



## Syrians struggle against the bitter cold

By **Tony O’Riordan SJ**, JRS Syria Country Director

“Where did Fadi go?”, was my question, as I turned around to discover that Fadi who was my guide in a extremely poor neighbourhood of Damascus was no longer at my side. As my anxiety levels were beginning to rise, I heard Fadi’s familiar voice at the far side of a nearby diesel truck.

I approached and saw him entering the number of the truck driver into his phone. As Fadi resumed his guide duties he told me that he had just managed to buy 100 litres of diesel for his family- ‘that’s all we can afford, but at least we will have something to keep us warm for the coldest few days of winter.’

To provide this small amount of fuel for heating, for a few of the coldest days

of the upcoming winter, Fadi had to spend what is equivalent to 6 months’ salary of the average school teacher with about 20 years of experience. Most public servants earn far less.

I did wonder, about the choices to be made on using this fuel – enough for about 50 - 60 hours of heat. Even those limited hours of heat will only heat one room in the home, using a commonly used stove called a *sobia*.

Central heating is either non-existent or idle due to the absence of fuel or the inability to afford the oil.

Fadi and his family are some of the lucky ones, as he earns more than the average income and so he could buy some fuel. The families that JRS work with do not have this ‘luxury’, the luxury of having to buy and store 100 litres of fuel for the 5 or 6 coldest days of the winter ahead. ‘Luxury’ is having enough

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money to buy food to have a reasonable meal for a few days a week – ‘you do not have to eat every day’ one woman said, ‘you can survive on bread some days’.

Laura who has a young child told me she is dreading the winter ahead. With the limited income of the family, she has to choose between baby milk and heating fuel. “I can choose to spend money on four hours of heating or baby milk to stretch for a month – of course I will choose the baby milk”

Millions of families like Laura face similar desperate dilemmas. They can only live in hope that the winter will not be cold or that winter is short.

I remember last New Year’s eve in the height of the Syrian winter. I never felt cold like that before, as the sub-zero

temperatures ushered in the New Year. Like many Syrians, I was fully clothed in bed, with gloves, hat and several blankets. I was not sure if I would die of hypothermia or crush injuries from the weight of blankets. I thought that if I was in Ireland, I could plug in an electric heater. However, the 30 mins of electricity in the house that day had long passed.

Many households where we work have no electricity connection at all or if they do, it is to a local generator and the connection is only strong enough to power lights and charge mobile phones. It will not power heaters or kettles. I thought I might boil some water on the gas, but gas cylinders can cost more than a month’s salary and gas has to be rationed by the household for cooking.

One Syrian friend of mine put it this way, ‘nothing to do but use the Syrian way of staying warm in winter – layers of clothing and blankets.’

That is why the IJI Winter Appeal is so important. Last winter with the help of the Christmas appeal, JRS was able to provide almost 2,000 children of poor families with warm winter clothing. We were also able to distribute a food hamper to over 1,400 vulnerable households. This winter we would like to do the same and more.

For as little as 10 euros you can help us ensure that a child who has no hope of having a decent winter jacket will get one. For 20 euros we can ensure that a child will get a jacket, shoes, a hat and some base layers. For 30 Euros we can provide a vulnerable elderly person with a food hamper which will not only ease the pain of winter, but might be the difference between life and death.

This winter, everyone in Ireland is feeling the pinch and many households will struggle with the cost of living crisis. As Syrians enter winter, and the 12<sup>th</sup> year of war and humanitarian crisis, the battle for survival is real – not everyone will see spring time.

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## A word from the Director

Christmas is a time for giving gratitude for the year passed and a time of hopeful expectation for the New Year ahead.

The image of the baby in the Crib shows us the tenderness of God's love for each one of us. He is the light in the darkness and the peace bearer in our broken world.

The stories in our newsletter this Christmas season speak of that hope, joy and healing that you bring to so many because of your generosity, care and compassion.

For our Lenten campaign, we raised funds for the building of school blocks in a rural village, Akol Jal, in South Sudan. We are delighted to give our readers and supporters an update on the construction process and to thank all of you for your kind support and generous donations which has made this education project possible. This project will change the lives of children forever.

Other articles in our Christmas newsletter highlight projects which are supporting marginalised people to create brighter futures for themselves. Spotlighting the work of JRS India, our partners address the education gaps that impact Chin and Afghan urban

refugee children in Chanakya and Tilak Nagar, two districts in New Delhi. With a specific focus on girls' empowerment and education – the year-long project has helped refugee youth not only build confidence and social support networks but new skills which will open new doors of professional opportunities.

