

Refugee protection: from theory to practice in the PNG border town of Vanimo

Events in a small town in Papua New Guinea allowed participants in a workshop on refugee law to apply classroom theory to immediate practice.

About twenty five mainly government and judicial officials – including police, prosecutors, border liaison, intelligence and immigration officials – gathered in the border town of Vanimo, on the north coast of PNG, in early May for a seminar conducted by UNHCR.

At the same time, UNHCR staff, the local prosecutor and senior immigration officials were in and out of the local magistrate's court on the matter of detention of two Myanmarese asylum seekers held in police cells for working illegally.

The two men had entered PNG in April 2007 and, along with a third Myanmarese national, are in the process of having their refugee claims decided. All three were detained three months for illegal entry when they first arrived, but were released, after UNHCR intervention, into the care of a compatriot who works locally. Recently, two of the men were detained again by local police for working illegally.

Efforts to get the men released while their refugee claims were being assessed coincided with the workshop, providing a handy real life case study for participants.

The seminar was part of an initiative by UNHCR to improve the protection environment in PNG and help frontline officials to meet the country's obligations under the Refugee Convention. As well as strengthening the legal framework, UNHCR hopes to raise awareness among border officials to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees are not sent back to a place of danger, and to improve the standards of reception and treatment for those with protection needs.

For UNHCR's Canberra-based Regional Representative, Mr Richard Towle, one of



UNHCR/P. Friedman

Government and judicial officials attend a workshop on refugee law in Vanimo, PNG.

the main aims of the workshop was to demonstrate that PNG can maintain effective border control at the same time as helping people have their asylum claims heard without being unduly penalised.

"Our practical case study showed up a whole host of issues, including how asylum seekers can be caught up in immigration control measures and the need for solid local care arrangements and good communication between different government departments," said Towle.

"One of the pressing issues identified was the need to get asylum seekers out of prison and into some alternative care arrangements – a practical issue UNHCR is now discussing with relevant authorities in Vanimo."

"There was also recognition that delays in processing of refugee claims at a central level can place an unfair burden on local departments in the Vanimo area, including the police and the courts," he said.

As part of UNHCR's broader capacity building strategy in PNG, the office will carry out training with various stakeholders dealing with migration and refugee issues.

"At the workshop, our key message was that a country's responsibilities under international law can be upheld or broken through the actions of every officer in the room. And, that expulsion can lead to very serious consequences for people denied

the right to make a proper claim for asylum," said Towle.

"This was a useful first step in a longer process; we now need to work more deeply with different stakeholders".

PNG signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol in 1986 (with a number of reservations) but has yet to implement domestic legislation to enact those obligations in national law or develop comprehensive refugee status determination procedures. UNHCR's protection strategy in PNG includes working with the government to strengthen the overall legal framework, and to introduce interim measures and safeguards to boost protection for refugees and asylum seekers.

Key steps to boost protection capacity in PNG

- Targeted training for government officials on appropriate standards of treatment of asylum seekers in line with international obligations as an interim step before legislation and regulations come into effect.
- Develop checklists for border officials to ensure people who may need protection are identified.
- Integrate refugee protection procedures into existing migration management and border control systems.
- Provide interim documents to asylum seekers while their claims are pending
- Provide arrangements for care and assistance of asylum seekers outside of detention and police facilities.
- Establish a '24 hour hotline' to keep UNHCR informed and seek guidance.

PNG refugees travel road to self-reliance

Roads and rubber are the hot topics of conversation in East Awin, Papua New Guinea, where UNHCR and its partners are stepping up efforts to move the remote refugee settlement onto a firmer development pathway.

The (infamous) 46 km stretch of road between Iowara and Rampsite is a key artery for locals and the community of 2,500 Papuan refugees who use it to sell their produce in the towns of Kiunga and Tabubil, send their children to secondary school, ride to work and access medical facilities.

“The road is important for our survival,” said Mathias Baam, who fled to PNG 23 years ago. He and other refugee leaders believe they can become self-sufficient, but say their ambitions are frustrated by lack of transport and the state of the road, which is virtually impassable in the wet season.

