

A Crack in the Rock

VRRP's Volunteer Newsletter

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Mission Statement

The Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program brings hope and opportunity to the lives of refugees and immigrants. We act to defend human rights, promote self-sufficiency and education, and forge community partnerships through a full range of services and programs.



Photo: Rose McNulty

Our world often seems to be a hard, rocky place. Manmade and natural disasters strip people of what they need to survive. But Vermont is a crack in the rock, widened by the smiles, persistent efforts, and adventurous spirit of its people. Thanks to 226 volunteers, we are offering a new life to people who have endured the harshest conditions in hopes of a new opportunity.

Out of a Crack

By Judy Scott

"Wasted talent is the saddest thing in life." I heard those words today as I was listening to NPR. They got me thinking about a statistic I often mention: there are over 8.5 million refugees who are warehoused in camps. That's over 8.5 million individuals who are sitting like a radio on a warehouse shelf – useless, unless someone takes it off the shelf and lets it perform its function.

As I was thinking all this, I was actually listening to a radio and feeling just how wonderful an invention it is. Have you considered recently just how great a radio is? It brings ideas into my life. And music, which all by itself, soothes me when I'm irritated, or energizes me when I'm worn out. By playing a song that was popular at a certain time, it can even bring back more vividly than any other medium, memories of when I was a high school freshman or a bride or a harried mother with a house full of teenagers. Every morning on my way to work, I listen to the BBC World News which teaches me about what's going on in the rest of the world. It allows me to listen to the voices of people in countries I'll never even visit. It's truly a miraculous instrument.

But if my car radio were still on a shelf in a warehouse, it would be totally useless. That's how those 8.5 million people, in the human warehouses that are refugee camps, must feel: totally useless. Unless they are among the tiny number of people who are offered resettlement in another country, they have no hope of ever leaving, no hope of a future. They are not allowed to work. They have no control over the basic necessities of life. Even if education is offered to them, they have no reason to pursue it. This is the epitome of wasted talent.

Contrast this with James Ajena, whose story you can read on page 2 of this newsletter. Or with David Tabaruka, another former refugee who has been in Vermont for three years. David has worked with Sebastien Hakizimana and me to develop a presentation on Burundian culture that we have been giving to school districts. When we made our presentation to educators in Winooski, the school system that his younger brother attends, David spoke movingly about what it was like for him to suddenly be pulled out of school due to the genocide in

Rwanda and to be forced to flee his homeland. He kept thinking that soon he would start school again because, in his family, that was a given: kids go to school. He repeatedly asked his mother when he could start school again but she had no answers for him. She had no way of knowing when, if ever, they would get out of the refugee camp or when, if ever, he would continue his education.

David thanked the Winooski teachers for their efforts. Given his family's experiences, David's younger brother never forgets how lucky he is to be able to go to school. Neither does David who, along with working as a VRRP interpreter, is a student at Champlain College. He plans to pursue a career in international work. No wasted talent in this family, which includes by the way, another brother who is also a Champlain College student and who is working for the Burlington School District, as well as their mother who works at Fletcher-Allen Health Care and who is studying (along with her daughter) at CCV. They did lose years of their lives, feeling that they

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The Other Side

By Doreen Cutonilli

Writing an article for the VRRP newsletter has been in the back of my mind ever since I left America last November to start a new chapter in my life in Africa. Yet it hasn't come together, at least until now....

It finally hit me as I was kneeling over a bucket of sudsy water in western Tanzania, where I was completing another round of processing for the 1972 Burundian group. While scrubbing the ubiquitous red dirt and sweat from one of my shirts a title came to mind, "the other side"...no wait. Maybe..."from the other side".... A vague memory of the only volunteer open house I ever attended at VRRP enters my mind, and along with it, a promise to Judy Scott to write about my by now eight month old experiences....

I'm writing from my home in Nairobi, Kenya, where I've spent only four of the past ten months. The remaining six months have been spent working in refugee camps in remote locations in Kenya and Tanzania, for my job as a caseworker with Joint Voluntary Agency [JVA] — a branch of Church World Service created to do the overseas processing for refugee resettlement to the United States for the United States Refugee Program [USRP]. Most of the refugees you welcome to the United States through VRRP will have been processed by one of the many "Overseas Processing Entities [OPEs]" of which my organization is the largest. In fact, either myself or one of my colleagues may have interviewed the refugees you work

with [those from eastern/southern Africa] at least once during the resettlement process which begins in the camps they used to call home....

