performances at the Riverside Theatre in Parramatta and the Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney in 2013 and is expected to be going on tour in 2014. These programs connect emerging communities with the wider community.

In addition to its extensive and ever changing clinical and community development programs, STARTTS also works with a broad network of professional and community organisations. They publish educational materials in the form of handbooks, information sheets and pamphlets, that incorporate their latest advice about working with refugees as individuals, families and communities. STARTTS also conducts Master Classes attended by its staff and professionals from other like-minded services. These are broadcast and



All the staff of STARTTS together in May 2013. PHOTO: Dominique Cleary

shared by peers all over the world via the internet-based video sharing site Psychevisual.

One of the major challenges for STARTTS has been and continues to be the management of resources, Jorge said in a recent presentation. Some of these challenges relate to how to: match clients' needs with interventions and staff skills; get funding for new ways of doing things; establish and maintain the limitations and boundaries of what STARTTS can offer; and how to continue to create and support a 'change friendly' staff culture. Mariano says he wants to improve the evaluation processes and maintain and strengthen the organisation's research focus.

Jorge proudly describes STARTTS as a learning organisation, a 'continuing work in progress'. And that is how the organisation has become a highly effective, loyal, inclusive workforce whose reach and effectiveness has expanded over the past 25 years from that small, three bedroom house in Fairfield to the rest of NSW.

In addition to its sprawling headquarters in Carramar, STARTTS now has offices in Liverpool, Auburn and Blacktown in the greater Sydney area, as well as

Coffs Harbour, Wagga Wagga Newcastle and a service in Wollongong. This is complemented by a network of clinics operating from other organisations' premises across Sydney and NSW. STARTTS also works in close collaboration with NSW Health, the educational establishment, the Red Cross and other agencies that deal with refugee communities. It is the only agency in NSW entrusted with treating asylum seekers in detention.

The one common feature that characterises everyone I talked to for this article is their respect for the resilience of their clients and each other. Perhaps Jasmina and Gordana summed up best the secret of their success when they said that STARTTS has always respected the knowledge of its staff and supported them when they wanted to try new things. They also continuously provide opportunities for learning and extensive support for the staff for coping with the stresses of their jobs. Everyone believes that the past is prologue and that STARTTS will continue to grow and stretch the boundaries of its knowledge base on how to empower torture and trauma survivors overcome their past and build a bright future in Australia.



*Douris Odesho*

**STARTTS came to my school to do this activity called Jungle Tracks and after that I came to STARTTS as a client. I didn't have anyone, but I wanted to talk to someone. I went to a camp and was asked to be a volunteer, and here I am after 5 years. STARTTS helps everyone here... if it wasn't for STARTTS, I don't know what I would be doing. I came here and look at me – I'm helping people.**

Photos by  
David Maurice Smith / OCULI



*Leakhena Suos*

I cry all the time when I speak about what happened in Cambodia during Pol Pot. My brothers were taken to be killed in the war. By that time, they had already taken my father, my uncle, a lot of my cousins, my aunties... I was really depressed. I received the Neurofeedback treatment at STARTTS and it helped me improve. Here we have enough food to eat, we can sleep and we can go to school. We are grateful for our new life and our new future.



*Eh Paw Hla*

We were refugees in the camp - we had no rights and no future for our children. It is not easy, it is very hard settling in the beginning. When we first arrived, I felt stressed so I went to STARTTS - they comforted me, talked to me nicely. I know I don't have many skills, but I really want to help my people. STARTTS encouraged me. Now I have more confidence and more knowledge.



*Danni Satto*

With the Iraqi dance group I found STARTTS [and] I met many people. Whatever you have in your mind you just dance and forget everything. In Iraq you can't do your hobbies, there is no place. In Australia you can do whatever. It all happens from religion, this person has that religion and this person has that religion and they try to kill each other. [In the Iraqi dance group], no one cares about religion - we are all Iraqis.



*Loi Nguyen*

Some days I feel depressed when my boss treats me badly or when I am sad, I always recall the sad times in the concentration camp. I came to see Tiep from STARTTS and he saved my life. STARTTS has helped me a lot, and now I want to forget the past and look forward. I would like to thank STARTTS, they are very good people who have helped me overcome a very difficult time of my life.



*Abraham Ajok*

We were all traumatised in one way or another - the sort of suffering that humans cannot imagine, we have all been through it. Generally in our community people don't really like to ask if they need help, but as soon as you come in, the warm welcome that you get, that will open everything up. Once you come to STARTTS you find where you belong. I've been to so many organisations, but nothing compares to STARTTS.



*Daniel Saeed*

We went to school in Iraq but because of the war they harassed us and we couldn't go to school. When we came to Australia, they put us into English class straight away. We had to see a counsellor and we started doing all the [STARTTS] programs. I came out of nothing and STARTTS made me the person I am. They are legends - they taught me how to go for my dream. Iraq is where our past is but I'm here for the future.



*Oboya Oboya*

When we're dancing it's a bonding thing - I wouldn't normally spend that much time with any of my family members but now we have dancing we're together most of the time, and that is a great thing. STARTTS paid for everything and gave us a place to rehearse in. They have been really amazing. Without them we wouldn't be where we are today, there would be no Afro-Contemporary Dance Group.



*Salim Jafari*

I escaped to Pakistan but they were killing Hazaras in Pakistan too, so it wasn't much safer. We were in Malaysia for one month and then I decided to take the boat [to Australia]. I met some people from our community who were already here and of course you ask them where can you go? What can you do without having any help from the government? Through our community we heard about a place called STARTTS. The first Australians I met were the volunteers working with STARTTS, they taught us English and many of them were like my own parents.



*Ljubica Novakovic*

After the war in 1995 the politicians did not want us there. We had to leave. We were in a refugee camp in Serbia for four years. I got out with my girls to get a better future but most importantly to sleep peacefully. [Coming here] was like being born again. STARTTS gave us hope for the future, for the kids it helped them to have a better life.

*Vinitha Vasanthakumar*

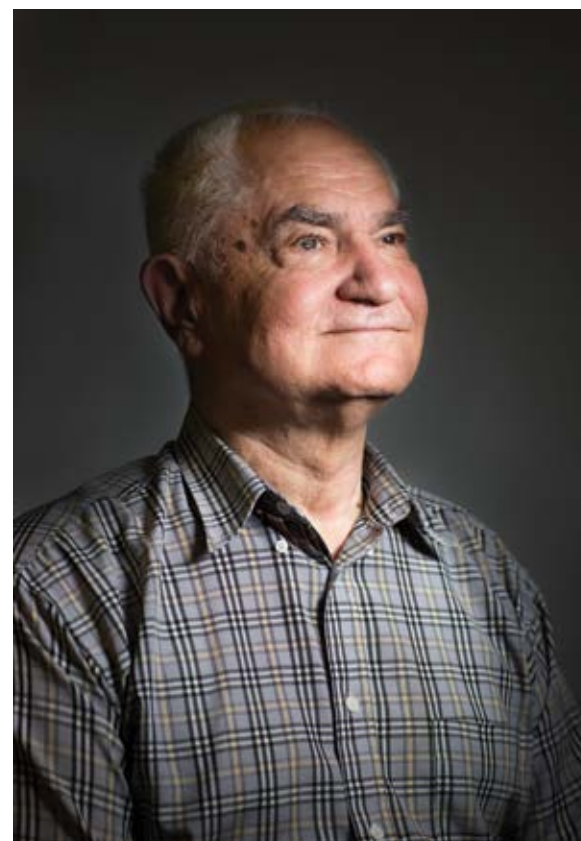
**Me and my dad came by boat from Sri Lanka to Christmas Island where we stayed for 21 days. I've been to two or three STARTTS camps and [for my first camp] I went to Newcastle, it was a nice camp. We went rock climbing and on the last day of camp we danced, [there were] lots of activities. [At the camp] everyone was my friend. Camp was fun, I didn't want to leave.**





*Awatif Al Khalmashi*

STARTTS helps people to speak about what is inside... what they suffer. Most of them they have a very bad, very severe story - STARTTS helps them. In my heart I want to help my community, to give them about Australia. Because I am an educated woman I need to help, and Australia is our home now. I have suffered many times, but in the end I am in a safe place.



*Zelimir Matic*

My family had to escape from our country. Without STARTTS it would be very difficult to adjust to this environment. Everyone has been so welcoming and been very friendly to our family. Our group at STARTTS is important to exchange information and even support each other amongst ourselves. We formed a choir and joined art societies. Being at STARTTS we feel safer together as a group than being alone.



*Lejla Hujdur*

I left my country with my husband, son and friends to a new place. After a year we had no social security, no money to set up for our future. We then arrived in Australia and met STARTTS. I joined the group that has become very important. My group is together because we all feel the same, we had pain in our country and here we exchange our experiences.



*Det Le*

It was a very bad time for me, very tough. I heard voices in my mind that told me to jump through the window. I thought everyone was watching me, I was scared of everyone. I was desperate for help. [My counsellor] is very understanding, patient and caring - if she was not at STARTTS I don't think I would be here today. STARTTS gave me my life back. They made me feel like my life was worth something.



*Sonia Huertas*

I left my country during internal country conflicts, the time of the revolutionary movement. I had to start a new life. Once I was here STARTTS has taught me to understand how to live with my conditions and understand through counselling. STARTTS has become my new family as well as my friends formed in the GRUMAS group organised by STARTTS.



*Milan Opacic*

I was a young a boy. I lost my father, I lost too many friends, I lost the home I was born in. Somebody cut my roots. You don't have to think about death but every day you have to fight to survive. Because of STARTTS I am settled and I understand. With so much suffering around the world, I think everyone needs to come to STARTTS, you can make it easier for them.

*STARTTS uses many different approaches to support the recovery of torture and trauma survivors. While individual counselling is the main intervention for many clients, there are also many more ways in which STARTTS helps people to heal from their trauma. Here are just a few of them.*

**Photos by David Maurice Smith / OCULI**



**Afro Contemporary Youth Dance** is a dynamic Western Sydney-based dance troupe made up of young people aged 12-21. The group emerged from the Dancing in Harmony Project –one of an expanding range of STARTTS community cultural development initiatives aimed at enhancing the connections between Sydney's refugee communities and the wider Australian community. Guided by professional dancers and choreographers, the group has gone from strength to strength and have established themselves as performers and artists in their own right.



Originally a mental and physical system of defence against oppression developed by Afro-Brazilian slaves in the 16th century, **Capoeira Angola** is now used at STARTTS to help heal trauma in young people. Capoeira is a non-violent, non-contact martial art that combines the therapeutic potential of musical instruments and physical expression, and effectively engages young people in hands-on, enjoyable activities that build trust, confidence and respect in a safe group setting.

