

Together

NEWS FROM JRS UK
SPRING 2024



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“Your support and donations to JRS UK’s work make a difference to someone’s life, because you know that there is someone out there who is supporting you. You feel cared for.”

Nayla, JRS UK Refugee Friend

JRS DRC: championing change



Students gather outside a JRS school building in Goma

After more than two decades of conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), violence has escalated between the government and armed groups in the last two years.

Today, millions of people are estimated to be internally displaced in a country that already hosts hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring countries like Rwanda, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Burundi.

JRS is in Goma, the capital of the North Kivu Province in the DRC, accompanying refugees and internally displaced people. Victor Setibo, JRS Country Director, explains: *"The fighting is causing thousands of internally displaced people. We are dealing with a very complex and persistent humanitarian crisis"*

As well as facilitating access to basic survival needs, a primary focus of JRS DRC is education in emergencies. In the DRC, JRS staff on the ground, in collaboration with partners, have created a system that allows displaced children to continue their education in Temporary Learning Spaces. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) is incorporated into these spaces, to support students and teachers.

Access to education is also a means of protection and self-reliance, particularly for girls. JRS DRC is actively finding ways to make their education programmes more accessible, through, for

example, the provision of menstrual hygiene kits to reduce the barriers that keep women and girls from attending class.

Girls are encouraged to pursue higher education and even receive training to become teachers themselves. The goal is that one day they can return and teach the next generation of Congolese women in remote areas. *"It is so important that girls see themselves represented and have role models in their classroom,"* Victor said.

Women and girls in the DRC who are survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) do a lot of work to heal from these devastating experiences. JRS, through advocacy and awareness-raising on SGBV, accompanies women on this healing journey.

" THE FIGHTING IS CAUSING THOUSANDS OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE. WE ARE DEALING WITH A VERY COMPLEX AND PERSISTENT HUMANITARIAN CRISIS "

Looking towards the future, Victor hopes to implement a more structured social cohesion programme to help the community in Goma strengthen relationships between different ethnic and cultural groups. He

believes that if people have more understanding for where one another comes from and each one's expected contribution for peace and development, this tension will ease. Victor's goal is that one day the JRS team will be able to go beyond emergency response and create programmes that pave a pathway towards sustainable change.

A longer version of this piece was first published by JRS USA. To learn about the work JRS does internationally, visit www.jrs.net

Message from the editor



As I sit down to write this, the Rwanda Bill is back in the House of Lords, and Rishi Sunak has wagered £1000 on being able to send asylum seekers to Rwanda before the next election.

The government is also compounding recent policy changes that put refugees at risk of homelessness, by proposing new measures that could deny newly-recognised refugees access to social housing.

And even as the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) condemns the UK's immigration detention practices, EU countries are planning to extend their own use of immigration detention under the new EU Migration and Asylum Pact. Alberto Ares SJ, JRS Europe's Director, calls the Pact "a historic low for the Common European Asylum System". We stand with our colleagues at JRS Europe as they continue to be a witness and voice for change.

It is important, amidst all these developments, not to forget the lived experiences of people as they navigate the complexities of the asylum system and a cost-of-living crisis. In our Lent Appeal, you'll hear from Shawn about the challenges he faces and some of the services JRS UK provides, and in the following pages you'll find a thought-provoking piece by Nayla on food insecurity; a reflection from the Destitution team and an update from our Senior Policy Officer Sophie on the Brook House Inquiry.

Yet, confronted by these challenges, there are so many things to bring hope – in this newsletter you'll also meet some of this year's London Marathon runners who will be raising funds for JRS UK's work; as well as Abdul, Ali, John, and Michael, who share inspirational reflections on volunteering. These are some of the things that keep us going.

Your support, prayers, and generosity help the mission to accompany, serve, and advocate with and for refugee friends, so I'd like to say a heartfelt thank you from all of us here at JRS UK.

Wishing you all a prayerful Lent, and a blessed Easter when it comes,

Victoria

Victoria

Senior Communications and Engagement Officer

What are we reading?

Life and Death in One Breath by Sadhguru

"The book provides an incredible vision that stems from Sadguru's great inner experiences. The central view of the book is the concept that life and death are the two sides of the same coin, and that by embracing both life and death, we can break free from self-made struggles in our lives.

I found it fascinating to learn that life and death happen simultaneously in our bodies. For centuries we have believed that death is the final event of our lives, but the book argues that death is a gradual process that begins with our birth."