In a nutshell.... UNHCR, the State Department, or the U.S. Embassy designates a person or group of people as being eligible for resettlement to the United States. Eligibility is based on the person or group's inability to 1. return to their country of origin based on a well-founded fear of persecution based on race/ethnicity/membership in a social group/religion/political opinion; and 2. an inability for them to integrate into their country of asylum; either because the government of that country will not grant the refugees the opportunity to gain citizenship and/or the government is unwilling to allow the refugees to remain in the refugee camps.

When refugees can neither return to their country of origin nor integrate into their country of asylum, resettlement to a third country is deemed the only remaining "durable" solution....

As far as how it is decided who gets resettled to the United States vs. Canada/Europe/Australia, I'm still a little fuzzy on this. I do know that the United States has the most liberal policy with regard to which refugees are accepted. Give us your tired, weak, poor, sick...this maxim is alive and well and working for the benefit of refugees worldwide. While other countries accept only those refugees who have marketable skills which will benefit them economically and/or with certain levels of English speaking abilities, the United States' only criteria for disqualification is...can you

guess...association with a terrorist organization. Illiterate and unable to sign your name and/or tell me how old you are? Just make an "x" on the signature line! A barefoot former farmer who is 80 and blind? No problem! Welcome to all! However if you were in any way associated with a group or individual deemed as being linked to terrorism — sorry, resettlement to the United States is not open to YOU, because you gave "material support" to terrorists.... [For more information, see the June 2006 newsletter.]

OPEs are located in Vienna, Austria; Moscow, Russia; Bangkok, Thailand; Accra, Ghana; Cairo, Egypt; Nairobi, Kenya; and several other locations. The Nairobi office is the largest processing organization in the world. It is my understanding that other organizations such as the International Rescue Committee [IRC], and even some embassies also do some refugee processing, yet to a MUCH smaller degree. Although things work slightly differently at each of the OPEs, it is my understanding that the process follows the same basic structure: refugees who have been designated as being eligible for the resettlement process go through a series of three interviews.

At JVA, their pictures, height, and weight are taken following the completion of their first interview, which determines the composition of their case. There are a whole set of rules we must follow regarding who is allowed to be on a case. Each case has a principal applicant [PA], typically [but not always] the father. The PA is usually chosen because they have the best chance of qualifying for the United States Refugee Program

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In Their Own Words (Part 2)

By James Ajena

Recorded and transcribed by Ned Castle
Transcribed for VRRP by Molly Vatis

Editor's note: James' story picks up after he escapes from slavery. He starts a family with his wife, Adoul, and his first son, Deng, is born. The first part of James' story can be found in the VRRP October newsletter.

The next part of my story starts when I was working with the Pepsi Company. When I was working there, my name came up on a list and they said I had to stay until January 2001 and then go to southern Sudan to fight. The list — I think it was the Mujahadeen — I don't know how to explain them in English, but they are called, Mujahadeen. They aren't

the army, they aren't the police — they don't wear the army clothes, they wear the normal clothes and they just have guns. They came looking for people and the Pepsi Company just gave them some people who could go do that job — to go to southern Sudan. But that was my original territory, they wanted me to go there to shoot people — I said, "No, I can't do that." When I said, "No," they just said if you don't want to do this you can't work here anymore.

So, at that time I was thinking of leaving the Pepsi Company — I was just thinking of waiting until January 1st and then looking for a different job. That was my hope. I was thinking that if I didn't want to go with those people then they couldn't do anything — the company couldn't do anything. When I decided not to go, I didn't tell the Mujahadeen, but I was telling the

people around me — you know friends. I think someone talked to them and said, "This guy — he doesn't want to go do this. Maybe he thinks he will find another job or something." I think that is why they sent the men to my house.

That's when the people came at night and they took me. When they came to the house I was there with my family. They came at night and knocked on the door. Then when I came to open the door, they asked me my name. When I told them my name is James, one of the guys hit me in the face. Then they threw me into a truck and they sat on my back — I couldn't move and I couldn't see their faces. They held me for three days and they were asking me lots of questions. They wanted me to go to southern Sudan. They said if you didn't want to go, then who was going to go kill

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One and a Half Years Later

By Rio Holaday

After spending over a year with VRRP, I can say with certainty that I no longer believe in the power of logic. My confidence in this conviction emerged slowly but steadily as I witnessed dish soap used as cooking oil, blankets converted into tablecloths, and people sleeping on top of their blankets and then complaining of the cold. It's not that the actors in these incidents had faulty or absentminded logic; it's the exact opposite, in fact. After all, if I found a bottle of liquid in my kitchen that smelled like lemon and had a picture of a lemon on it to boot, I'd probably marinate my chicken in it, too. If I didn't use the table for eating, then I'm sure I'd see little difference in decorating an armchair with an afghan and decorating the kitchen table with one. And if I'd never slept in a bed before, my first thought certainly wouldn't be to attack the tightly tucked-in bed covers and insert myself between them. So let me say again: in a world where such illogicalness (yes, that's a word) abounds, I've come to the conclusion that common sense just can't be counted on.