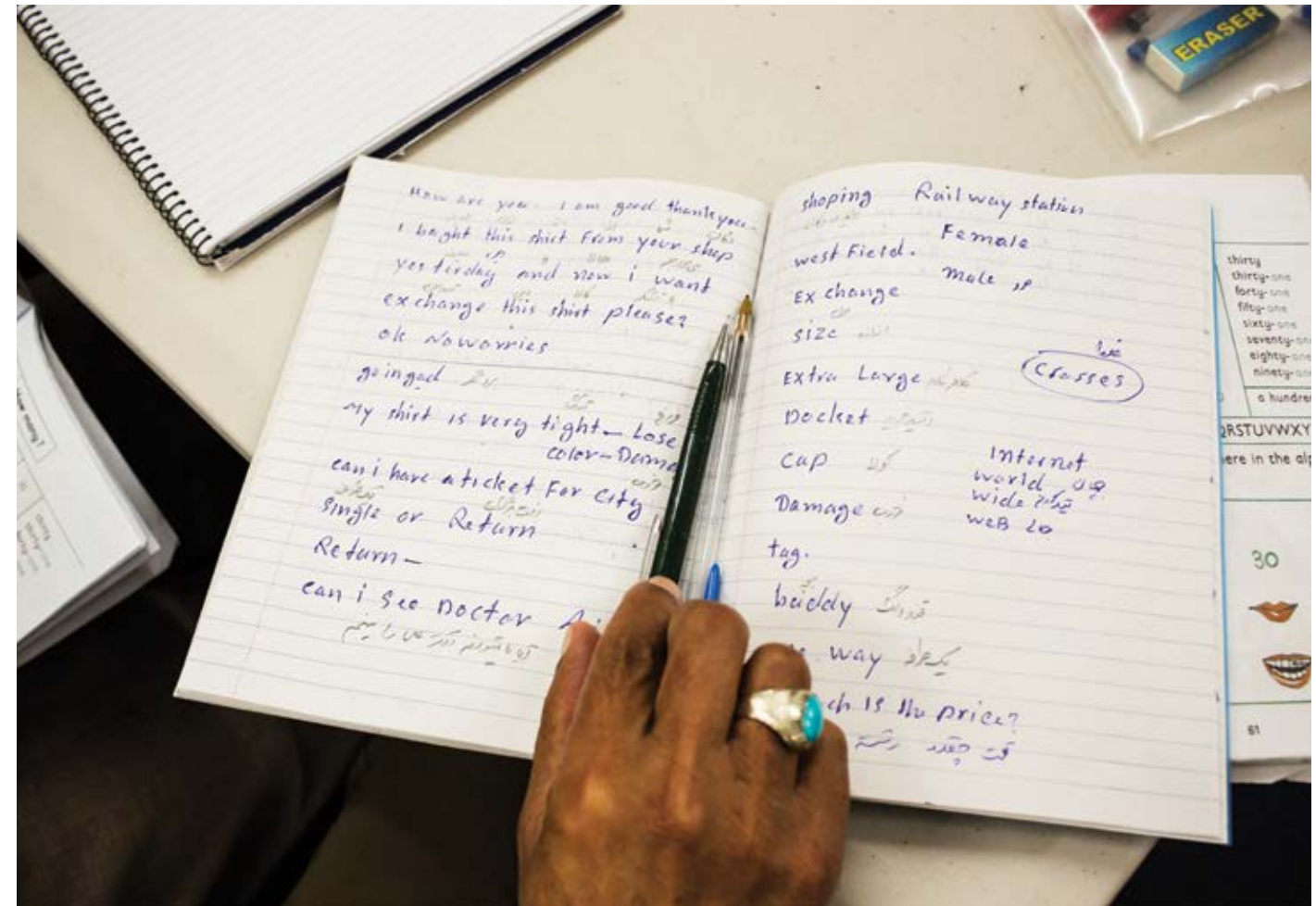




**The Spanish-speaking choir** gathers together every week to sing traditional songs and enjoy the company of the group. The choir is a partnership between STARTTS and Multicultural Health, with many of the choir's members drawn from STARTTS' 'GRUMAS' support group for women from South and Central American countries. GRUMAS is one of the longest running of all STARTTS groups, established in 1990 and running continuously since.



For about 18 months STARTTS has been supporting **English classes organised by the Hazara community** and held in our Auburn office. Hazaras are an oppressed ethnic minority from Afghanistan whose numbers in Australia have increased rapidly in recent years. Fuelled by their desire to learn English more quickly, the community, with help from STARTTS and volunteer English teachers, has worked extremely hard to get this project off the ground.





**The Chester Hill Community Garden** is an important way of providing psychosocial support to our clients in a variety of forms. The community garden helps to meet people's most basic needs - food, health and employment - while at the same time allowing people to develop the higher-level needs of friendship, confidence and creativity. Cooperation between a STARTTS counsellor and community development worker creates a safe place for therapeutic discussions and information and acts as a pathway toward further healing from trauma.







**Sand play therapy** is used at STARTTS to help people to express and process their trauma. Used mainly with children but increasingly with adults as well, sand play allows the client to create a physical world which corresponds to their inner state, allowing their unconscious thoughts to be made visible. Expressing their feelings in this way is often an important step toward healing for people who have survived trauma.



Although refugee children are amazingly resilient, they are also very vulnerable as they are often exposed to trauma during the most formative years of their life. **Youth camps** are a way to help young people learn to adapt to their new environment and enjoy life again. At overnight camps kids can have fun but also talk through any issues in a safe environment, and can engage in activities that promote social skills, positive relationships, teamwork and confidence.



PHOTO: RICHARD WALKER

STARTTS

*“The therapist is not just working for a particular patient,  
but for himself and his own soul...”*

Carl Jung

# On Becoming a Person

*Positive Changes from Working  
with Trauma Survivors*

Tiep Nguyen OAM

**W**orking with trauma survivors brings rewards and challenges. There has been a bulk of literature on the challenges. Not as much perhaps has been written about the rewards. I myself wish to bring my own experience of years of working at the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) in highlighting the secondary gains I have obtained out of these years of service.

I came on board with little preparation for the job – for understanding the far-reaching dimensions of the human mind and spirit, for exploring the depths of human pain and suffering, and especially for handling my own emotional reactions to painful client stories.

To use the concept of gift and gift offering<sup>2</sup> to describe my contribution to the job, I joined with fewer gifts of the head, but more of the heart – my interests, enthusiasm and passion. These gifts were highly valued by the first service for refugees in Australia, STARTTS, whose mission is to help them deal with their past traumatic experiences and build a new life in the new country.

To make up for the gaps in my theoretical knowledge, clinical skills and therapeutic experience, I set upon reading relevant literature, seeking advice and wisdom from colleagues, taking internal and external training, committing fully to the job and pursuing my goal with a strong determination.

As time passed I worked, learned and grew personally and professionally. I have changed a great deal, for the better, in several respects. But before talking about it I should acknowledge the pain, anguish, sorrow, distress and despair suffered by my clients. What I have learned and how I have changed is owing to the privilege of witnessing those uncomfortable feelings in their souls. I appreciate their kindness in giving me permission to “enter their worlds for a time and join them on their journey”.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, I have gained and grown in the cradle of relationships with clients. Most of my clients were boat people and a few were land people. The Western media and literature have described the means and routes they used in search of a new land and a new hope.

This implies the unprecedented risks and dangers they experienced in this search. The sources of these

mishaps were the stormy sea, the unseaworthy boats, the unscrupulous pirates, the scattered minefields in the jungle, the hostile guerrillas, the mere shortage of food and drinks, and on top of that the lack of necessary preparations for the sea voyage, or the foot journey, on the part of participants as well as organisers.

If there was any preparation at all, it was a preparation in abnormal clandestine conditions. It was in these real extraordinary circumstances that the refugees experienced or witnessed the fragility of human life, the helplessness of physical strength and the powerlessness of moral courage.

Many of them in such circumstances had recourse to their religious faiths. Perhaps never in their lives had they felt so deeply the significance and importance of a genuine relationship with their deity as when they were desperately adrift at sea or lost for days in the jungle. There and then, in the hour of an impending death their beliefs about spirituality, including questions about God and faith came into the foreground.

It might be relevant to say that the god they prayed to was not a god of power and might, but a god of mercy and love. The Christian Virgin Mary or the Buddhist Qwan Yin were invoked most of all. The refugees believed that these motherly figures would respond to their urgent needs and would come to their rescue in this time of crisis. They prayed, silently or vocally, individually or together as a group, and in most occasions witnessed the miracle of surviving their ordeal.

I myself believe that by listening to their experiences of the working of the spiritual, my spiritual connection was reinforced.

After the ordeal of escapes, the refugees were resettled in Australia. Many of them quickly re-established themselves while some others did not. For the latter group, their long arduous perilous journey had not yet finished in this lucky country. While many problems of theirs had come to an end, other problems emerged – the pain and distress of coming to grips with their multiple losses and grief and severe traumas experienced in their original country and/or en route to Australia.

The after-effects of trauma and loss on my clients are numerous and diverse and in many cases very serious and incapacitating. It is to do with their inability to stop the intrusion of their past, the hurtful or

terrifying events, to concentrate, to remember and learn new things, to have enough sleep undisturbed by nightmares, to manage their anger and irritability, to have happy family dynamics, to make or maintain social relationships and to have a productive, useful or satisfying life.

It was really painful to see how the effects of loss, torture and trauma have rendered people chronically sorrowful, helpless, hopeless, physically scarred and mentally disabled.

Working with these issues of my clients, I could not help reflecting on myself. I feel lucky that I can still use my brain, learn and adjust to changes, that I can still work and study and that I have not suffered the enormous pain they have, nor lost as much as they have lost.

I should admit that I feel lucky, but at the same time feel uneasy or even guilty about this feeling of luck. I just hope that my suffering clients would forgive me for this nasty comparison.

Along the way, whilst I have strived to overcome the effects of my own trauma, I feel that I am getting closer to my clients, and I am connected more deeply with them, which is an essential ingredient of therapy. This sense of connection goes along with an increased respect for their resilience and a greater appreciation of their efforts to recover.

I have witnessed not only the unrelenting entrenched problems and difficulties of my clients but

also the growth and positive change in quite a few of them resulting from their struggle with many horrendous experiences and the lasting consequences. The areas where people show growth are various.

Some people have seen new possibilities and are able to choose an option deemed to be best for them in life and work. Some have achieved a new understanding of how their lives have changed after trauma and have begun to consider future plans and hopes in accordance with this understanding.