Abdul, a refugee friend

For World Book Day we asked refugee friends, volunteers, and colleagues for their book recommendations. Here are a couple of the books on our reading list:

NO! My First Book of Protest by Julie Merberg and Molly Egan

"I've been reading My First Book of Protest with my 2-year-old son Naoise. It's a book for young children featuring different people who've campaigned for social justice including Frederick Douglass and Malala Yousafzai. It's a really good way of introducing him to important and inspirational people as well as introducing concepts like racial justice, workers' rights and feminism. I don't think you're ever too young to begin activism!"

Liam, Head of Communications, Fundraising and Advocacy

Check out the rest of our recommendations at www.jrsuk.net/blog/world-book-day-2024 and let us know what you are reading!

“It shouldn't be this hard to access food”



Nayla has been waiting for asylum for 13 years. Throughout this time, she has lived in many different settings, and access to food has always been difficult.

“I'm from Africa. I was in my twenties when I came to the UK after escaping a cult. I applied for asylum straight away – that was over ten years ago.

Shortly after I arrived in the UK, I was detained at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre after going to report at Lunar House in Croydon.

At Yarl's Wood, I shared a room with others. We had communal areas like a library, lounge area, and a gym. They'd never let you stay in the room during meal times, you literally had to come out even if you didn't feel like eating. There were a lot of food strikes at that time. Some people had been there for years. They wanted to get released. It was hard - you're not being deported, you're not being released. There were women with children too.

I was in Yarl's Wood for many weeks, and later moved into temporary accommodation. My asylum claim was refused, and since then I have been appealing and re-submitting applications for thirteen years. I've moved around a lot. I now have a daughter. We live in a house share with another family.

It's hard – food is so expensive and my daughter has allergies. When we go to [medical] reviews, they tell you the foods you have to introduce to her diet so she can get used to them. But these foods are expensive and so maintaining her diet is hard, especially with the costs of food rising.

Having limited finances restricts your access to food. When you go to the supermarket you have to start with the reduced section, see what bargains there are, and then carry on with your main shop. It's hard. You have to bargain at the corner shops or world food stores, asking for a discount.

It's hard to live a healthy lifestyle, and practice clean eating, with a restricted budget. I feel like some illnesses could have been avoided – I think illnesses can be picked up from what you're consuming too much of. I've heard of people struggling with diabetes, or things like hypertension. What you consume matters – what you consume on the inside, reflects on the outside.

It shouldn't be this hard to access food. Besides nourishing you, food acts as a comfort. It is a reminder of your culture and reconnects you to your identity. Having a restricted access to your comfort foods due to financial constraints can feel disheartening. Sometimes I do feel distressed and would like to eat something that reminds me of happier times, but I can't. I miss maize flour, tasty vegetables, and fruits.

Where I come from, when you visit someone – even spontaneously – you will be welcomed with food and asked to stay for a while. When you leave, you'll be given food to take away with you from the visit. Food brings that feeling of togetherness and welcome.

I like to reconnect with that feeling, so I sometimes volunteer with another charity, cooking for others. I see how people light up when they come to serve and share in the meal. They always enjoy the food, which makes me happy, especially when nothing is left!

Your support and donations to JRS UK's work does make a difference to someone's life because you know that there is someone out there who is supporting you. You feel cared for.

Cooking is therapeutic, and keeps me busy, especially as I wait. The JRS Shop helps me with access to food staples, which I pick up monthly. Food-wise, I usually prioritise picking up lentils, legumes, and beans, as well as milk and cereal, fresh fruits and vegetables, cooking oil, rice and pasta. I like picking up herbal teas too. I also pick up toiletries for myself and my daughter.

I appreciate the other services JRS UK offers, like the creative activities, holistic acupuncture treatments, and the Social Drop-In. I see how food and a shared meal can bring people together at the JRS Social Drop-in too, where I can socialize with others over a hot plate of food.



Whilst waiting for a decision on their asylum claim, people are banned from working and, even when you are entitled to it, claiming benefits can be hard. If they are able to access accommodation support, this may be out-of-town and isolated, making it hard to access services or find community.

Alongside this people get just £7 a day – which has to cover food, clothing and toiletries, and travel. With rising costs, this support is becoming more and more inadequate – and if you are refused asylum, much of this support is taken away.

When we come to the Centre, we receive money for travel. It's helpful because I don't have access to money, and I am not allowed to work, but travel is expensive. JRS UK also does casework and legal advice. They also do legal workshops for people who have been here a long time, to empower them with knowledge to try and push their cases forward.