When you try to explain these types of non-sensical habits to newcomers, however, the oddest thing happens: they don't believe you. One of my favorite memories from this past year involved bringing children's clothes, collected and sorted by volunteer extraordinaire Lauren Berrizbeitia, to a new family with six children. As they exclaimed over the clothes and, boys and girls alike, fought over a shirt that read "DIVA" in leopard print, I explained to the mom that the clothes should go in the dresser. This

Life, especially here at VRRP, is unpredictable. A year and a half ago, I hired a VISTA to work with me in the Volunteer Office. My delight when she eagerly accepted turned into pointlessly angry disappointment when, two months later, she changed her mind. By the time she told me of her decision, it was too late for me to hire a replacement. All the plans I'd made for how she and I would build a better volunteer program and a better donations program shriveled into nothing.

But, against all odds, Rio came along and wanted the VISTA position. Because VISTA rules prevented us from hiring her until three months later, Rio offered to volunteer 30 hours a week, while doing a waitressing job to support herself, until she could begin as a VISTA. Those 30 hours a week, which sometimes stretched into more than 30, were a godsend to us. Because of them, volunteer applications were processed, donations were received and given to new families, and Rio proved herself to be an astoundingly quick learner.

Rio began her VISTA service last November and she will complete it the third week of this month. In that year, she has been a calm and quiet dynamo of hard work and smart ideas. From dealing with our grungy, cold warehouse and putting up with a supervisor who was pulled in many different directions to supporting all sorts of volunteers with humor and intelligence and supporting all sorts of newcomers with genuine interest and appreciation, Rio transformed what seemed, a year and a half ago, to be a disaster into the best 18 months the VRRP's volunteer department has ever experienced. Deeply grateful as VRRP staff are for the depth of her dedication and the excellence of her work, our appreciation pales in comparison to the difference she has made in countless lives, volunteers' and new Americans', alike.

Unpredictable as life is, those of us who have gotten to know Rio feel with absolute certainty that her talents will continue to enrich the lives of everyone whose life she touches. Much as we'll miss her at VRRP, we'll console ourselves with the knowledge that as long as she's in the world, she'll be making it a better place. Best wishes, Rio!

was an exercise in charades, seeing as how she spoke no English and I can only name food items in Somali, but I could tell when she understood because she started laughing. It wasn't a gentle and obliging laugh – it was a rolling and rollicking and side splitting laugh. The idea that anyone would put *clothes in the drawers* was so superbly hilarious to her that I knew right then and there that not even a sock would ever see the inside of that dresser.

Just as experiences like these have convinced me that I was raised in a truly absurd world, it's these same experiences that have taught me to believe more strongly than

ever in the power of human compassion. The work that we – volunteers and staff members alike – do is unpredictable by nature. We are actively helping families and individuals reconstruct their lives in a place whose parameters are unknown and unfamiliar. There is no chart, no checklist, no rubric that can prepare anyone for this sort of work. It is work that can only be done when one person approaches another person with compassion in their heart.

Unfortunately, the reality is that it's extraordinarily difficult to balance compassion and

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Toothbrushes, Light Bulbs, and Brooms, Oh My!

By Rio Holaday

When a new family arrives in Vermont, I am the villain who brings toothbrushes and toothpaste to the airport. Remembering back to my own childhood enmity when it came to brushing my teeth, I can only imagine the new children's displeasure at my gift and, by extension, me. To my great surprise, the exact opposite was true in the case of a family that arrived in late September: as the bearer of toothbrushes, I was not only mobbed by ecstatic children but also favored over all new adults by the baby (in my opinion, the highest form of acceptance there can be).

As the host family gave the parents a tour of the house, the children and I sorted out who got which age-appropriate toothbrush (thankfully, color didn't matter yet and the five-year-old boy was perfectly content with his purple one). Between their breathless anticipation and my inability to open the thick plastic that encased each toothbrush, each unveiling was like a mini-miracle. The two oldest girls

immediately opened the toothpaste and carefully coaxed a pea-sized amount from the tube. Huddling around the sink, they brushed like there was no tomorrow. Their younger brother chose to wander around the room, brushing blissfully with neither water nor toothpaste. Even the one-and-a-half year old managed to drool valiantly on his tiny toothbrush. Since then, I think of these kids every time I put together furniture and household items for a new family, and I wonder what the new children will get a kick out of – the Kleenex box, perhaps, or maybe the sponges.