Some have been able to grieve and accept what has been lost and make sense of their experiences. Some have been able to re-establish attachments and trusting relationships with humanity. Still others have been able to go out of their way to help “people in the same boat”, or participate in community-building activities, or even engage in religious training with the purpose of providing for the spiritual needs of many.

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STARTTS Vietnamese group in 1992. PHOTO: Courtesy of STARTTS.

While in the process of working with my clients I could not help feeling deeply saddened by their sufferings, I anyhow found precious encouragement, motivation and inspiration seeing them moving beyond their trauma and moving forward to a new goal. It was this that was for me an effective anti-burnout strategy and much more.

What has been my experience of all this work with clients in my personal journey – their positive changes, their experiences of becoming “stuck”, or their faults and failings?

Above I have linked my gains with the milestones in my clients’ lives. There are still rewards that seem to come, day by day, little by little, which only become evident upon my self-reflection and reflection on my working years at STARTTS.

Looking back over many years now I can see I have grown into someone better than I probably would have been without having worked with trauma survivors. I am not sure if I have become a stronger person, but I am pretty sure that I have become a more compassionate, more human person, more sensitive to people’s feelings, more ready to help and better able to reach

out to their needs. Though an unconditional positive regard towards people is still far from being achieved, I find myself less demanding and judgemental, while more empathic and accepting, and better able to put things in a broader perspective.

To sum up, it is a blessing to be involved in trauma work. Indeed working with trauma survivors has provided me with many opportunities for growth in my profession and my personal journey. To be honest, I should point to several factors that have had an influence on the positive effects of this work for me. It is that over the years I have received precious support from the community, the organisation, the team, the supervisors, colleagues and friends. R

- 1 The title of this article is a borrowing of Carl Roger’s *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy*.
- 2 Ted Smeaton, *Assets-based Community Development*, ABCD handouts.
- 3 Allen Ivey et al. *Counselling and Psychotherapy – A Multicultural Perspective*, 1993, p2.

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# One Hundred Countries Use Torture

## What would you say are the global trends in relation to torture and trauma?

I cannot tell you with any precision because there are no reliable statistics. What we know is that torture is used in many countries. In some it is used systematically, in others sporadically, with more than 100 countries in the world practising torture.

Torture is not only the systematic and deliberate infliction of pain and suffering by one person on another, but torture also includes inhuman and degrading treatment, which can happen without intent and is less serious than the former. Cruel and degrading treatment may include prison overcrowding, lack of basic services, etc. This happens just about everywhere in the world.

## How would you define the situation in the Middle East?

There are reports that human-rights abuses were committed before and since the Arab Spring. I have read reports about this happening in Bahrain, Tunisia, and of course Syria. In Egypt there was much repression at the time when Mubarak was ousted. Unfortunately, there was excessive use of force in demonstrations, and

extreme cases of cruel and degrading treatment.

## What should be the response of the international community?

The international community has to uphold the notion that torture is an international crime – even though it happens in an isolated environment –and that means that the state has an obligation to investigate, prosecute and punish every act of torture. It is indeed unfortunate that the international community has not always put pressure on states to live up to the standards required. International monitoring takes places through the Special Rapporteurship and through the Committee against Torture, the Subcommittee on the Prevention of Torture and also by resolutions. But more needs to be done on a consistent and sustained basis, until we see that the countries that torture pay a high political price for doing so and make changes to their institutions.

## The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture was established to allow for international inspections in places of detention. How is it being implemented?

It is actually going quite well. Now that 50 states are parties to the Protocol we can say that it is growing at a good pace, considering that it is not all that old. A subcommittee made up of 25 member countries can now visit any of the 50 countries regularly, or without warning the governments of their visits.

Member countries visited will be issued reports and as a result may have to create national preventative mechanisms and implement them. Hopefully it will prevent the use of torture and inhumane, cruel and degrading treatment. But the level of implementation varies from state to state even among those that have signed the Protocol and ratified it.

**You have said that the US military is culpable of inhumane and cruel treatment for holding Bradley Manning on suspicion of being the Wikileaks source in solitary confinement for more than two years. Did you visit him in prison?**

I was denied access. I sent a request to the government and was invited but I was told that they could not guarantee our conversation would not be monitored and even used in court. Of course I declined. Under the rules the military is supposed to operate, they had to allow me to hold private conversations with Manning. Manning wanted to go ahead, but I could not see the point.

**Is torture still used in the US?**

Not frequently. In investigations of suspects of common crime, it is now used infrequently. But the US has unfortunately softened their stand against torture because of the war on terror. We saw the infamous torture memos written during the Bush Administration. It shows clearly that they applied torture, including water boarding and a combination of other techniques to detainees. It looks like it did take place extensively.

Now that President Obama reinstated the prohibition, we have not heard of any new cases of torture, but prolonged solitary confinement is a problem. It is used not only in Guantanamo but throughout the US for detainees accused of terrorism, threat to national security and even in immigration detention. Prolonged solitary confinement in some cases is almost torture or at least cruel and degrading treatment.

I have called for a specific ban of some forms of prolonged solitary confinement. I have said it should

be banned for young detainees, and for any person with mental disabilities. I do agree that on a limited basis there are some legitimate reasons. We should ban anything beyond 15 days or maximum 30 days. Prolonged confinement should not last for months or years.

**Did you visit Guantanamo?**

My predecessor and other special rapporteurs were invited to visit it in 2004 but with conditions they could not accept. I renewed the request to visit it in 2010 but the same conditions were imposed. They could only allow a guided tour and would include some of the facilities but not all of them, and I could not talk to the inmates, so I declined.

**You were arrested in Argentina during the dictatorship, what prompted your arrest?**

I was actually arrested prior to the military dictatorship under the government of Isabel Peron, which was also repressive and was replaced in 1976 by the military junta. I was arrested because I was a lawyer defending political prisoners and investigating cases of abuse. I was not the only case, 125 lawyers disappeared during the dictatorship. I was tortured and after 18 months I was escorted to a plane and asked to leave Argentina for good.

The common practice at the time was to hold the detainees in clandestine detention centres. I was taken to several places. I am not even sure where I was as I was blindfolded all the time. I was tortured while they asked questions. They wanted to know the names of other lawyers. I remember the torture and I had nightmares. Over time I overcame that but it is something that remains with you forever. It does not go away and I don't want it to go away because I want it to be a source of commitment for my work in human rights.

**In the 1980s there was great hope in Latin America during the democratic transition when human rights enshrined in the Constitutions would be extended to all citizens, however practices and attitudes of state agents in the criminal justice systems haven't changed all that much.**

Yes, however since then there have been positive human-rights advances. Most Latin American countries now have democratic governments elected by the people who tend to observe democratic principles, with

the exception of Colombia where drug trafficking and violence is pervasive.

From time to time there is arbitrary and perhaps authoritarian use of power, attacks on freedom of expression and attempts to overrun the independence of the judiciary.

There is also progress made in revisiting the past and making sure that it doesn't happen again, by prosecuting the perpetrators of human-rights abuses in the dictatorships.

In Latin America there is still economic, social and cultural inequality. In this area there has not been as much progress as in political rights.

Not all problems are over though. There are still tensions, police brutality, particularly against young men. Venezuela and Brazil rate low in terms of prison conditions, also some prevention prisons in Argentina. The juvenile detention systems are in bad shape just about everywhere.

In the case of Brazil cruel and degrading treatment of prisoners occurs because of the deplorable and overcrowded, unsanitary conditions, which amount to cruel and degrading treatment.

Much torture is most likely to happen in pre-trial detention. This is where the victim is most defenceless. Many people are sent to prisons and forgotten about and they spend time without lawyers or access to services, without being able to challenge decisions that placed them there.

**Is there a time limit for pre-trial detention?**

Yes the law prescribes time limits. Pre-trial detention even when authorised should not last more than two years. Unfortunately the criminal justice systems are overwhelmed by large case loads, the chaotic nature of the courts, and the lack of resources. As a result, the statutory limits on pre-trial detention are ignored.

**How do you see the future in relation to human rights? The number of wars has decreased and we live in a relatively peaceful time, according to political analysts and researchers, yet the use of torture prevails.**

I think in the future the intensity may change and the number of victims, but torture may not disappear completely. I think torture happens when nobody is looking, particularly when countries don't have a strict prohibition and don't prosecute perpetrators. Then torture becomes a common practice, a common way of circumventing otherwise more complicated means of solving crimes. It is relatively easy for interrogators to go back to torture when they know they will not be punished for it.

I have not lost my optimism, perhaps one day will

come when we can consider torture effectively abolished everywhere in the world. But I am afraid there is still a long way to go.

There is no doubt that since 9/11 we have lost a number of battles against torture because popular culture has conditioned us to think that it is inevitable, that it may make us safer so we might as well look the other way since there is nothing we can do about it. These are myths of course but are deeply entrenched in our culture. There is a degree of acceptance and tolerance now, though NGOs and the public have been strong in their stand against torture.

**Should the US investigate and prosecute President Bush?**

I don't know about prosecuting individuals. President Obama has refused to even consider investigations of the crimes committed under the so-called torture labels.

**One way to eradicate torture would be to reform police and the prison system and work on changing the culture. What are your views on that?**

There have been some attempts at reform, which although not completely successful have produced positive outcomes. There are organisations dedicated to reforming those institutions. The problem is not that there is lack of knowledge or expertise about police reform or correctional reform, the problem is a lack of political will to fulfil the international obligations. Another problem is that these institutions are strapped for resources.

Unfortunately even though it is obvious that we need a trustworthy policy, healthy and decent prisons, these needs rate low in the political agendas of today's politicians who get elected on promises of harsh tactics to fight crime. That destroys any possibilities of reform because obviously the police feel that they are protected by politicians.

Human-rights training and capacity building for internal investigations are important, however it is the commitment of states to fulfil the international obligations that is crucial. They have a binding obligation to investigate, prosecute and punish every single act of torture.

It is unfortunate that when there are complaints about torture in order to be able to prosecute the perpetrator the state will demand evidence. It is not always possible to produce evidence because medical examinations have been done too late, or by doctors not trained for it, or simply perpetrators have used techniques that leave no traces on the body. But it doesn't mean torture has not been used. This continues to create a culture of impunity. So yes, there is still a long way to go. R



A man walks inside the burnt Rabaa Adawiya mosque, the morning after the clearing of the sit-in which was held in and around the mosque, in Cairo, Egypt. PHOTO: AHMED HAYMAN/EPA/LANDOV

# Egypt

## and the Quest for Democracy

*Egypt's transition to democracy is teetering on a precipice. Political strife, increasing poverty and unemployment are adding new trauma to a region already in turmoil. **OLGA YOLDI** writes.*



Egyptian Defence Minister Abdel Fattah el-Sisi on May 22, 2013. PHOTO: KHALED DESOUKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Since President Mohamed Morsi was overthrown in a military coup on July 3, it has been downhill for Egypt, a country now on the brink of a civil war. After only one year in power, Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood is back where it started, if not worse. It now is struggling to survive as a political force.