What's the hardest thing? It's tough, my daughter can't bring friends over, and sometimes when she asks me hard questions I can't answer them. 'Why don't you have a passport?' 'Why can't we travel?' 'Why do we live in only one room?' – **where do I begin?**

Photos:

1. A volunteer stocking the shelves of the JRS Shop
2. Refugee friends, volunteers, and staff members share a meal at the social drop-in

Holistic, ongoing, and proactive support

Refugee friends supported at JRS UK face factors that can result in prolonged periods of destitution. These include (but are not limited to) homelessness, chronic physical and mental health difficulties, poverty, loneliness, and isolation. Lack of legal status (and therefore restricted access to public funds), means that refugee friends often find themselves unable to meet their most basic needs, including shelter and warmth, food, clothes, and travel, leaving them in poverty. This experience of destitution often lasts for a decade or more.

The complex and increasingly hostile policies of the UK immigration and asylum system play a major role in the levels of poverty and destitution faced by refugee friends. For example, policies restricting their ability to work, rent and open bank accounts. Most recently, the Home Office introduced a 7-day eviction notice period when someone is given leave to remain in the UK. This policy has resulted in many refugees facing street homelessness for long periods. Other contributing factors include the lack of legal aid and therefore legal representation, as well as the dramatic increase in cost of living. These are just a few examples of policies and trends that continue to deepen destitution and increase the risk of exploitation faced by refugee friends.

The Advice Project run by JRS UK's Destitution Team provides multiple levels of specialist support while refugee friends wait to begin a new application or await the outcome of an application to remain in the UK.



“ Since being supported by the Destitution Team, I better understand what support is available to me than before I was supported by them. ”

“ Communication is important, we need to say whatever is happening to us no matter where we are. It's crucial to be updated. People and friends must know that we are okay. Even Liliane at JRS UK just messaging to ask how I am, just having her check in on me is really crucial. ”

- JULIET

Our caseworkers provide holistic, ongoing, and proactive support. This usually involves providing information, advice, and accompaniment in a range of areas, from housing, health, and legal needs to basic provisions. There is no one-sized fits all approach as refugee friends are individuals and therefore treated as such.

Crucially, our caseworkers – with support from JRS UK's Befriending Project – maintain regular and ongoing contact with refugee friends. This allows early understanding of changes in their personal circumstances:

for example, where there is a risk of homelessness, declining health, or an upcoming appointment at the immigration and asylum tribunal. The Destitution Team works closely with the wider JRS UK services and externally to coordinate and respond to any urgent and non-urgent needs refugee friends might raise.

The Brook House Inquiry and the horrors of detention

We are approaching six months since the publication of the Brook House Inquiry report. The report documented systemic abuse by staff of people incarcerated at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre over a period of several months in 2017. This included specifically finding 19 instances that amounted to Inhuman or Degrading Treatment in contravention of the European Convention on Human Rights.

In addition to egregious instances of physical abuse and misuse of force, the inquiry found numerous other forms of mistreatment, including use of solitary confinement as a punishment or even simply for convenience; repeated failures to safeguard vulnerable people; a culture of belittling and mocking people in detention; and a tendency to disregard mental health problems amid a context where highly vulnerable people were forced into a situation that was very bad for their mental health, with no support available.

This report is horrifying. It is also unsurprising. JRS UK's Detention Outreach Team accompany and serve people subjected to such horrors in

detention every week. They work hard to advocate for vulnerable people's access to basic care and safeguards – such as GP appointments and Rule 35 reports flagging histories of torture – when these should be readily available, even under the Government's own rules. And they see again and again how dehumanised people can feel from being held in detention, how hard they strive to maintain hope and sense of self in this environment.

The Brook House Inquiry Report acknowledged that its findings did not represent an anomaly, but reflected problems throughout detention centres that have frequently been highlighted before. In assessing progress since the period it covered, the report also noted that many of the specific problems identified at Brook House persisted. And indeed, six months on from the report's publication, the government is continuing with plans to reopen previously closed detention centres, such as Campsfield House in Oxfordshire, and expand the detention estate. Something must change. Something fundamental. The use of detention for immigration control needlessly destroys lives. It must end.

