

Excellency

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am grateful to UNHCR for the honour of having been selected as this year's recipient of the Nansen Refugee Award.

It is an honour that I share with every member of the Jesuit Refugee Service throughout the world; when one of us is honoured all of us are honoured because we share the same mission - to accompany, serve and defend the rights of refugees and other forcibly displaced people.

JRS is a small and relatively powerless organisation. However, it has a special charisma: a profound commitment to accompanying refugees, to being with them and empowering them to defend their rights, rather than just doing things for them. Everything else we do – the services we set up, our advocacy efforts – flows from this accompaniment

Accompanying asylum seekers and refugees is not always easy. It rarely makes us popular and it has cost some their lives. Just a few days ago, the coordinator of JRS in Mannar, northern Sri Lanka, Fr Packiaranjith, was killed in a claymore mine attack as he was delivering supplies to displaced people and orphans in rebel-held territory.

JRS is directed to go where the need is greatest, where others are not working. It is for this reason that in many countries, in Europe and beyond, JRS has chosen to work with asylum seekers and other forced migrants in detention.

Since 2002, when Malta experienced a sharp increase in the number of undocumented migrants arriving by boat to an average of 1500 per year, JRS has worked almost exclusively with asylum seekers in detention, offering basic professional services – primarily legal assistance, social work and pastoral care.

The vast majority of detainees arrive by boat, in an irregular manner. All arrivals, including women and children, are detained. Asylum seekers are released from detention only if and when they are granted some form of protection. If there is no reply on their application within 12 months, asylum seekers are released. The only exception is vulnerable people, who are released once screening is carried out and accommodation found - which may take months. It is worth noting that nearly half of asylum applicants have been granted protection so far.

Although the basic structures necessary to provide accommodation and other essential services in detention have been set up, asylum seekers remain isolated and still face huge difficulties to obtain information and access social work and legal assistance. It is also very difficult for asylum seekers to challenge their detention and to seek redress for any abuses suffered, as the courts are often legally and practically inaccessible to them.

JRS Malta seeks to address these needs from the moment of their arrival in Malta, paying particular attention to the most vulnerable groups. For example, this year we are implementing a UNHCR-funded project to combat sexual and gender based violence among immigrants.

This project has made us increasingly aware of how vulnerable women can be. We are grateful for the grant that comes with this award as it will allow us to consolidate our projects and to develop new services. It will help us to:

- produce DVDs with information explained in the languages chiefly spoken by asylum seekers, to reach people, especially women, with a low level of literacy;
- establish a legal fund to enable asylum seekers to access the courts if necessary;
- fund the continued training and use of cultural mediators.

JRS Malta doesn't have stable sources of funding –we are largely dependent on project funding and the generosity of our benefactors to fund our work –so this financial support for our projects is greatly appreciated.

But even more than the money, this award means so much to all of us at JRS Malta because it is an affirmation of the work we do and the direction we have chosen. It is not easy to work with people in detention, not only because we come to share their unpopularity, but also because ultimately, this work is a daily encounter with great suffering, and with our powerlessness to do much about it. Because, although we do make a difference in individual cases, the policy of long-term detention, which we believe raises serious human rights concerns, has remained largely unchanged.

I am sustained in my work by my family, to whom I am truly grateful not only for their support but also for their example; by my colleagues, who show untiring courage in their refusal to give up and turn away from the suffering caused by detention; and by the sure knowledge that hundreds of JRS workers around the world are selflessly committed to the same cause.

JRS works to turn strangers into brothers, boundaries into gateways, and frontiers into a place of meeting, where all are accepted and respected. That is why I work with JRS and that is why this is really an award to JRS.

THANK YOU