Last July, security forces under the leadership of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi attacked the Brotherhood with extreme brutality. Morsi and a large number of high-ranking Brothers were detained, the television and some of their offices were closed down and the Brotherhood was suddenly cast in the role of the enemy, a terrorist group, and a political force to be excluded at all costs. The military on the other hand cast themselves as the custodians of democracy and political pluralism.

Those claims however, were soon shattered, following their violent crackdown in which the military launched a combat-style operation to disperse demonstrators and riot police backed by armoured vehicles, helicopters, bulldozers and snipers, swept through two encampments of pro-Morsi demonstrators, unleashing

violent street battles in Cairo and other cities, leaving 1,000 dead, 4,000 wounded and between 3,000 and 8,000 pro-Morsi supporters detained.

Such violence seemed senseless and totally unnecessary. The killings destroyed all hope for the democratic process, alienating secular Egyptians and the international community.

The Muslim Brotherhood has now been decimated. An Egyptian judicial panel has recommended its dissolution as a legally registered non-government organisation. Their assets, money and buildings have been confiscated, their leaders are either in prison or on the run and Morsi will face charges for allegedly inciting murder during his presidency.

But his supporters say they are not prepared to go quietly and will fight until Morsi is reinstated. However, the generals have appointed the leaders of a new interim government, dictated an interim constitution and set a rushed timetable for elections.

"What makes the situation so fraught is that both the Brotherhood and the military see themselves as defending the democratic spirit of the uprising and the interests of the nation," wrote Carrie Rosefsky

Wickham in *Foreign Affairs*. "Each believes that its worst suspicions of the other have been confirmed, and that it has the manpower, resources and motivation to continue the standoff for some time to come."

Egyptians now fear a resurgence of violent Jihad. They also fear that the crackdown on Islamists by the military will widen to other dissidents that oppose military rule.

So far violence and turmoil have continued, with the government admitting to killing 36 Islamists in custody and the militants killing 24 policemen in an attack in the Sinai Peninsula, a lawless area now seen as a growing threat.

The question is, will Egypt follow Syria into civil war? Or will it follow the path of Algeria? Where a coup prevented an Islamist electoral victory in 1992 and unleashed 10 years of fighting.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 as an Islamist, political and social movement. For decades it was the largest, best organised and most disciplined political opposition force, despite political repression by the regimes of Anwar al Sadat and Hosni Mubarak.

The Brotherhood carried out social development and education programs in the slums. At the time religious organisations were among the only forums in which people could organise themselves or participate actively in the lives of their communities. So when Mubarak fell only Islamists had the social and political infrastructure in place to mobilise supporters effectively.

Sheri Burman wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that the underdevelopment of other civil society and political organisations meant that once the dictatorship disintegrated, there were few institutions capable of channelling, much less responding to popular grievances.

But once in government it was popular grievances that caused the Brotherhood's demise, particularly Morsi's Freedom and Justice Party's lack of commitment to building an inclusive, pluralist, democratic government. While he promised to serve as a president for all Egyptians, he was accused of using his powers for partisan gain. He appointed Islamists to strategic positions in the bureaucracy, media and the judiciary, giving them control of key government ministries.

He dismissed 17 provincial governors and replaced some of them with Islamists. Morsi and his supporters justified such appointments by saying that they needed to cleanse the state of bureaucrats linked to the Mubarak regime.

But it was the economic problems that proved most challenging. Analysts say that Morsi's great mistake was to ignore the economy focusing instead on consolidating power and using cash injections from neighbouring Arab countries to buy time.

Since the uprising, government revenue has been decreasing and investment has dried up. According to *Foreign Affairs*, the country's foreign currency reserves diminished from US\$36 billion before the Arab Spring uprising in 2011 to \$16 billion in May 2013. As a result, Egypt's Standard & Poor's long-term credit rating was downgraded from B- to CCC+, and the budget deficit reached more than 11 per cent of GDP, up from 8.3 per cent before the uprising.

Increases in government expenditure were mostly caused by salary increases to government workers and the cost of subsidies (food \$4 billion a year and fuel \$16 billion a year), which continued to be a drain on state finances.

Egypt's population has grown well beyond the means of the state to support its needs. It imports more than half of its wheat consumption. Even the new government will struggle to secure sufficient supplies of fuel and bread. According to Stratfor, a strategic forecasting organisation, the government has few options but to back off subsidies in the hope that higher prices will help reduce consumption and therefore cut down on the net drain on state finances. But a fear of political backlash stopped the Brotherhood and previous governments from making reforms.

The Brotherhood and the IMF held discussions about an assistance package. The IMF was willing to release \$4.8 billion in economic aid as long as the government made the necessary economic reforms that would help stabilise and grow the economy and reassure investors. Instead, they relied on financial support provided by Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and even Libya. Together they provided more than \$10 billion in aid with no strings attached. Economic analysts said that the unpredictability of such measures discouraged investors and postponed the inevitable fiscal consolidation that Egypt needed to stabilise and grow its economy.

To make matters worse Morsi's long-term economic recovery plan stalled. He blamed a combination of government bureaucracy and internal conflicts. As a result, unemployment grew from nine per cent to 13 per cent and the economy slowed to two per cent from 5.5 per cent.

Slow economic growth combined with rising unemployment resulted in an increase in the black economy which now accounts for one third of the

working labour force, or eight million people. It also resulted in an increase in the number of people living below the poverty line, which has grown to 25 per cent from 20 percent according to Egypt's Statistics Agency.

At the same time, the security vacuum that had persisted since the revolution was never addressed. Since 2011 crime rates have skyrocketed. Egyptian Government statistics indicate a 300 per cent rise in homicides and a 12-fold increase in armed robberies. The proliferation of small arms in Cairo and across Egypt also did not help.

According to press reports, a flood of weapons somehow made their way to Cairo streets and since then the market for weapons has boomed. Many of the guns for sale were ransacked from police departments during the revolution. Others were smuggled across Egypt's borders from neighbouring countries. "Distrustful of a police force known for being simultaneously abusive and incompetent, and wary of an increasingly politicised judicial system that rarely delivers justice, many Egyptians are administering law on their own terms," wrote Mara Revkin in *Foreign Affairs*.

Groups of vigilantes now guard the streets and the Brotherhood outsourced its law enforcement functions to private security companies which functioned as a substitute for police. "These predatory groups operate illicit fiefdoms of racketeering, trafficking and prostitution with total impunity, hiring thugs (and sometimes children) to staff their private militias," Revkin wrote. According to Revkin, outside Cairo the problem is even more severe, with gangs controlling entire sections of major highways in Upper Egypt and Sinai.

Minority groups, particularly Coptic Christians, were and continue to be most affected by the security vacuum. The attacks on Coptic churches, businesses and schools by Salafists and their supporters showed the failure of the authorities to protect Egypt's Coptic Christians, the largest religious minority in the country. According to Human Rights Watch, attackers torched and looted scores of churches and property across the country. Security forces failed to intervene and in many cases police stations refused to register complaints. Hardly any arrests were made.

Now dozens of churches are ruined. Egyptian law makes it difficult for Coptic Christians to rebuild and repair them because official authorisation is denied.

The Brotherhood was also accused of wanting to Islamise the state and society. While the Brotherhood struggled to find a solution to the country's economic and security challenges it had no overarching vision. With time it became clear to many Egyptians that it lacked the experience to manage an extremely diffi-

cult political and economic transition and demanded Morsi's ouster.

The Muslim Brotherhood had waited for 80 years to seize the chance to reshape the country according to their ideals, but unfortunately they could not root out the economic and social legacies of previous regimes and build a new order inclusive of all.

There is no doubt the new government will face exactly the same problems, which are old and deeply-entrenched in the system and have persisted for decades, so shifting the deckchairs may not solve the crisis. The political and social situation may become increasingly difficult with each passing year, leading to further instability.

**T**he Egyptian armed forces are seen as being too big, too powerful and too influential. They are the largest in Africa and the Middle East and the 10th most powerful in the world. Their lack of accountability and sense of entitlement has posed problems for a long time. They enjoy privileges, resources and powers they should not have. After all, this is an army that has not been in combat for decades and faces no significant threat from external enemies. However, it has intervened in internal politics twice in three years and it is highly likely this coup will not be Egypt's last.

The military also controls about one third of Egypt's economy. According to press reports, the military's economic and financial interests have penetrated deeply into every aspect of the political and social systems. "The military has become the main employer, a dominant shareholder and an owner of an enormous network of investments in everything ranging from the tourism industry, to Egypt Air, to construction companies and so on," said Professor of Law at UCLA, Khaled Abou El Fadl, to the ABC.

According to El Fadl, the military's economic interests had been threatened by the Brotherhood when it entered into agreements with Turkey, China and India. This caused anger among the ranks of the wealthy generals which may have triggered the coup.

Media reports said that Morsi nominated al-Sisi as Minister of Defence, replacing Gen Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, former minister of defence under President Mubarak. However, according to Khaled Fahin, Professor of History at the American University in Cairo, it was through an internal military coup that al-Sisi secured his post from Tantawi and Morsi was left with no choice but to accept him. It is possible however that Morsi did not see al-Sisi as a threat as he is perceived as being patriotic and above all a devoted Muslim who

frequently quotes the Quran in conversations.

Little is known about al-Sisi or his plans for Egypt. All that is known is that he studied in the UK, and at a US Army College for a Master's degree. He wrote a paper titled Democracy in the Middle East in which he argued that the religious nature of the region needed to be reflected in new democratic systems there. In this paper, al-Sisi complained that governments tend towards secular rule, excluding large segments of the population who believe religion should not be excluded from government. He wrote that "democracy in the Middle East may bear little resemblance to a Western democracy" and warned that "ideally the legislative executive and judicial bodies should all take Islamic beliefs into consideration when carrying out their duties". What he proposed was a tripartite government but only if the executive, legislative and judicial branches were all sufficiently Islamic, otherwise there must be an independent religious branch of government.

In his role as defence minister, he made some attempts to modernise the army, removing older officers who had been allied to Mubarak and warning against the military's involvement in politics.

*Newsweek* correspondent Mike Giglio wrote that al-Sisi began to behave in public as a player independent from Morsi's government. According to him, the general called a meeting for talks among opposition groups and military intelligence officers, and began to communicate secretly through intermediaries with those who wanted to force Morsi out of office.