Thanks to generous donations from the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers and the Northwestern Vermont Board of Realtors, items that welcome newcomers to Vermont are provided for. The Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, many of whom have served in the countries that newcomers are arriving from, gave their gift specifically for the

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Worries over Myanmar refugee flood at crammed border camp

UN World News Center
September 30, 2007

MAE LA REFUGEE CAMP, Thailand (AFP) — In this refugee camp on the Thai-Myanmar border, huts are so tightly packed that chickens leap with ease between the thatched mud-and-leaf roofs.

The tiny homes can shelter up to three families of refugees who have fled fighting between Myanmar's army and ethnic rebel militias, and who face little hope of ever returning home or even leaving the crammed Mae La Camp.

Dirt roads teeming with ragged children are barely wide enough for the off-road trucks that ferry humanitarian aid through the settlement, which is home to nearly 50,000 people, mostly from Myanmar's Karen ethnic minority.

Thailand's Ministry of Interior, which runs the camps, has accepted few new refugees here for at least a year, but as Myanmar's junta cracks down on protests in Yangon, there are fears that a fresh wave of asylum-seekers could flood the border area.

"The people inside Burma, if they come inside the camp, we have to welcome them," Lin Leh Soe, who works with the Karen Women's Organisation, said, using

Myanmar's former name.

Refugees from Myanmar began coming to Thailand in 1984 as the junta advanced into Karen state, and now there are about 155,000 refugees crowded in nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border.

Groups including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented a catalogue of abuses by Myanmar's military against civilians in Karen state, including forced labour, murder and the destruction of crops.

"They burn down the rice and they burn down the fields," said Mahn Shah, a member of the Karen National Union, an armed group battling the junta.

"Civilians lose their food, their property, they can't stay any longer, so they come to the border."

Naw Palay Wak spent a month traversing mountains with her parents and brothers to reach Thailand after troops from the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), as Myanmar's junta is known, came to her village two years ago.

"When the SPDC military came to my village, if they saw women, they raped them, and they called the people in the village to be porters," she told AFP. "My mother was raped. We could not stay in my village."

The 20-year-old was in her first year studying law at Taungoo University when her family fled, but now her main task is taking care of her younger siblings.

"I did not want to throw my education away," she says. "I would like to improve my life, but I can't go to school."

Many of the social ills in Mae La such as alcoholism, domestic violence and drug abuse stem from the hopelessness that afflicts the refugees, said Sally Thompson, of the Thailand Burma Border Consortium, which provides aid to the camp.

"They don't have a choice, they are not able to decide what they do. At the moment they are not allowed to work, so they leave school, and then what do they do? They've got no hope, no opportunity," she told AFP by phone.

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Toothbrushes, Light Bulbs, and Brooms, Oh My!

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Welcome Kits that VRRP provides. These Kits are made up of items that must be purchased new, such as shampoo, multi-purpose cleanser, toilet paper, paper towels, extra light bulbs, shower curtains, brooms, and mops. The Northwestern Vermont Board of Realtors gave an unrestricted monetary donation, giving VRRP the flexibility to put it toward a project or purchase that will ease newcomers' transitions to their new lives.

The gift from the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers underscored the group's connection with and commitment to the people that VRRP serves. Kate Belluche, who served in Cote d'Ivoire, noted that by supporting VRRP's newest arrivals, the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers are maintaining a "neat connection where we can give our time and money to our core [values] – what we've done in the past and how we keep Peace Corps alive in the United States." As a previous host family and longtime volunteer with VRRP, Kate has seen firsthand the difference that each "extra" – from envelopes and stamps to band-aids and deodorant – makes in "helping folks get off to a good start."

Every year, the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers sell international calendars with beautiful photographs from the field submitted by present and past Peace Corps Volunteers. Each calendar features images from countries that host Peace Corps Volunteers, as well as

international holidays and languages. Calendars cost \$10 apiece, and all proceeds from this year's sale will benefit VRRP as well as overseas projects by Peace Corps Volunteers from Vermont. To purchase a calendar, please contact Kate Belluche at akbelluche@aol.com.

The generous gift from the Northwestern Vermont Board of Realtors also stemmed from a unique experience with former refugees. Jan Battaline, who serves on the Board's Community Service Committee, had worked with a Bosnian couple many years ago. She explained the connection between this experience and the Board of Realtors: "This is all about having people come here to Vermont and making a home for them, and that's who we are – as realtors we help people find homes, and part of what we can do is help these people get settled in their first home in Vermont." The Northwestern Vermont Board of Realtors has also given time and gifts to Habitat for Humanity, the Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS), and many other organizations.