In his own words, Ngongo a 52-year-old Congolese refugee living in Nairobi shares his incredible story and how through Mikono crafts he can provide for his family with his amazing artistry. Ngongo talks about his training with JRS Kenya and the support they gave him to build a new life for himself and a more promising and safe future for his wife and children.

Noelle's article highlights the important and valued presence of JRS in South Sudan. In Maban County, Upper Nile State, as country director, Noelle oversees several initiatives such as: teacher training and occupational and physiotherapy programmes, services to the refugee and local host community and various supports to local schools. Recently, local communities have



endured catastrophic flooding which has left thousands homeless, crops destroyed, and lives torn asunder – Noelle speaks of being a witness and accompanying the distressed in their time of need.

As winter approaches, although at home, we excitably await festivities – Syrian families fear the bitter cold. Tony O'Riordan SJ, writes from Syria in this newsletter as he describes the desperate situation for families. Our Winter Appeal hopes to fundraise for lifesaving winter kits – so that we can do what we can to bring protection and care to the suffering of the world's most vulnerable and marginalised.

We say once again Thank You for your help and solidarity throughout the year. We wish you a very happy Christmas and a hope filled New year.

**Fr John K. Guiney** | Director

## "3... 2... 1 ... And We're LIVE!"

**By Joe Munnelly**

This year we supported our peers at Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) India to address the education gaps that impact Chin and Afghan urban refugee children in Chanakya and Tilak Nagar, two districts in New Delhi. With a specific focus on girls' empowerment and education – the year-long project followed a right-based approach to advocate for educational rights of vulnerable refugee children and enable their access to skills and resources that can fulfil their learning needs.

The JRS project partnered with existing informal and vocational education initiatives with vulnerable urban refugee children and female youth. Focused at addressing two key areas, the project empowered refugee girls and teachers through both formal and

informal knowledge building within their community. Chin and Afghan refugee girls associated with JRS Learning Centres, who are marginalised by their gender and the socio-cultural constraints within their communities were mobilised and trained to form a

community-based Girls Club. These Girls' Clubs are about championing education and support young girls to strive for personal and professional development through solidarity, learning and a social support network.





*Mary San assisting the translation of session topic during a radio program training*

Members of these Girls' Club were trained in a number of Radio Podcasting including radio communication techniques, speaking skills, audio modulation and content creation. As well as upskilling, the programme also equipped refugee girls to articulate their thoughts, expand their social network, build rapport, build refugee girls support networks, and learn about issues that affect their lives. This will enable them to raise awareness on key issues pertaining to learning rights of refugee children.

The trained Girls Club members will use techniques of podcasts and storytelling which will be published on JRS digital platforms and circulated widely. Through JRS Media Coordinator support, the refugee girl advocates will be encouraged to develop content that highlights the challenges faced, potentials of refugee children and learning opportunities available to refugee children, and girls in the host community. It is hoped that this digital

advocacy will bring about positive transformation in the community's cultural perceptions.

The second key area of the project focused on Teacher Training. Training will build local capacities with relevant teaching, mentoring and psychosocial support skills that enhances their teaching methods and enables trust-based relationships with their students who are often subjected to hostile life circumstances in the host community.

In addition, trained teachers will also promote attainment of education rights of refugee girls and deprived children by offering a safe learning experience at JRS centres. Chin and Afghan urban refugee girls are often forced to drop out of host community school on account of sociocultural challenges and inadequate financial capacities. This increases their future vulnerability. The training will enable JRS teachers to continue offering learning support to refugee children and young adults and

create localised support systems which champion girl's education.

Mary San, 22 years old from Zomi community of Myanmar:

*Today I want to say a big thank you for letting me be a part of Radio Podcasting Program. We can share the life of a refugee, we can reconnect with our family and we can help families by sharing their information through radio. We can also share our culture and any other interesting entertainment to the world too. That's why this project will affect not only my life but the lives of my family and also the people in my community.*





## Build a classroom. Change a life: Appeal update

Back in March, we fundraised for the building of classroom blocks in a village in South Sudan where women farmers like Deborah and Mary, worried for their children's futures.

Since 2011 and in partnership with the Jesuits of East Africa, IJI has been funding the Multi-educational and Agricultural Jesuit Institute of South Sudan (MAJIS) which sought to address food insecurity to an entire county, roughly 288 villages. The project focuses on women and knowledge transfer for sustainable farming, good agricultural practice & appropriate land use.

The MAJIS project has had a huge impact on the lives of local women. In Easter this year we focused on the

needs of the local children at the informal primary school, which was set up by the Jesuits to educate the children of the adult farmers at MAJIS.