There is no doubt that al-Sisi took advantage of a revolutionary mood against Morsi as expressed by the Tamarod movement that called for a change in government, and ousted a President who had been democratically elected by the people in free and fair elections.

Khalid Abou El Fadl defines the coup as the collapse of legitimacy. "Sovereignty belongs to the citizens

and the only source of legitimacy is the integrity and sanctity of the democratic process. The integrity of the political process must be defended above all," he writes.

According to El Fadl, the military coup, even if it came in response to widespread grievances, is a fatal blow to the Egyptian revolution because it reaffirms the politics of the old guardians of Egypt. "The tragedy is that Egypt has returned to the politics of the worse authoritarian periods in the Arab world."

Indeed, according to human-rights groups, the political prisons are now holding populations larger than they ever held during the Mubarak regime and security forces are torturing and killing without any restraint.

While the scale of atrocities committed by the military grows, they are justified as necessary to achieve national unity and political stability and save the country from the threat of Islamism and the war on terrorism.

Many segments of society including intellectuals have been silenced. Even the very revolutionaries that were once driven to the streets to protest against human-rights violations are no longer demanding justice and freedom.

According to press reports, human-rights groups are now being targeted by the military, and also by some sectors of the public and media. "Activists are now seen as traitors, foreign agents or naïve trouble makers," writes director of Freedom House Egypt, Nancy Okail. According to Okail, any criticism of the military government is now met with accusations that human-rights groups are the ones contributing to instability and dragging Egypt into a Syria-like war.

"Unlike previous crackdowns however, the current attack on civil society is drawing strong backing from the Egyptian public," Okail writes. "In this context the promotion of political freedom and human rights is deemed a secondary priority."

Al-Sisi remains defence minister, but no one is in

**"Sovereignty belongs to the citizens and the only source of legitimacy is the integrity and sanctity of the democratic process".**

*Khalid Abou El Fadl*

**The military's economic and financial interests have penetrated deeply into every aspect of the political and social systems.**

any doubt where the power lies. The military's hastily conceived plan is unclear on key issues. Media reports say that it was written in secret, much of the language is vague and concepts like protection of civil rights are ignored.

The plan grants new powers to the military that will not only preserve its financial freedom but would also allow it to nominate its own defence ministers –effectively setting the ministry apart from elected officials.

On the other hand the timetable for amending the constitution, putting it to a referendum and holding new elections seems too short to allow for discussion and consensus-building among the different parties and factions. Unfortunately it will be put in place in an extremely tense atmosphere which will be anything but conducive to success, so it is hard to imagine elections taking place in these conditions.

There is now growing speculation that al-Sisi will emerge as the next leader of the country. He has acquired a cult following. A movement to nominate him as the next president appears to be gaining pace. This is a development that reflects a desperate yearning for peace, stability and order.

A campaign known as “Complete your Favour” is gathering signatures from millions of people to demand al-Sisi runs for president. They say that Egypt needs a strong leader, someone capable of inspiring the people and reviving national ambitions. Such a leader will need to lift the country and restore peace and stability. It is ironic that if al-Sisi were to become president it would facilitate a comeback of the very regime they rebelled against.

So far al-Sisi has not made any public announcement for or against and mostly has kept quiet. So it is hard to know what his real plans for Egypt are. As Khaled El Fadl puts it “For the time being, al-Sisi is blissfully untroubled by the unlawful closing of media outlets, the mass arrests and even the murder of hundreds of pro-Morsi advocates and by his own monopolisation of legislative executive powers deposited in him by the military.”

**T**he prospects for a democratic transition at this stage are rather dim. If Egypt does have any elections soon they will be a sham. Real democracy won't be achieved without the demilitarisation of Egypt's

politics and the withdrawal of the military from the political stage. Then all main political actors would have to commit to resolving their differences through the political process. But a profound culture of distrust between various groups will make negotiation and compromise difficult.

If the Muslim Brotherhood refuses to participate, it will make it difficult for a new government to succeed, because it will create a political system as exclusionary and as vulnerable to disruption as that of Morsi's. Violence has made the Brotherhood's reintegration into the political system almost impossible. Besides, Morsi is not in a position to run for anything, being detained, incommunicado and the subject of a criminal investigation. Secular liberals say returning the Brotherhood to power would pose a different kind of threat to democracy. There is pressure for secular liberals to play a more important role this time by organising themselves into an effective political force.

The new government should revive the economy by undertaking rapid economic adjustments. The cost of delaying reforms will have a dire effect on the economy and will only increase unemployment and poverty.

One of the driving factors in the instability is the continuous economic crisis sparked by the revolution. According to a recent Pew Research Centre poll, Egyptian protesters were not interested

in elections and freedom of speech but in a stronger economy, a more robust judiciary and improved law and order.

Egypt needs the discipline as well as the technical support of the IMF. What has been recommended is a smart budget-rebalancing that would cut the subsidies, add more to the social safety net for the poor and reduce the fiscal deficit.

The international community has an important role to play in restoring stability and a return to democracy in Egypt. So far there has been an unwillingness to intervene as the focus of attention continues to be the Syrian war. It is important that the West defines clearly what their goals for Egypt actually are.

While the US has in Egypt an important ally, controlling the critical Suez Canal and allowing the US to use its airspace, President Obama has announced the suspension of aid. He said the US will withhold military aid in the form of tanks, helicopters and fighter

**Human-rights groups are now being targeted by the military, and also by some sectors of the public and media.**



Mourners comfort a relative of one of four Copt Christians who were killed late Sunday, during their funeral in Warraq's Virgin Mary church in Cairo, Egypt, Monday, Oct. 21, 2013. PHOTO: AP PHOTO/KHALIL HAMRA

jets, as well as aid funds for education and health, pending credible progress towards an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government through fair and free elections. However this won't force a change of heart, as Qatar and Saudi Arabia will probably be most willing to fill the gap.

While restoring stability and security is a key goal for the international community, this will not be achieved through cuts in aid or sanctions, but through efforts to promote democracy. Currently this may be unrealistic in a country with weak institutions, a repressive regime and a vulnerable civil society.

So at this stage the restoration of stability should be the highest priority.

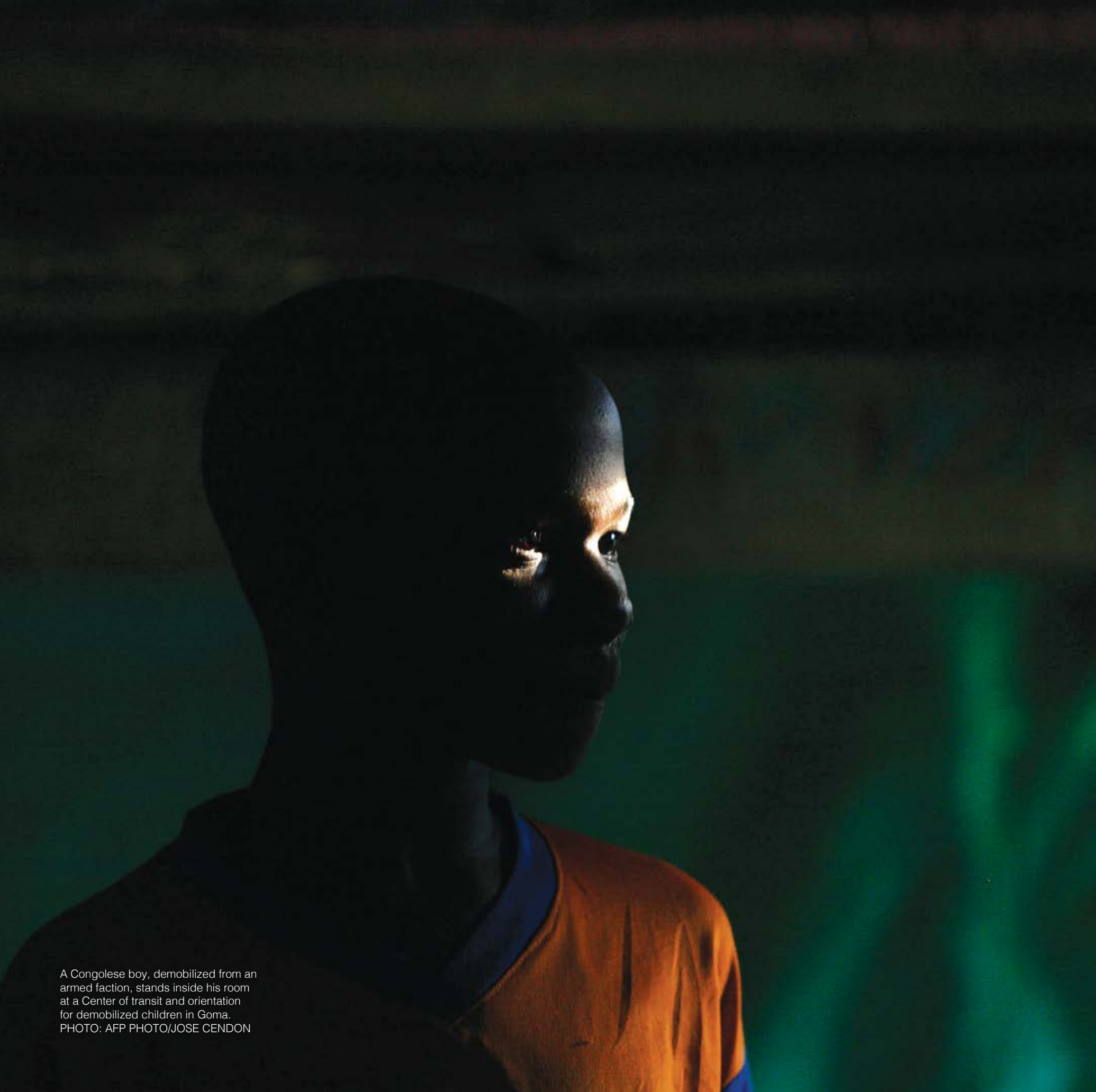
A long period of continuous violence is the most dangerous scenario for Egyptians as well as for the international community since this would certainly provide an ideal breeding ground for terrorism. The emphasis needs to be placed on the protection of

human rights and the restoration of a legitimate government. Even these goals may be hard to achieve.

“Clean government and a return to economic growth could restore some legitimacy to the political system,” writes Gideon Rahman in the *Financial Times*. “If order and economic growth return there is a chance that the kind of civil society institutions that are necessary for a democracy to survive and flourish – independent courts, a free media, better schools – can take root in the country.”

Continuous disengagement on the other hand will be disastrous for civil society and Egypt's crisis will only deepen.