In addition to the monetary donation, Jan also sent VRRP's donation guidelines to the approximately 600 realtors and affiliates who make up the Northwestern Vermont Board of Realtors. Spreading the word in this way is a gift in itself, as it makes donors aware of VRRP's need for beds, couches, dressers, tables, chairs, kitchenware, and linens. VRRP furnishes its clients' apartments completely from donations, and every item that we receive benefits a newcomer to our community. To learn more about our needs and guidelines, please contact Deirdre Smith at 338-4633 or dsmith@uscrvt.org.

Free VSAC Information Session

Refugees and Volunteers are invited to a free information session to learn about adult education and training opportunities available to refugees and immigrants. Bosnian, French, Kirundi, Mai-Mai, Russian, and Vietnamese interpreters will be present. There will be a supervised play area for children, and food will be provided. The Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC) will be hosting this event at 10 East Allen Street in Winooski on Tuesday, November 13 from 4:00-7:00.

For more information, please call VSAC at 655-9602 or 1-800-642-3177 (ask for Outreach) or www.vsac.org. You can also call VRRP at 655-1963 (ask for Nada).

We are again collecting winter coats, mittens, gloves, and hats in all sizes for clients in need.



Unfortunately, we are not able to fix zippers or pay for cleaning so every item must be clean and in good condition.

Please contact Deirdre at 338-4633 or dsmith@uscrvt.org to arrange a time to drop them off at our office. We are located at 462 Hegeman Avenue in Colchester.

One and a Half Years Later *Continued from page 3*

bureaucracy. In our daily lives there are meetings to attend, papers to write, chores to be done, family and friends to spend time with. At the same time, not a day goes by when a client doesn't show up unexpectedly at the office – a mother needs hats and mittens for her children, a Food Stamps application needs to be filled out, or a good-natured donor appears with a carload of items we can't take. When it's impossible to ignore our responsibility and unkind to deny ourselves pleasure, how do we embrace the unpredictable nature of our work with compassion and grace?

Over the past year, I've learned to approach each situation with the flexibility to embrace change without begrudging the difficulty it causes, the patience to recognize the times when all I can do is wait, the creativity to see a new possibility in a flawed design, and the humor to laugh when it falls to pieces. Flexibility, patience, creativity, and humor are all crucial elements to compassion in the world we work and volunteer in – not only for the people we are helping, but for ourselves as well. From the after-hours receptionist at Vermont Gas, who advocated on my behalf to turn gas on immediately for a newly arrived family, to volunteers, who have waited patiently as I locate all the pieces of information needed to answer their one simple question, I've learned to believe in the undeniable power that *people* have to make a difference.



As I say goodbye to VRRP and the wonderful people I've met and worked with, I'm left with the memory of the night of September 25. My grandmother had passed away exactly one year before, and I was thinking of her and the three families that would arrive between 6:39 and 11:39 that night. I wrote this in my journal: "I think it's fitting that, on the one-year anniversary of her death, three families are arriving in Burlington to begin their new lives here. That's 15 people tonight, more than I think we've ever received in one night. Ah Por came here as an immigrant and watched her children excel and build new lives and their own families here. I can only wish the same for these newcomers, who are traveling not only far from their homes, but far from the

lives they knew before – far from their pasts."

My experience with VRRP staff members, volunteers, and clients has not only been inspiring and enriching; it's been deeply personal. We have all benefited from another's kindness at some point in our lives or our ancestors' lives, and I respect and admire everyone involved with VRRP for continuing to pass along that wonderful gift of human help and compassion. As a friend once said, "Our life is not static—it's dynamic—it's moving. If somebody needs your help, give your help because you don't know tomorrow if you're the one who's going to need the help."

Washington County Update

By Kate Donley

The Turkish community in Washington County recently gathered to celebrate "Arafa," the special evening before Ramazan Bayrami, the holiday marking the end of the month-long observance of Ramadan. We gathered at the Old Labor Hall in Barre, and the buffet table was groaning with Turkish delicacies: little pies filled with meat or squash, lovely rice pilaf, circles of fresh-made bread, Russian-style salads, and fresh fruit. According to our hosts, fried food is significant because the aroma of freshly made doughnuts or fried potato pies (piroshki) tells everyone that it is Arafa and time to feast. However, at 6:45 everyone was still eyeing the food. I'm sure that those who fasted and worked that day were hungry indeed.