Our Easter Appeal hoped to raise the much-needed funds to build classroom blocks to cater for 250 children over the next 3 years. Without this school, children must walk 12km to the nearest school. This journey is too long and far too dangerous with risk of abuse and violence. Without the MAJIS informal primary school, most children would

be without schooling, remaining in the fields while their mothers farm in order to provide for their families.

### THANK YOU

Thanks to your support and generous donations, construction work has begun on the classroom project which will have a huge impact and continue to empower and enrich the lives of the local communities, especially mothers and their children.

MAJIS is preparing the way for building a proper primary school. They have managed to secure a government permit for construction, completed a new pit latrine, completed the bush clearing and site preparation with stones, sand and steel rods now all in place.

This work to give marginalised children the support for a brighter future could not be possible without your support and for that and from all of us at IJI – thank you!





# Jesuits serving as witness in South Sudan

By Noelle Fitzpatrick, JRS South Sudan Country Director



## 'You Shall Be My Witnesses'

The 10<sup>th</sup> October is the feast of St Daniel Comboni, an Italian missionary and one of the first to come to Sudan. He was the only surviving child of a family of 8. He endured the judgement of many for leaving his aging parents to follow a deep conviction to dedicate his life in service to the people of Africa. Like so many before him, he died young (aged 50 years) during a cholera epidemic, but not before leaving an amazing legacy of love and service which lives on to this day in South Sudan. On his feast day, the Cathedral of St Teresa's in the Archdiocese of Juba was filled with people who came to honour him. His legacy is in education, in championing the role of women and the laity in an

inclusive, expansive vision of Church. He is seen as an honorary patron saint of South Sudan. Today his feast was celebrated all over the country. The strength of this evenings gathering is a testament to the power of one person's response to the call to be witness to the love of God, a witness that has gone on to inspire generations later.

With the support of Irish Jesuits International, we as Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) have an important and valued presence in South Sudan. One of these is in Maban County, Upper Nile State where we have a teacher training, occupational and physiotherapy programme, services to the refugee and local host community and provide various supports to local schools. JRS Maban also supports the local parish and provides pastoral accompaniment to many in the absence of a parish priest. Maban which is a very isolated and deprived area bordering Sudan and Ethiopia where approx. 160,000 refugees and 60,000 local people live very simple and precarious lives. On 17<sup>th</sup> August this year, people here endured numerous incidents of serious flooding. Heavy rains from the Ethiopian highlands were carried upstream on the river Yablus inundating the low-lying areas in Maban, destroying houses, crops and drowning small animals.

In the early days of the flooding with our own compound inundated, pit latrines were overflowing and road access to many places including the refugee settlements were cut. It was difficult to begin to know how to start responding to the needs of others! Yet orienting our focus outwards, one of the ways we accompany people in their suffering is to simply get out and about amongst them, be visible, witness the suffering and the resilience and, from there, in faith we find a way of responding to the most critical needs – food, blankets and shelter. The Jesuit and SVD (Society of the Divine Word) priests working as part of our wider team also pressed on with the mobilization of community preparations for celebrating the feast of St Comboni. In this way we also help create some normality, lifting people's eyes and spirits from the water to focus for a short time on this community celebration.

## You shall be my witnesses – in big and small ways, day by day

As we moved around some of the communities affected by these floods, a woman started shouting. She was angry and frustrated. We stood and listened. We came to understand that the heavy rain the night before had taken its toll. She was tired of the water, the mess and the misery, and she needed to vent. So, we listened, and after two minutes she fell silent. Nothing had immediately been resolved, but, she had felt heard and seen in her misery and frustration which seemed to give her some satisfaction. As JRS we must also accompany and be witness to people in this way. It is important to take time to listen, help carry a heavy sack across a stretch of flood water, give something to the hungry animals around our compound, take time to drink coffee with the elderly as a mark of respect and care. These things do not, in the first stages of a crisis require



silver and gold, only a heart oriented outward toward the suffering around and about us.

To me, having a missionary spirit means courageously loving God and neighbour by word and deed as part of everyday life. It means a corporal 'all in' commitment toward working for justice and the common good day by day. It means in faith, doing what we can with the gifts we have been given and trusting for the rest. It doesn't require coming to Africa, or even leaving your home-town to live this commitment. But, rather, it means making a clear choice about the life we want to live, from a place of deep desire, and being prepared day by day to make sacrifices in service to that choice.