While it is true that Egypt is not yet suffering from the violence and instability of Syria the risk is growing by the day. The lessons of that country should certainly serve to prompt participants to take stock of what is happening and to step back from the precipice. **R**



A Congolese boy, demobilized from an armed faction, stands inside his room at a Center of transit and orientation for demobilized children in Goma. PHOTO: AFP PHOTO/JOSE CENDON

# A Second Chance for Child Soldiers in a War Zone:

*DRC struggles to restore lives of young fighters*

By Eunice Chin

**R**ebel groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and its neighbouring regions are still causing disruption, despite the signing of a United Nations-backed Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework by 11 African countries last February. The deal aimed to bring stability to the highly volatile nation, after the successive wars and recurrent violence of insurgent and government militias.

There was hope the deal would be a potential solution to the conflict between the M23 rebels and the national army that culminated in the fall of Goma in November last year. The agreement led to the formation of a 3,000-strong UN intervention brigade under the command of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) with a mandate to attack insurgent forces.

Although still engaged in peace talks with delegates from the DRC government, M23 rebels have threatened to recapture the city of Goma. The rebel movement's previous victory over the city was short-lived, with the group withdrawing under a ceasefire accord



A Congolese child peers out from a door as a Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) soldier stands guard at Lushebere town in the Massasi district, 50 kilometres northeast of Goma. PHOTO: AFP PHOTO/TONY KARUMBA

and subsequently entering into the peace talks.

Sixty-eight percent of the UN intervention brigade has been deployed in North Kivu and are involved in daily patrol operations, Felix Prosper Basse, military spokesman for MONUSCO, told Xinhua, a Chinese news agency.

The ongoing violence in the east and north-east of DRC has resulted in the displacement of more than 2.2 million people since 2012. But many thousands of people living in the conflict areas have no choice but to stay. Among them are peace builders and ex-child soldiers who are in the process of being reintegrated into the community.

Last August, MONUSCO expressed “deep concern” over 150 documented incidents of child recruitment since the beginning of 2012, by M23 rebels, the Mai Mai groups, the Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

UNICEF estimates that 4,500 children serve in militias across the DRC, while at least 1,700 child soldiers are active in North Kivu alone. Children are for-

cibly conscripted into insurgent forces and government militias, abducted at gunpoint from villages, markets, schools and foster homes. Poverty and hunger drive some parents to willingly surrender their children to armed groups, or force them to volunteer as a way to guarantee regular meals and medical attention. Some of these children become soldiers to protect their families from rogue forces or to avenge the deaths of loved ones, while others are lured in by the promise of wealth, power and an end to hunger.

Henri Bura Ladyi, dubbed “Africa’s Schindler” by *The Independent* has worked on rehabilitating child soldiers for 10 years as the director of the Congolese church-based organisation Centre Résolution Conflits (CRC). “The fighting between militia groups and the national army is like a cycle,” Ladyi said. “And every time, children are victims of this.”

The demobilisation process is complex. Floribert Kazingufu, the founder of the Chirezi Foundation, uses a process known as “DDR” (Demobilization Disarmament and Reintegration), contacting the child’s family, local authorities and army officials in the child’s com-

munity to gain their support in negotiating the liberation of children from the rebel groups.

“Sometimes we are taken between two fires: the government army, and armed groups,” Kazingufu said. “This is why it is important to have friendship with both groups. Without building trust, this process is very dangerous and risky.” Because of the importance of children to the militia, negotiating for their release is no easy task. Ladyi once persuaded a rebel army leader to free 100 children in exchange for 25 goats.

But other peace builders refrain from supplying means to rebel groups altogether. “What they do is illegal, so we don’t give them anything,” said Mumbere Kiseriwa Kizito, who is the coordinator of Passion for Souls Mission in DRC (PSM/DRC).

When the rebel army leaders agree to discharge the children, groups such as the Mai Mai perform rituals to permanently sever the children’s ties to the group and cleanse them of the acts they committed under the rebels’ control. The end of this ceremony marks the beginning of the children’s new lives.

Former child soldiers are found in such destitute states that it can be disheartening for peace builders. Ashamed of having been used as pawns to harm others, the children often “hide within themselves,” Kizito said.

But according to Ladyi, “We don’t pay attention to their condition.

We just know that they are children under 18 years-old... we need to take care of them. We need to bring them to the good condition of life. We need to make them really become children.”

Ladyi related that there are three phases of action for the children’s societal reintegration. The first is to try to reconcile children with their families. This can be a gruelling task for peace building organisations—there is no guarantee that a child’s family can be located. Sometimes, children return to their villages only to find that the place they once called home had been completely deserted, or to hear of their parents’ death at the hands of rebel forces.

On the rare occasions that they are reunited with their parents, a number of difficulties may arise. Peace builders often have to resolve conflicts which are, in most cases, rooted in the parents’ mistrust of their children.

“Some parents can say, ‘No, no, we cannot accept the child because he took our bikes, he sold this. We are...

obliged to pay these back—it can be a bike, a goat, a cow. Anything belonging to family, belonging to the parents’,” Ladyi explained.

The second stage of the activity is to work towards a child’s psychological and social wellbeing. “This is to help him to be able to think about new things, and not think about what happened when he was active in the bush,” Ladyi said. The third and final step is the development of a means by which children can financially sustain themselves in the future so they can fully steer clear of violent livelihoods.

In general, villages welcome former child soldiers and support them throughout the phases of their rehabilitation. But, Kazingufu explained, “When the child soldier is blamed for committing acts of violence or robbery, the attitudes of the village change.”

Some members of the community can hold ex-combatants accountable for the crimes they committed under the manipulation of their superiors. “People want revenge. They need to try to destroy or to make children understand that what they did before was very bad. Not only the neighbours, I can also say, for example, the police, the national army, and the government. They are not comfortable with those children,” Ladyi said. This abuse can cause children to choose to abandon the community and return to the life they know in the armed forces.

All three parties agreed that there is a gender divide in the acceptance of children into the community. Girls are often victims of discrimination due to their past as objects of sexual abuse; they can easily be called prostitutes and be dismissed as pariahs.

“They face more challenges during reintegration. Many of them are not married because the community doesn’t trust them,” Kazingufu added. The tenuous position young girls are in is aggravated when they’ve borne children in the rebellion.

Young boys are given an ultimatum—they must first repay the things they have stolen during their time in the rebel groups or they will be rejected as members of the family or community.

Due to the difficulty of tracing children’s families at the height of a conflict, children who have no family or relatives to return to, are taken in by transit families, who are selected during the DDR process.

Peace-building organisations supply these families

**Former child soldiers are found in such destitute states that it can be disheartening for peace builders.**

with food and finances to cover the children's medical costs. The role of transit families is to help organisations to find the children's biological families and provide children with support throughout their reintegration.

When it is certain that a child's parents or relatives are either dead or unwilling to accept their child, the child will be put up for adoption. During the six months of the adoption process, they remain with the transit family.

"Children who have no family left in their village are subjected to lives of mendacity, drug abuse and banditry. Many of these children join armed groups later on just to have a job or feed themselves," said Kazingufu.

The struggles children face in the process of their reintegration are pervasive—at home, in their community, and in school. There are no special education centres for former child soldiers. Constant threats are posed by rebel groups to peace builders—they set schools on fire, destroy peace-building organisations' campsites, terrorize communities and massacre children. "Their actions are fuelled by resentment of former child soldiers' progress," Ladyi explained.

This makes it a necessity for peace builders to operate at a low key. In schools, former child soldiers are intermingled with children who have grown up in the village, unfamiliar with the violence and bloodshed of warfare.

"The first months are difficult because of the differences between the two groups, but later on the situation comes to normal," Kazingufu said.

Some children who have lived in the village their whole lives are comfortable with ex-child soldiers in the community. But Ladyi says the problem is when discrimination starts.

"This is what is creating a vicious cycle. You can see those children return to the bush because they were stigmatised. They are victims of being treated badly by other children," he said.

Instilled with the notion that violence is acceptable at an early age, some children in rehabilitation find it hard to overcome the aggression that comes naturally. This makes it difficult for organisations to manage these children because they are capable of hurting teachers and schoolmates.

A Congolese commission once advised Ladyi that it would be best to remove former combatants from the school system altogether because of their misbehaviour. But Ladyi did not let this serve as a detriment to his continuing efforts of helping the children towards a better future.

"This is normal here. Many children come from the bush. Their behaviour is not changing in one

day—it takes a long time for them to change their behaviour and become normal children."

"The key is time and love," Kazingufu said. "When you preach to them, taking into account those two words, they become normal and violence doesn't continue to manipulate them."

Given the abrupt change of environment, children often turn to varying mediums to make their transition easier. The ways by which girls and boys cope to the change of lifestyle are vastly different.

Girls engage in small business activities which include selling crops or bread in the local market. They are able to sustain themselves by the time they turn 15.

But most boys want to go back to school, according to Ladyi. For boys who don't, Ladyi shares his own testimony of how an education helped him attain his position as the director of CRC. This, he said, is "to help them understand that life is not in the bush, but it is in the community."

Many children are speechless when Ladyi asks them, "How will you let this program change you?" "They can just start crying and say, 'It's difficult for us, because we cannot forget what we did. We cannot forget the time when we were killing people, when we were abusing women, when we raped the women. We cannot forget this'," Ladyi said.

This necessitates the incorporation of spiritual cleansing into the children's rehabilitation. Pastors are asked to pray for them, and at times, peace builders enlist the assistance of witch doctors to treat children's psychological problems and break the rebel mentality impressed upon them.

The Theory of Change that peace-building organisations have established states that the reintegration program for former child soldiers is typically three months long, but can take up to six months for children who are not deemed to be ready to return to the community without the organisation's full guidance.

"We are just opening the process. The follow-up process is continued by the community," Ladyi explained. After the program, counsellors and other specialists in the organisation are regularly sent to the children's homes to assess their progress with an evaluation form. This document ultimately aims to assess the children's condition of life, with questions for the parent or guardian and for the children themselves, such as "What makes you happy?" or "Who do you talk to when you have a problem?"

Former child soldiers who have successfully been reintegrated into the community also offer their support to younger boys and girls who are in the



Children walk through a transit camp for ex-rebel soldiers of the Democratic Force for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) on in Kasiki, 190 kms north-west of Goma. PHOTO: AFP PHOTO/LIONEL HEALING

process of rehabilitation.

The reason why only three months is allotted for the reintegration program is the lack of time and the enormous amount of children still serving in the rebel forces.

"Every two-to-three weeks," Ladyi explained, "we can find another 20-30 children again. We need time to deal with the new children."

The complete process of societal reintegration can take up to five years.

Amidst these obstacles, one that proves to be the most challenging is the organisations' lack of funds and adequate resources. They are short of finances for recreational materials (consisting of toys, sports equipment, and educational DVDs), clinics, the salaries of teachers and specialised counsellors, transit centres and reintegration centres.