Everyone was dressed up for the occasion and many of the men wore skullcaps. The newest bride glowed in a lovely new outfit and long headscarf, perhaps gifts from her new in-laws. Some children, running around and excited, were rebuked and told to behave because it was Ramazan. Soon, our host, a mullah from Turkey, silenced everyone and a young man chanted the call to prayer. The men gathered together on carpets on one side of the room and prayed while everyone else sat at the tables in silence. Then dinnertime!

A line formed as everyone turned toward the buffet table. By then, there were more than sixty people. Turks attended from Waterbury and Barre, and there were

Turkish friends of the mullah. Turks had invited their American friends, and it was wonderful to meet volunteers and former host families. A teacher from the local high school and adult educators also attended with their families. Talk turned from work and kids to an upcoming wedding, certainly an occasion for joy. I spent most of my time talking up the new English class that VRRP will be starting in Barre. We're excited because we are introducing a new teacher, Elvira Dana, who will be working closely with a teacher from the Barre office of Central Vermont Adult Basic Education, Joyce Kahn. So it's the end of Ramazan, the beginning of new classes, and a continuation of wonderful friendships between Turks and Vermonters in Washington County.

Worries over Myanmar refugee flood *Continued from page 4*

Thompson estimates that about 500 to 600 asylum seekers arrive from Myanmar each month.

Prospects for the refugees to return home remain bleak, she said, and one solution would be for the Thai government to allow them to work legally in the kingdom, a scenario currently being hammered out.

Since 2005, about 16,250 refugees [from the camp] have also been resettled abroad, mostly in the United States, thus all but giving up hope of ever returning to Myanmar.

People working in the camps say it is difficult to predict if the crackdown in Yangon will send a new wave across the border, and are divided over the ability to house any new arrivals.

"If there was an influx, the Thai government would probably accommodate them," says Eldon Hager, the resettlement officer for the United Nations' refugee agency office in Mae Sot.

Others are not optimistic about the government taking so kindly to a flood of persecuted Myanmar nationals, especially when Mae La already has up to 6,000 unregistered residents who officially have no access to aid.

"That's been the policy of the MoI (Ministry of Interior) – starve the new arrivals out," says one aid worker who asked not to be named.

Security at the camp has been tightened since the Myanmar junta unleashed bullets and tear gas last week, killing at least 13 on the streets of Yangon.

A small protest was rumoured to have broken out at the camp football field, while foreign missionaries are afraid to leave their schools inside



the camp in case they will not be able to get back in through the military check-points.

And while many may be making treacherous journeys to try and reach Thailand, those who live in Mae La think about escaping.

After stoically describing her mother's rape and her flight from Myanmar, Naw Palay Wak finally breaks down in tears when speaking about her future.

She has applied for resettlement in the United States and Australia, but has heard nothing.

"I only want to get the education that I can't get now," she says.

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The Other Side

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[USRP] based on their history and the given resettlement priorities of the program for that particular year.

During the second interview detailed information about the PA is gathered: names of parents, siblings, all children, all spouses and/or unions resulting in children; dates of birth [for all]/dates of marriage/employment history/education/etc. During all interviews we are both filling out forms and entering the information gathered into a worldwide database called WRAPS [Worldwide Refugee something, something, something].

This might be a good time to mention that the organization I work for is huge [to me]! There are about 140 employees and a whole slew of different departments. The whole resettlement process is quite involved, as you might imagine...I work as a member of the field team and we are composed of both ex-pat [American] and Kenyan national staff. Our Kenyan staff is responsible for taking photos/height/weight as well as completing

the second interview. The ex-pat staff takes care of the first and third interviews. During the third interview we go over the information given in the second interview, to ensure its accuracy, and compose the refugee's "story" or "case history": a bullet-pointed narrative of what caused the refugee to flee his/her country of origin, where they have been since first flight [some refugees flee more than one country] and why they cannot return to their country of origin.

A few months after their third interview with JVA, the refugees will have one final interview with representatives from the United States Citizen and Immigration Service [CIS]. My organization was created in order to prepare each refugee's case file for this final interview. My colleagues and I are the ones who make sure that all the proper paperwork is filled out and included in each refugee's white plastic file folder, and that all information is correctly entered into WRAPS. We document the refugees' reasons for flight and the reasons they cannot "go home." Then, it's all up to the CIS officers, who fly in from Washington, D. C. to make the decision as to whether or not each

case is approved or denied for resettlement to the United States. There is a process of appeal for those cases which are denied, yet I'm not as familiar with the whole CIS process as I've never been involved in that aspect of things yet....

I was really excited when I read June's newsletter and learned that some of the 1972 Burundians have been resettled to Vermont. I've spent most of the past ten months interviewing these refugees in the camps where they resided in western Tanzania. I may have even interviewed some of those who made it to Vermont! To be honest, during each interview, I secretly held hope that they would all end up in Vermont, knowing what an amazing job VRRP and the volunteers do!