Stay tuned for our forthcoming report on Detention in the context of the Inquiry later this year. In the meantime, please do write to your MP and express your concerns about problems in the detention system. You can find advice and guidance on writing to your MP at www.jrsuk.net/contact-your-mp

Donate to the Lent Appeal

Every two weeks, JRS UK provides a lifeline - £20 on a prepaid card for refugee friends, that can be used to shop online or in stores.

At the JRS UK Shop, refugee friends can choose from a range of healthy fresh food, clothes, and toiletries, free of charge.

Your gift can also provide holistic casework support to refugee friends as they navigate an increasingly hostile asylum system.

To donate, visit www.jrsuk.net/lent-appeal-2024 or scan the QR code



“ You can help JRS UK provide a hardship grant of £20 every two weeks. For me, that’s a lifeline I know I can count on. And you ensure the JRS UK team, who check in regularly with me, are always there to help with accommodation, legal advice, and other support. ”

REFUGEE FRIEND.



Meet our Marathon runners!

Our incredible team of 28 runners are taking on the London Marathon in April to raise funds for JRS UK. Today we introduce you to four of our runners: Anthony, Colm, Natalia, and Mark!

Brothers in Arms, Feet in Action: Running for Refugees

Two of the runners taking on the London Marathon for JRS UK this year are brothers from Worcestershire, Anthony and Colm.

“When I was at school I used to love running, but since then I’ve pretty much been on ‘hiatus’ until last September when I took it up again. Soon after I got a one-word text from Anthony saying ‘marathon?’ The rest, as they say, is history!”

“Having attended a Jesuit School, it came as a reward to work in my first job with the Society, and continuing that path, I have been working in Brussels since September 2023 for the Jesuit European Social Centre where we share a building with JRS Europe. It has been nice to learn more about their work over these past months” shares Colm.

For Anthony, the opportunity to raise money for refugees was inspired by an encounter whilst travelling: “It was in a chance conversation I had in Vietnam with a friend of one of the Essex lorry casualties that the plight of refugees became real.”

“Only a few months before, in November 2019, 39 Vietnamese migrants were found dead in the trailer of a lorry in Essex. They’d tragically died whilst being smuggled to the UK.”

“So, when I learnt about the good work that JRS does in the UK I knew that this was a cause I wanted to fundraise for. This was further solidified when I learnt that the establishment of JRS



in 1980 was a direct response to Vietnamese refugees escaping their homeland in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.”

Regarding the training, it has not been an easy ride! “I learnt the hard way that it’s just as important to warm down as it is to warm up when the back spasms started” tells Colm, as Anthony recovers from a calf injury. Does sibling rivalry play a part in motivating them?

“Well, Anthony was always a far better cricketer, so I’d like to think that when we swap the spikes for the running shoes, it’ll be my time to prevail.”

Anthony is not persuaded – “We’ll have to see about that!”



Running for a great cause

Hello! My name is Natalia and I am excited to be running the London Marathon as part of the JRS UK Team! I am 23 years old and originally from Centreville, Virginia, USA, right outside of Washington D.C.

When I first started running three years ago, it was largely an endeavor that I did for myself. I wanted to be healthier and find a new hobby I could try out on my own. However, whenever my running became hard or I had to push myself more, I found myself taking a rest day instead or choosing easier routes.

It was only when I started running with and for others that I truly began to push myself outside my comfort zone and achieve running goals I never thought possible. Running in groups I began to go faster and longer.

When training for my first half marathon, I collected donations for Ukrainian refugees. Knowing I was a part of something larger helped me to become a more dedicated and grateful runner!

I am currently getting my MSc in Migration Studies at Oxford University and hope to dedicate my career to working with migrants and refugees.

Running for a cause has always pushed me to be a better runner, and I can think of no better cause to raise money for than an organisation that works to help the migrant and refugee populations that I also hope to support and work with in the future!

Running alongside a refugee friend

Hi! My name is Mark and I am Community Projects Coordinator at JRS UK. I see daily the importance of being in solidarity with refugees and asylum seekers. The asylum system has purposefully been dismantled by successive governments and vulnerable people are being forced into prolonged legal limbo with no right to work, access benefits, or rent, whilst at the same time being scapegoated by politicians and media.

JRS UK is a place of safety, warmth, friendship with quality advice and support. We place high value on coming to know refugees as people who are not only defined by their situation in immigration law; we come to know refugees in the fullness of their humanity.

I am proud and honoured to be running alongside one of our refugee friends this year. He is a passionate, dedicated runner and has had the opportunity to run internationally before he was forced to leave his home country. He jumped at the chance to participate in the London Marathon this year and is excited to be back running in such an iconic race! Running is his place for joy and sanctuary and we are proud to have him on our team!