When I have visited other Jesuit works in South Sudan I see this same spirit alive and kicking. The Jesuit co-ed secondary school in the city of Wau, Loyola Secondary School, was occupied by armed forces for 26 years during civil conflict before being re-opened in 2006. The Jesuits here lived through a lot of conflict and insecurity but are making this school into a beacon of hope and possibility, within which students evolve a dream for their lives. This year the school was the best performing in the State in the second level leaving exams. Fr Jean-Baptiste is the Head Master who is known to give additional civic education lessons at 6.30am in the morning by request of the students!

At the Jesuit community in Cueibet, Lakes State, Fr James is the Principal of Mazzolari Teacher Training College and Victor-Luke Odhiambo Secondary School for students from rival Dinka clans. He knows that some of his students carry weapons. The culture of seeking revenge as a form of justice for past wrongs is strong amongst these clans. The environment is fragile. Yet, through this college where the students live and study alongside each other, he models a different way, and opens out a different vision for the future - one that connects the best of tradition and culture with a new way of being and thinking. In Rumbek, the Jesuits have also lived many tough years transitioning with people through times of extreme violence to the current time of greater peace where new possibilities continue to emerge, and they work to

meet the growing demand for quality vocational training.

In South Sudan there are a lot of hard, dark and heavy challenges. This is a place where your heart can be shredded over and over, but it is a place I love with all of my heart. There is so much life, colour, culture, diversity, kindness, graciousness, humour and giftedness in the many peoples of this land. There is so much beauty and so much need. We are the ones blessed to experience it. Starting with what is in our hearts, our heads and our hands, working with people we can help create new pathways toward the future. If there is a more satisfying way to live life, I have not found it.

To donate to the Maban Flood Response contact us on 01 836 6509 or donate online at [www.iji.ie/donate](http://www.iji.ie/donate)



## Ngongo's story: Jewels that dream of the Congo

By Paula Casado Aguirregabiria, JRS Eastern Africa Regional Communications Officer

Ngongo is a 52-year-old Congolese refugee living in Nairobi. He escaped the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in early 2000, running away from political persecution as he belongs to the extended family of one of the regime main opposition leaders. As his own life was threatened, he had to escape the country.

He walked to the border with Uganda, where he could take a lorry that brought him to Nairobi, where he resides today. Once in Kenya he met a Kenyan woman and later they married and he fathered four children.





*"I would like to return to my country, of course. But I will only be able when insecurities end, and that is not yet the case. Now, I cannot go. In Congo, people die every day, since the beginning of times ... by famine, by violence, by the war .... There is no way for me to go back" he tells us.*

He did not travel to Kenya alone, but accompanied four children, his nieces and nephews, also fleeing persecution. One of whom was killed in Kenya in 2007 during post-electoral violence. When being asked about his sister, he says he has had no communication with her since they fled Congo, where she stayed.

*"I don't even know if she is still alive .... I have not been able to be in touch with her ever since".*

Ngongo defines himself as a designer and an artisan. He started crafting wood and making wood furniture when he arrived in Kenya, and in 2005 he started learning jewelry skills thanks to Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) training.

He knew about JRS in 2003, when he started producing wood items for the Mikono Refugee shop. It was only a few years after when he learned the jewelry skills and JRS could provide him with the working tools, so that he could begin selling his jewelry crafts.



Currently, he has a workshop where he carves wood and a room in his house where he works on the jewels.

One item that characterises his jewels is the use of the Turquoise rock, original from DRC. The beautiful color of the rock and his amazing skills result in unique, gorgeous jewels, like necklaces, earrings, and rings.

He puts his soul in every piece he makes. He ensures the use of quality materials that cannot harm the skin and will not break or deteriorate.

*"The money I receive by selling my items in Mikono through JRS is very, very helpful to me ... I use it to pay the school fees to my children, the rent, the food ... I am very grateful to them and to all those who buy my products."*

*"I really thank the people who, through JRS, has purchased my items. It's been already nearly 20 years bringing my items to JRS and Mikono has helped me a lot. Also, in Corona time they were very supportive ... they always walked with me."*

When asking him what he wishes for the future, he talks about his children. He wants them to pursue major education and to become professionals in the future.

*"I thank Mikono clients, and I pray for JRS to continue doing the job they are doing with us ... Thank you."*



## Mikono Christmas Cards and Crafts

Irish Jesuits International (IJI) supports Mikono and its artisans by purchasing Christmas cards and other crafts. Shopping at Mikono via IJI is a tangible way to demonstrate solidarity with refugees while helping them earn valuable income. If you would like to order some handmade African Christmas cards uniquely designed or any other items for presents, please get in touch with Amanda or Rosaleen on [reception@iji.ie](mailto:reception@iji.ie) or 01 836 6509. A selection of cards and craft items are also on sale in the Church shop at St Francis Xavier Church, Gardiner Street.