If you have any questions feel free to contact me via email [abacus164@yahoo.com]. I only have regular/reliable access to email when I'm in Nairobi so I may not get right back, yet I will, eventually, respond....

Peace to you all and thanks so much for the work you do!!

In Their Own Words

Continued from page 2

those people in southern Sudan. That is what the boss — their boss — said to me. They hit me. That was for three days.

They wanted me to go take their training and then go to the south. They wouldn't let me leave, but then when I said to them, "Ok, I'm going to do this," they said, "Ok, if you're going to go do this, then we don't have a problem with you. If you try to go somewhere, we know how to get you, how to take you back here." I decided to do the training because I just wanted to leave there, because I didn't know where I was. So, that's why I said I would do the training. I thought when I came back I would find a different way to save myself and my family.

So, I went to the training for two weeks. At the camp they taught me a lot of Islamic songs. We would sing and learn how to shoot the guns. I never went to training with the army, but I don't think it was the same thing. They told us we would have to go to the south when we were finished. They were going to do something there called, Jihad. They were called the Mujahadeen, and they went to go do Jihad. I am Christian — they didn't care about that, they just wanted me to change my religion. Even if you didn't want to change your religion, you have to do it — you have to go to the south.

So, for the two weeks I had to go there for the training and then I would come back to my home on the weekend — which started on Friday. We came home on Thursday and went back on Saturday. When you left you had to go sign your name — they had an office somewhere called Mossisa. It was a security office, a government security office. You just had to go to sign your name so that they knew you were going to go back the next day. During that time — the two weeks — my wife's father he was making some papers for

me — a passport and other things. That's why I needed to stay for a little bit. Then after the first two weeks I left and went to hide in Jabeloliay. So, I signed out and I didn't come back. After I came back from the second week of training I sent Adoul to live with her mother, with Deng and his sister, Aleik. It was hard to leave them, but I think it was safer because the people were looking for me, they weren't looking for my wife.



After that I went to Egypt and while I was there I found a UN refugee office. There were a lot of people who went there to get tickets. You stand in line to wait until your time to make an appointment — six months later, or a year. I went there and I just wrote down my name and made an appointment for one and a half years later. Then they told me I could come six months earlier — they changed so I only had to wait one year. When I went I filled out an application, did some paperwork, and then I got interviewed. They asked me about why I was there and what were my problems I told them what had happened from my time in southern Sudan until now. After the interview they told me I could come on Thursday to see the list outside — there I would find my number and whether they had accept me or reject me. When I went there, I saw the board and I found my number — I was accepted.

James' story will be continued in next month's edition of *A Crack in the Rock*.

Out of a Crack

Continued from page 1

were wasting away in a camp, but they are now moving forward with strength, determination, and hard work. As education enriches their lives, their talents enrich our community.

But not every newcomer is able to access the opportunities that David has. When English language skills and employment opportunities are limited, talent is wasted. In spite of this, many people develop talents they didn't know they had. Donations of sewing machines have made it possible for women to learn how to sew and to start their own cottage industries by making clothing for others in their community. A volunteer asked me recently where our clients get their colorful dresses. We laughed at the response she got, "Not at the mall!" But the real answer is that women sew dresses for each other.

Other newcomers are developing computer and technological skills that they never could have dreamed of when they were stuck in the camps. When we give our presentations to the schools, it's David and Sebastien who set up the laptop and the projector – connecting all the required cords

is too overwhelming for me. Another talent that they have honed is their public speaking. When we do presentations together, I get so interested in what they're telling the audience that I tend to forget to do my part.

But they're not the only ones developing new talents. One of the greatest things about refugees settling in Vermont is that over 200 volunteers (and I!) are learning things we never would have understood if we hadn't decided to get involved. Some of us, who had never used public transportation in Vermont, have learned how the bus system works. Some of us have learned how to cook samboos and halwah and manti – yummy! Some of us used to think that going to a doctor's appointment involved nothing other than calling to request an appointment, getting in the car, and going. Now we have learned to think about how a non-English-speaker can call to ask for an appointment, how the interpreter will be scheduled for the right language, how the bus pas will be obtained, how the patient will know what busses to take. Who knew how complicated this could be?

So we're developing new talents as well. We're learning new ways of thinking about the world. We're learning how to pause,

ponder, and talk it over when clients who are working parents want their 12-year-old to drop out of school to take care of a grandmother. We're gaining knowledge about our own system: that a client's rental payment for a three-bedroom apartment can be more than a mortgage payment on a three-bedroom house. We're learning to look through eyes we never knew existed.