You can find out more about our runners and sponsor the JRS UK London Marathon team here:
www.jrsuk.net/london-marathon

A confluence of three rivers

In December, JRS UK refugee friends joined sixth-form students at Bacon's College to host a Christmas party for local older people with Age UK.

Abdul, Ali, John, and Michael came together to tell us about the event, and what volunteering means to them.

“Can you tell us about the party?”

Michael: The party was an early Christmas event for older people from the local area, to bring them company and conversation. We from JRS UK were teamed up with two or three students from Bacon's College, and together we looked after different tables.

Abdul: I really enjoyed [the event], serving the older people and I observed they were very happy as well because they had a change from their daily routine. The party was a creative way to bring people together – we need this in our society. We all move so fast past each other.



Michael: It was a space to celebrate Christmas together before having Christmas individually in our homes. I enjoyed seeing how Christmas is celebrated here. I usually celebrate Christmas on a different date, in a different tradition and different country, where the food and the songs are different.

“What was it like volunteering alongside the students?”

Abdul: In the beginning, I was nervous - I haven't participated in this kind of event before, where there is a big generation gap both ways – working with older people and students. But we worked well together. An image that comes to mind when I think of how we worked together is a 'Confluence of Three Rivers': JRS UK, Bacon's College and the older people.

Michael: I really admired Reverend Nicky and the students. They seemed to have that kind of lifestyle of helping others. I'm not always very good at being hospitable, helping others, but having people around you who exhibit that kind of character is very encouraging, it helps you.



Ali: Yes, I enjoyed it too – the students and the staff are very respectful people. Very good people.

Abdul: You're right, the students were very nice, very helpful and they accepted us very well. They didn't care about our status or age or lack of experience or lack of speaking very good English.

John: In my small group, we had a good conversation about future dreams. I asked them, 'in the future what are you going to do?' One said to me: 'I want to go to space!' 'Ah, you are so clever' I said! I had told my mother when I was young that I want to go one day to space. It was nice to have that connection.



Abdul: I hope it was a good experience for them to see us and learn that refugees can help and that we want to serve the community. There is a very negative image surrounding refugees at the moment in society – you can see it in the newspaper everyday.

Michael: This volunteering experience was good in widening everybody's perspective. I learnt better how to work with older people, and what the life of students is like here. I think they learnt about us as refugees too. There are usually misconceptions and generalisations about 'others' in society. So, when you meet people in person and when you realise that 'it's not quite as I thought' – it's good!

“Why is volunteering important to you?”

Abdul: Because I'm not allowed to work, I'm not doing so much, so I always have in my heart to donate at least one or two days in a week. I only have time to give, nothing else.

Ali: According to Islam, volunteering is one of the best things. They say if you find something harmful on the street, to remove it from the street – even this little thing is a good thing to do. Where I can, I always do my best to do something good.

John: You know, sometimes the Home Office is taking so long to respond that you feel like you're suffering. But when you are in a group doing something together, you can forget a little bit that the Home Office aren't responding. Instead, you can be happy with the group. Like me, I do my volunteer work. It helps you to know people and to learn. On a practical note, it also means when they finally one day give me my status, my papers, I will have no problem for work experience because I did it in my volunteering. When I go to look for a job, I will have references.

Abdul: I feel proud – I spent a day with purpose, remarkable purpose, and instead of just sitting at home, I got to do something for the community. I hope that I will participate next year as well.

John: All we have to do next time is not forget the elf costumes!

Some refugee friends' names have been changed in this newsletter to protect their identity.

Pray Stations of the Cross online with JRS UK

On Thursday 21st March, JRS UK is hosting an online Stations of the Cross prayer, inviting you to reflect on the experiences of refugees and forcibly displaced people.

Find out more:

www.jrsuk.net/news/stations-of-the-cross-2024



The Jesuit Refugee Service works in more than 50 countries around the world.

JRS UK is made up of staff and many volunteers who work to accompany, serve and advocate for destitute and detained refugees in the UK, of all faiths and none.

If you can, please consider donating to JRS UK. With your support JRS UK can continue to accompany destitute and detained refugees in a spirit of hospitality, welcome and love.

Donate today

Visit www.jrsuk.net/donate

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Mail your cheque/postal order made payable to Jesuit Refugee Service to the address on the right.



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