The road linking Iowara and Rampsite on the Fly River (from where refugees travel about an hour by boat to Kiunga) is now on the priority list of the provincial government. Funds are secured, equipment is being purchased and serious work that engages the locals alongside expert project management is expected to begin in the coming months.

The need to improve opportunities for self-reliance and to better integrate the refugees into the provincial development plans of PNG’s Western Province was a key theme of a stakeholder conference convened by UNHCR in Port Moresby late last year. There was widespread agreement that improving the road was the crucial first step.

“Good road access will solve lots of problems,” said Bishop Gilles Côté, whose Catholic diocese of Daru-Kiunga provides

health, education and other services to refugees and locals in Western Province. “Once it is in place, there is definitely the capacity within the group of refugees to make great strides towards self-reliance.”

These sentiments are echoed by Musje Werror, a former refugee from Papua province, Indonesia, now General Manager of Corporate Relations for Ok Tedi copper and gold mine. “People have the skills to work and earn a living but road access to the river makes it difficult for people to freely move,” he said.

Werror believes the development of the Western Province’s rubber industry holds great opportunities for refugees.



UNHCR/R. Friedman

The road through East Awin’s refugee settlements to the Fly River is a key artery for refugees to sell their produce, go to school, ride to work and access medical facilities.



UNHCR/A. Rummy

The Fly River is a major thoroughfare for the mining town of Kiunga, in PNG’s remote Western Province.



UNHCR/IA Rummerly

Around 34 percent of the population in East Awin, one of the most remote refugee camp's in the world, are children of school-going age.

“Establishing blocks and encouraging families to grow rubber will reduce dependency on UNHCR, government, church and the hand-out mentality,” said Werror.

Indeed, rubber is seen as the next big thing for PNG's remote Western Province particularly with the scheduled 2013 closure of Ok Tedi mine – the province's largest earner for the past 24 years.

Provincial Administrator Nelson Hungrabos says that rubber is currently the priority agricultural crop in the Western Province. The government supports private sector initiatives such as North Fly Rubber – a company in which local growers hold shares. “There is already a processing factor in Kuinga, and plans to open a latex factory in the future,” Hungrabos said.

“Where the refugee camp is, the potential for rubber is very good.”

The new buzz about rubber in the province coincides with UNHCR's efforts to boost the refugee community's prospects for self-reliance.

In recent months, the UN refugee agency has joined forces with government

planners, agricultural advisors, provincial officials, North Fly Rubber and the Ok Tedi Development Fund to map out a way forward.

A Rubber Working Team was established to complete land surveys, conduct a feasibility study and prepare such proposals as starting a rubber plant nursery.

“North Fly Rubber Limited is providing advice to the steering committee on lessons learned from cultivation elsewhere in the province, and the best way to plan ahead,” said UNHCR's PNG Representative Wallaya Pura.

“The next steps include holding further discussions with the refugee communities and local land owners.”

“It has been suggested that 10 hectare blocks will be allocated to families of seven to eight people to manage and it is expected that 3-4 hectares will be used for clonal rubber which will provide sufficient income to support them in the future,” she said.

UNHCR hopes that, in the longer run, development agencies and government departments will continue to include this

longstanding refugee population in development plans.

“These refugees have now been in PNG for over 20 years and its time we pooled our efforts to help them integrate more fully into PNG life”, said UNHCR's Pura.

“The road and rubber projects are critical. But they will need to be complemented by health, education, livelihood and other programmes to help this group of refugees along the road to self-reliance.”

The PNG government designated East Awin a refugee settlement area in 1987, following an influx of refugees from Papua Province in Indonesia. The government purchased 6,000 hectares of land from the traditional land owners, and sub-divided for settlement of refugees.

Since the establishment of the settlement, some 7,000 refugees have been received and processed at East Awin. About 60 percent of the current population of 2,500 were born there. Others have moved on to other parts of PNG after obtaining residency permits, or returned to their villages in Indonesia.