We're learning how the food stamp system works and how to communicate without a common language. This demonstrates that, along with refugees who come here seeking the opportunity to use their talents, those of us who have been born and bred in this country can also develop new abilities. Talents that had been sitting on a shelf in our brains, unused, are now progressing.

At the end of the day, when there are ten things I'd wanted to do which I still haven't finished, it always makes me smile to think of all the people, from so many different backgrounds and cultures, whose involvement with each other is developing their talents in a million unanticipated ways, like learning how to use a telescope when all you'd ever known were your own eyes.

A Home-School co-op group is collecting new and gently used boots of all sizes.

There will be drop-off sites in Essex, Jericho, and Richmond.

Please contact Laura Murphy at 879-7867 for information about the sites and distribution!



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*e-mail addresses follow this pattern: Judy Scott = jscott@uscrvt.org
(Exception: Volunteer Office = volunteer@uscrvt.org)*

community buzz

December Issue

Each month, we pride ourselves on the fact that our newsletter includes articles by volunteers, former refugees, and staff members. Input from such a wide range of people involved in the resettlement process enables us to offer many different perspectives on the experience to our readers.

We would love to include an article about **your** experience, which will help us keep volunteers and community members abreast of challenges, successes, and questions that volunteers face. If you have a wonderful story to share but don't have the time to put it into words, one of our volunteers is a professional writer and has offered to work with other volunteers to capture their stories.

If you'd like to discuss an idea for an article, please contact Judy at 338-4627 or jscott@uscrvt.org.

Articles for our December newsletter are due November 20th.

NEEDED: Volunteers with Trucks!

Do you want to volunteer once a month for just 2-3 hours each time? Do you have a truck? If so, then VRRP needs **YOU!**

We frequently receive more offers of donations like beds and couches than we can pick up. So, we often have to turn away items that we truly need. By volunteering to pick up donations ONCE a month around the community, you will make an enormous difference!

Please contact Deirdre at 338-4633 or dsmith@uscrvt.org for more information. We are happy to accommodate all schedules.

Volunteer Open Houses

Open Houses provide a wonderful opportunity to learn more about our organization, Volunteer Program, and volunteer opportunities. Judy and Deirdre will be present to discuss our programs and answer your questions, and we hope that experienced volunteers will stop by during the second hour to share their experiences. While attendance at one Open House is mandatory before beginning service, they are also a great time for new and veteran volunteers to check in with VRRP staff.

In **November**, Open Houses are held every Monday from 5:30 - 7:30, except for Monday, November 12.

If daytime meeting times are better for you, then you're welcome to come to one of our December Open Houses, which will be held the first three Mondays from 11:00 - 1:00.

We look forward to seeing you there!

Book Club

This month, we will discuss Knots by Nuruddin Farah. Our meeting will be on Thursday, November 15 at 5:30 at Muddy Waters in downtown Burlington. Please join us for coffee and discussion after work!

Contact Deirdre (338-4633 or dsmith@uscrvt.org) to RSVP.

We will read and discuss King Leopold's Ghost by Adam Hochschild in January.

Volunteer Trainings

Fuel Assistance and Section 8 Housing

Presenters: Rio Holaday and Deirdre Smith

Wednesday, November 7, 12:00 - 1:30

OR Wednesday, November 14, 5:30 - 7:00

This training is especially important for volunteers working with newly arrived families. The Fuel Assistance application will ensure that they receive a benefit for winter heating costs. The waiting list for Section 8 Housing can be very long, so getting an application in as soon as possible is best for the family.

Medicaid

Presenter: Kristen Staley from Vermont Legal Aid

Wednesday, December 5, 5:30 - 7:00

Please contact Deirdre (dsmith@uscrvt.org or 338-4633) if you plan to join us for a training. Out of respect for our presenters, **we will cancel sessions if volunteers do not RSVP**. Unless otherwise noted, all trainings take place at the VRRP office.

Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program

462 Hegeman Ave, Ste 101, Colchester, VT 05446

Phone: 802-655-1963 Fax: 802-655-4020

E-mail: volunteer@uscrvt.org

Volunteer Office Phone: 802-338-4633

Directions to VRRP

Coming from downtown Winooski, follow Route 15 east past St. Michael's College. Continue past Camp Johnson Military Facility. Take a left at the next light and turn into Ethan Allen Complex.

Coming from Essex, follow Route 15 west past Susie Wilson Road. Turn right at the next stop light to turn into Ethan Allen Complex.

Hegeman Avenue is the third road on the right. VRRP is at 462 Hegeman Avenue (the third building on your left — a brick building with a green on white sign out front.)