"Without that, sometimes we do the work but at the end of the day, when the children don't have

something to do to enable them to live, they finish the program just to go back to the armed groups again," said Kazingufu.

While much remains to be done, there are several successes that motivate peace builders to go on. Former child soldiers have walked into Ladyi's office asking for job references; he has also been invited to their weddings. Ladyi once visited a village where many reintegrated children lived and saw that 30 per cent of the houses had been built by ex-combatants.

"This is an indicator that my reintegration is positive," he said.

The work done by peace builders in areas of conflict and the stories of former child soldiers' successes prove that hope and redemption can be found in the rubble of war. The children's journey to reintegration is a long and tumultuous one, but one that will help them regain their lost childhood, dignity and humanity. R

# Bouncing back?

## Treating trauma in early childhood

*The number of young children arriving in Australia is growing, and they and their families need increasing support to overcome their trauma. JOCELYN BARNETT spoke to ROSEMARY SIGNORELLI, the driving force behind STARTTerS, the early childhood clinic at STARTTS, established to better understand and treat the needs of young children at a complex and critical time.*

It's often thought that young children escape trauma relatively unscathed. After all, they don't talk about it. Also they may not have the language or cognitive development to describe or make sense of their experiences. Surely, then, if children fail to understand their trauma, they'll get over it. Haven't we all heard how quickly children bounce back? And isn't it the same for children who are refugees and asylum-seekers?

In the midst of political rhetoric, we often hear about children in detention or children on boats. Often they are used as tools to argue for or against one policy or another in an attempt to evoke a duty of care within the public or politicians: we must protect the vulnerable. Without denying their experiences, we may fail to understand what these children go through and how trauma shapes them.

Recognizing trauma in young children is often not straightforward. Rather than vocalising distress and disturbing thoughts, as an adult might, children may display a variety of disturbances.

Rosemary Signorelli, a counsellor at the STARTTerS early childhood clinic explains that "people may think because a child can't talk about traumas that they're not affected.

Children at the clinic, on the other hand, often

present with symptoms such as frequent sickness, headaches, stomach aches, eating problems, nightmares or sleep problems. They may have problems handling sensory input such as sound, touch, taste and sense of movement.

They may have changes in behavior, such as being withdrawn, or becoming more aggressive, or having a shorter attention span. They may stop playing with other children or adults, or they may become more distressed when separated temporarily from a loved one. These signs are primarily related to disruptions to normal development, and also to the changes that can occur in the structure and function of the brain when a very young child is exposed to trauma, especially in the parts of the brain that handle stress. The clinic's patients, typically aged up to six years, are in very sensitive, and often critical, phases of development. During this time, children acquire essential skills in overlapping stages. Failure to fully master one level can hamper successful development at the next level.

Consequently, a child whose development has been interrupted, by trauma for example, may have great difficulty acquiring the skills needed to function normally throughout their lives. Trauma can have such an impact that children may actually regress in their development. That is, a child who has acquired a skill may lose it in the face of traumatic experiences, so a child may begin to wet the bed although they had previously mastered this, or may become more aggressive than before.

The good news, however, is that with early intervention, adverse changes due to trauma can be reversed, and disrupted attachment with the traumatised parent can be repaired. Children can then continue towards normal development and regain skills that may have been lost. This is one reason why the STARTTerS clinic welcomes clients from infancy. Rosemary emphasises, however, that while early intervention is preferable, older children can similarly benefit from treatment.

In terms of traditional therapy, treating young traumatised children poses a challenge. In addition to the emotional stress a child feels, and other trauma related signs, therapists must deal with any apparent develop-

mental delays. Furthermore, as children struggle to articulate the extent of their trauma, both to themselves and to others, effective intervention requires a degree of creativity. Traumatized parents may also have some difficulty in participating because they are exhausted, or in their culture they are not used to playing with their child.

In her sessions, Rosemary uses a variety of techniques, centered on music and movement, play therapy and sensorimotor activities. While creating a safe and accessible environment, all activities serve a therapeutic purpose. Play, for example, is an effective way to gauge how a child engages socially and emotionally, and gives a child the opportunity to express or re-enact the traumatic experiences.

Specifically selected music, movement and play activities serve the multiple purpose of working through sensory-processing problems (if the child is sensitive to noise or touch, for example), helping children to regulate their emotions and behaviours, and teaching children communication skills. Similarly dance and physical games may allow children to acquire or master motor skills. There is no “one size fits all” approach, and it is imperative to first get a personal history from parents to assess any existing problems, and constantly observe the child’s play and behaviours, so that activities can be adapted appropriately.

Parents themselves are also key players in a child’s recovery. At the STARTTerS clinic, they participate in the sessions with their children. This equips them with tools to facilitate a child’s recovery and development at home. Engaging and playing together reinforces the bond between caregiver and child, and this attachment is fundamental to any youngster’s wellbeing and recovery.

Indeed, the clinic sees many children with disrupted attachment patterns, and encouraging parents to engage with children through play can be an integral part of healing. A parent’s own struggle and trauma can often affect the way in which they relate to a child, particularly when a traumatized child also has greater needs.

Furthermore, young children who are unable to make sense of their experiences may try and understand through their caregiver’s behaviour. A parent’s own trauma may thus unintentionally exacerbate the child’s difficulties.

Although attachment is directly related to the carer-child relationship, it is important not to place blame on the parent.

“The reality is that everyone in the family has been traumatized, and the parents have gone to great lengths to seek safety and a good future for their children”, Rosemary says.

In fact, a parent’s participation in the child’s session can be mutually beneficial. “We talk about co-regulation where both the parent and the child are finding that ability to regulate their emotions and their physical state together”, explains Rosemary. By engaging their child, caregivers are also supporting themselves and enhancing positive attachment.

The caregiver’s willingness to participate in sessions may also be related to culture and cultural transition. In some cultures, for example, it is simply not the parent’s role to play with their children. For others, the transition to a new country may affect how they discipline or engage with the child. With such a vast range of cultures, it can be a challenge to develop and implement therapeutic activities.

Although the clinic attempts to engage communities, integrate traditional songs and language into sessions and address barriers through the use of interpreters, the therapeutic model is a Western one.

For this reason, Rosemary emphasises the importance of working with, and in, communities to better tailor programs to the needs of cultural groups. Research in this area has already begun with Karen and Mandaeen communities, and there is potential for further study in the future.

With an ever-increasing number of referrals, STARTTerS is exploring the best ways to expand and improve on the service. It is hoped that the program will collaborate more with preschools, partner organisations and health providers in the area.

The value of the STARTTerS early childhood clinic lies in its ability to reverse damage done by trauma, damage that could otherwise lead to a lifetime of mental and physical health problems. Therapists aim to facilitate development and to enhance recovery, community development and the carer-child relationship. In the complex world of trauma and displacement, the clinic places children firmly on the road to healing, health and normal development. R

**Trauma can have such an impact that children may actually regress in their development.**

## AGENDA

# Opening old wounds: *the past is still raw for survivors of torture*

By Olga Yoldi and Richard Walker

In a speech to Parliament on September 11, Peter Phelps, a member of the Legislative Council and Chief Whip in the NSW Upper House, marked the 40 year anniversary of General Augusto Pinochet’s overthrow of Chilean President Salvador Allende.

“There are many who believe that General Pinochet was a reluctant hero, a morally courageous man,” said Dr Phelps. He went on, “We have to accept that sometimes it’s necessary to do bad things to prevent terrible things. It’s all too easy to say we believe we should never sanction dictatorship or that we should have no truck with evil, but such principles are foolish and self-defeating in the real world. Yes, Pinochet killed people and if you know of any way to overthrow a government other than military force then let me hear about it.”

Given that the Pinochet regime is widely regarded as an authoritarian dictatorship that used torture, disappearance and extra-judicial killings as a form of social control, Dr Phelps’ comments are indeed controversial. However, perhaps more damaging is the impact of the statements on the Chilean community in Australia.

On a daily basis STARTTS sees the horrific and ongoing impact of torture and trauma, particularly that used as part of state-sponsored violence. Many Chilean-Australians are victims of the Pinochet regime who fled Chile and settled in Australia during the 1970s and 80s. Many of these refugees lost family members, witnessed terrible acts of violence, or were tortured themselves. The horror of those experiences is still very much present for those who survived and comments such as these can reopen old wounds and significantly impede the healing process.

STARTTS has seen on many occasions how events like this can retraumatise survivors. Not only is it a reminder of their experiences, but it also invalidates



PHOTO: AFP PHOTO/MARTIN BERNETTI

what they have been through. For the pain that they suffered under torture and with the killing of their family members, there was no trial and no bringing to justice of the perpetrator. General Pinochet was never made to answer for his actions, which had a catastrophic impact on so many people, and for those actions to be justified by a member of Parliament is deeply upsetting for the people who survived them.

The Chilean community have been understandably distressed, with the comments provoking protests and calls for Dr Phelps to be disciplined or sacked. In an open letter to the Premier, Chilean lawyer Adriana Navarro noted that “Mr Phelps’ speech has caused deep hurt in the hearts of the thousands of Chileans who suffered terrible atrocities during Pinochet’s regime, and reside in this community... By praising an assassin, he has caused many of my fellow Chileans to relive those terrible days.” Ms Navarro notes that she writes “on behalf of the thousands of Chileans in NSW who carry the scars of those horrifying times on their bodies and their souls, some of which continue to receive medical and psychological treatment”.

Dr Phelps has rejected the suggestion he condoned human rights abuses committed during Pinochet’s time as President, stating that he merely defended the removal of Allende from power. Nevertheless, such comments can have a powerful personal impact on torture and trauma survivors, even many years after the fact. It must be remembered that, in these circumstances, injudicious comments by public figures have real power to hurt.

For most survivors the physical scars of torture are only the beginning - it is the emotional scars that cut the deepest and last the longest. And it doesn’t take too much to tear open old wounds and bring to the present an experience that many would wish to keep in the past. R

# Finding a Home in Regional NSW

*Many refugees have settled away from the main cities in small country towns. ANNELIESE TODARELLO writes about STARTTS' work in these communities.*

“**W**here do you call home?” seems like a simple question to the vast majority of Australians. When we think of home, it is often the

simple, and familiar experiences that connect us to a particular place; ever-present, but not always consciously registered.

For many refugees however this connection is severed, and the challenge of settlement is to rebuild those links that were lost. This challenge is daunting for all refugees, but for those settling in rural and regional areas, without an established community to call on, the task is even more formidable.

