

Insights from Sisters of Mercy in Papua New Guinea

It is ironic to go out and clean up someone else's backyard when your own backyard is messy.

The decision by Mr O'Neill, Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, to accept refugees is a very dangerous decision. As Papua New Guinean's we feel embarrassed and ashamed of such a decision when the majority of our own people have minimal to non-existing access to basic infrastructures, health care, education, law and order and employment opportunities.

The comment made by Mr. O'Neill about surplus land in PNG and not enough people living on the land is not true. Papua New Guinean's are custodians of their own land and live entirely from the resource that the land provides: building their shelter; sustainable farming which provides families with food; and money from selling the produce. This practice allows them to meet the basic needs of the 21st century.

We have no other support from the government. There are always tribal fights over land in PNG which Mr O'Neill should understand better. The refugees are human beings like us who are desperately in need of safe living. We feel that sending them to Manus Island is like sending them to prison. It means depriving them of basic human rights and the opportunity to build a better, safer life for them and their families.

Further considerations and questions

- The proportion of the population living below the international poverty line of US\$1.00 per day has continued to increase and in 2010 reached 40% of the population.
- Unemployment is very high at 87%. Only 500,000 people hold paid jobs out of a working-age population of some 3.8 million.
- We consider PNG is not safe for refugees as in the past few years there have been anti-Asian sentiments fuelled by rioting and attacks in PNG: Lae 2009, Port Moresby 2011, Rabaul 2012;
- Already there are PNG people who are displaced and disconnected in PNG e.g. taxi-boys in Mt Hagen;
- There is no welfare system in PNG so how is the PNG government going to explain giving financial support to refugees while their own people go without?
- PNG has refugees coming from West Papua and they also lack basic services from the PNG government;
- Statistics show that 2 in 3 women in PNG have suffered domestic violence and, 1 in 6 residents of Manus Island contract Malaria;
- If the Detention Centre on Manus Island becomes over-crowded, it is likely that the incidence of mental and physical health will deteriorate;
- The PNG Government has not provided better basic services for its 7.1 million people over the last 38 years even with all the money received from Australian Aid. PNG has a poor result of the basic development indicators for the Millennium Development Goals. How can PNG manage more people within its means and still provide the best for those who most need help? How can the government fulfil its vision 2050 goal and mission?

Sisters Theresia Tina RSM and Maryanne Kolkia RSM, 24 July 2013

On behalf of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea and, Sisters of Mercy living in Papua New Guinea.