Refugees making a difference in PNG: Profile – Musje Werror

Musje Werror came to PNG in 1971 from Jayapura, Indonesia, as a five-year-old refugee with his parents, brother and two sisters. After a short stay at the refugee camp on Manus Island, he grew up in Madang and joined the Kiunga-based Ok Tedi mine in 1988 as a Laboratory Chemist, as soon as he graduated with his Bachelor of Science degree. Today, he is General Manager Corporate Relations and one of a handful of refugee success stories in PNG.

The challenges Werror faced as a refugee in PNG started with having to quickly learn English. Clearly an able student, he won a national scholarship to complete his final school years at Sogeri National High on the strength of his year 9 and 10 grades and, he suspects, some concerted lobbying by fellow 'West Papuans' in the Education Department.

But the uncertainties of a refugee's existence carried well into his adulthood and successful business career. Even as a manager of Melanesian Tourist Services in Madang in 1999, he was still technically a 'refugee' without a passport to enable travel most of his peers in business would find routine. "I only had a Certificate of Identity which allowed travel to Australia only," he said.

He did not acquire the coveted citizenship until May 2007.

Werror is acutely aware that citizenship is not attainable for the vast majority of refugees in the country, due to the costs and rigmarole involved under the current arrangements. But he considers any steps to improve the rights and status of refugees as important to help refugees become more self-sufficient and integrated.



"It is important to recognise that the group in East Awin are no longer refugees, but permissive residents in PNG and that they are given the same freedom and opportunities as PNG citizens," Werror explains.

In addition to rubber development, which he believes is the way forward for the region, he advocates for investment in people through education scholarships.

"While rubber is being developed, children who do well need support to complete tertiary studies," he said. "They will hopefully return to assist people back in East Awin."

Aware that only a small group of Papuans from Indonesia share his level of success in PNG, Werror is determined to make the most of opportunities.

"I want to prove that West Papuans have the ability to manage ourselves given the opportunity. Hopefully I can contribute to West Papua's development in the future."

Musje is married to a PNG woman and has a daughter and three sons. His two eldest children are studying in Australia.



Refugee children in school in East Awin, Western Province.

UNHCR/M.Lech



Carolyn Yanse, the first female refugee to complete year 12 in PNG's Western Province, is now teaching in the community where she grew up.

Instilling the 'can do' attitude among refugee girls

Carolyn Yanse was the first female refugee student ever to graduate from grade 12 in PNG's remote Western Province. Today she is in her second year teaching grade 3 in the community where she grew up, and is an inspiration to boys and girls alike.

Born in 1985 in the border town of Vanimo, just a year after her parents fled their home in Indonesia's Papua Province, she moved to East Awin in 1989 after it was designated a refugee settlement area by the PNG government.

Encouraging girls to finish school is a problem across PNG, not just among the refugee population. But Yanse accepts the role model job with enthusiasm and tries to instill an "I can do it too attitude" among her own students and more broadly among the community.

She has taken her passion for helping refugee girls beyond the immediate confines of the classroom and, with another teacher Sister Cathy Rorokau, established the Iowara Girls Way Forward Foundation. The aim is to 'accelerate girls education' in all aspects of life, including awareness on HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, family planning and life skills, and there are currently about 30 members of the group ranging from 14 to 25 years.

"We started purposefully to help those girls who had left school, including to have a child, to continue their education," Yanse says. "We want to help them to continue even though they have babies."

The Foundation also hopes to develop workshops teaching practical skills like

making bilums, mats, cooking, sewing and growing vegetables.

Carolyn Yanse spent two years studying at the Holy Trinity Teacher's College in Mt Hagen, in the PNG Highlands, with a scholarship funded by the German Government's Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI). The programme promotes self-reliance among refugees by helping them access tertiary education in their country of asylum and boost their chances of future employment. Currently teaching at the Central Montford Primary School, Yanse is planning further studies in special education so she can help people with disabilities.