Over the past decade, resettlement of refugees in regional areas has increased dramatically, but the infrastructure has often lagged behind the needs. Many community service workers, particularly those working in mental health, have had to grapple with the presentation of a range of concerns around the experiences of complex trauma and the adaption to life in a foreign land. Health services in these regional communities had to quickly diversify to meet the needs that they

were facing.

With survivors of refugee trauma now located across NSW, STARTTS began the process of providing services in regional centres. Initially it branched out to Wollongong in 1992 and Newcastle in 1997.

It soon became apparent that further expansion was needed and the move to Coffs Harbour came in 2004 and Wagga Wagga in 2008, reflecting the growing spread of refugees across the state and the need to provide services to them.

However, branching out into regional areas was not easy. In Sydney, STARTTS had garnered the trust and respect of several generations of refugee communities and could rely on this good reputation being passed on to new clients.

While previous fly-in staff had laid down some ground work in regional communities with small numbers of clients, this was not enough to gain the trust of entire communities from the outset. The first and main challenge for fledgling regional offices was to foster at a grassroots level confidence in STARTTS, their services, and above all their staff.

Work started from the bottom up; often STARTTS

PHOTO: GENELLE BAILEY

staff would introduce themselves to newly resettled refugees, knowing full well that many practical and physical health related concerns had to be ticked off the to-do list before people could take heed of how they were coping as an individual, as part of a family, and as part of a community.

However, it was these initial introductions that set the tone for future relationships with communities, and it was often not the programs or services offered, but the fundamental feelings of respect and being heard that brought people back to STARTTS.

The process of building trust has been gradual, but it is happening. STARTTS Rural and Regional team leader, spoke of the gratifying and humbling experience of having one of her clients, a Tamil lady from Sri Lanka, slowly overcome her own traumas and anxieties through the process of counselling.

Then one day she came back to STARTTS, but she was not alone; she had brought her friend with her, knowing that the team leader would be able to help her in the same way, and understanding that at STARTTS her friend was safe. This is an experience that has been replicated with a young Afghani woman who described STARTTS as “a place where I express my concerns” to a friend of hers and this friend came in looking for the same safe place. Trust, it seems, is built one person at a time.

Simultaneously, at STARTTS there has been a continued emphasis on community development. STARTTS has long recognised that the individual and the community’s health are inextricably linked, and this is particularly so in regional areas.

From practical computer groups with Afghan youth to adventure-based youth camps, Denise Tunks, of STARTTS Coffs Harbor, is always astounded at the success of community activities. For example, in collaboration with the local refugee community and TAFE, an adult swimming program was started. STARTTS

not only facilitates the lessons and transport, Denise and her colleagues are also known to jump into the pool with the women’s group.

The first women’s swimming group comprised of Ethiopian, Eritrean, Congolese and Burundi women, who could barely speak to one another, but they were cracking up watching each other’s first steps into the water, all of them flopping about trying to gain some centre of balance.

This laughter and chatter, in the guise of learning to swim, forges social bonds that are fused around the positive experience of making connections with other people in a safe and relaxed environment.

The crux of all of these projects and the basis of their success is that the initial impetus comes from the community itself. STARTTS is simply one player in a highly collaborative process.

Building on existing resources and services specific to refugee communities has been integral to the work of STARTTS across NSW. ‘The STARTTS regional teams consist of several ‘go-to-everything-for’ workers’. If it wasn’t for the existing services and community support it would be impossible for STARTTS to build the capacity of the clients and their extended communities.

The existing strengths of the communities they work with, as well as the long-standing work by many other organisations in regional areas, have been vital to STARTTS’ progress.

The work forging relationships, at both an individual and community level, is paying off for the STARTTS Rural and Regional

staff. The best evidence of this comes from the many stories of STARTTS regional staff being invited to every wedding, community celebration and other event that’s happening.

Staff talk of being invited into people’s homes as a form of gratitude and being almost bombarded with small tokens of appreciation; chocolates, food and kilos of blueberries from refugees who are employed in the farms surrounding Coffs Harbour Bay.

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Young clients and staff at a STARTTS camp in Newcastle. PHOTO: Courtesy of STARTTS

Similarly, a couple who came to Australia with a young family who were involved with STARTTS during a short but intense crisis continually drop in with gifts of food. On Christmas day they arrived bearing an entire fish specially cooked in a traditional method. The stories of gratitude are never ending.

Undetected by them, the STARTTS regional staff think they are simply helping people adapt to Australia, all the while they themselves have been integrated into communities that are adopting them as their own.

Settling in regional areas creates its own particular challenges, not least of which is the sense of dislocation from pre-existing cultural hubs for new refugees, while counsellors in regional areas were often less able to draw on existing cultural support networks for their clients.

However with time this is changing - the beginnings of cultural-hubs are starting to take root in regional NSW, and they are a testament to the resourcefulness

of refugee communities and their ability to transform a place to reflect the familiar and the celebrated.

No longer are refugees simply adapting to their new environment, they are interacting with the existing communities and shaping the cultural landscape. These growing connections have implications beyond culture, they also represent a sense of security and community healing - in a sense, it is the beginning of calling a place your home.

And just as refugee communities are calling rural and regional Australia home, so too is STARTTS. Just like their refugee clients, STARTTS has also had to overcome significant challenges settling in a rural area - building trust, limited resources and the unique challenges of working with clients in regional Australia. But the hard work has paid off - as STARTTS has helped many people to become part of the rich tapestry of regional Australia, it has in the process become an important part of that picture. R



## AGENDA

# Refugee ball

On October 9 STARTTS' annual fundraiser the Refugee Ball marked five years, and what a night it turned out to be! For the first time ever the Ball was sold out, and an over-capacity crowd of 415 people crowded into Dockside at Darling Harbour for an elegant evening of amazing entertainment, great company and words from our inspiring staff and clients. And what's more, everyone joined in to help us support refugees who have survived torture and trauma – over \$20,000 was raised! Thank you to all our wonderful guests, sponsors and supporters! 🌟

Photos by Melvyn Knipe



# The Transformative Experience of Sharing

*A play about survival and redemption*

Review by Alexandra Cordukes

PHOTO: HEIDRUN LOHR

**T**he Baulkham Hill African Ladies Troupe reinforces how important the arts are to society. Writer and Director, Ros Horin, should receive an Order of Australia for this production for creating a work that addresses so many key issues into-day's society: women's rights with regards to domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape, tolerance, acceptance, diversity and integration.

With a successful 30 years of theatre behind her it is not just Ros's incredible writing and directing skills that make this play so special. It is her compassion, understanding, commitment and closeness with the cast that has enabled such an intimate and powerful piece of theatre to come to life. From the moment I took my seat in the cosy downstairs theatre at Belvoir St I felt part of something bigger.

The Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe is based around a form of theatre known as 'verbatim theatre'. This is where the playwright researches, workshops and records interviews with her real life characters. In this case it is four African refugee women who have built new lives for themselves in Sydney.

The women are Yarrie Bangura and Aminata Conteh-Biger from Sierra Leone, Rosemary Kariuki-Fyfe from Kenya and Yordanos (Yordy) Haile-Michael from Eritrea. Yordy, a past client of STARTTS, was orphaned at an early age and grew up as a child soldier. Many years later she escaped on foot leaving her daughter behind.

Each of these four women has experienced horrific and prolonged human-rights abuses and was bound by a culture of silence. As they have never been able to discuss the horrors they had experienced with their families or communities, they had become trapped – prisoners in their own bodies.

"It took a long time to build up trust and confidence," recalls Ros Horin who met regularly with the women over several years. "We drummed and we talked, and danced and laughed and sang. Gradually the form and text began to take shape. There were times however, that were extremely painful for the women and I stopped and asked them most seriously if they would prefer not to go on – to just go home and get on with their lives. Not one ever did."

Once she had collated all of the material, Ros then brought in four professional actors, dancers and singers of African descent, to work with the women and help tell their stories. This insightful approach creates a rich

and fascinating tapestry of storytelling.

In the play we are taken on a journey to Africa and each individual story has been creatively woven into the script and brought to life through live dialogue, video recordings, photomontage, dance, poetry and song.

The bonds between the women on stage are strong and genuine and the women cherish each other throughout the tough scenes of recollection. These scenes are so powerful and harrowing that at times, as an audience member, I just wanted to reach out and comfort the women.

There are however some playful and amusing scenes reminiscent of some of the women's fonder memories of Africa that Ros has cleverly integrated throughout the play – sharing food, boisterous markets and local gossip. Giving pause to the more confronting stories, these scenes also show the women in good spirits celebrating life – their on-stage confidence a sign of just how far they have come.

The question is, what drives these four women to keep reliving their past on stage each evening?

The metaphor for this play is freedom – breaking free from the shame and horror of the past. The women hope that by sharing their stories they might be able to help free other women who have been subject to or are currently suffering from sexual, psychological or domestic abuse.

STARTTS has been a major sponsor of this production and provided a professional counselor to support the cast during the development and performance of the play. This project is core to the STARTTS mission to help facilitate the healing process of survivors of torture and trauma.

When I asked Ros how she felt that the play has helped the women with their healing process she replied, "whilst you will have to ask them individually, from my point of view these are not the same women I met three years ago. The process seems to have been incredibly therapeutic and has helped them switch on a light inside themselves that they had forgotten or never even knew existed."

When the play comes to an end we are left with a lot to contemplate. As I wiped the sad and happy tears from my eyes I felt totally in awe of all of these great women with their fighting spirit, resilience and gratitude for life.

Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe is a powerful and engaging play with the potential to create individual and social change on a local, national and international scale. **R**

PHOTO: HEIDRUN LOHR



## DONATE TO STARTTS

STARTTS works with refugee survivors of war, violence, torture or forced migration. These experiences can be overwhelming and traumatic.

By donating to STARTTS you will be contributing to the many innovative and life-changing programs we run to assist individual refugees, community groups and young people.

Each year STARTTS helps over 6000 people start new lives in Australia. Your donation can help us do more.

**STARTTS is a registered charity and all donations over \$2 are tax deductible.**

*“When I first arrived my memories were strong. I’ve learned not to forget, but to deal with those memories.”*

Female client

*“STARTTS helped us lose our visions of the past and have a vision for the future.”*

Daniel, counselling client from Burma

 **YES, I WOULD LIKE TO HELP REFUGEES AT STARTTS**

## YES, I WOULD LIKE TO HELP REFUGEES AT STARTTS

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**“STARTTS changed everything for me. Without them, I don’t know if I would still be here or not. They are there for me whenever I feel down, when I don’t know what to do. They guide me in many ways, they help me and they teach me what to do. STARTTS changed my life so much – I see a bright future now. I am here today because of STARTTS.”**

*Monlam Piluntsang*



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.