

## Dominicans involved in Pastoral Care for Migrants and Refugees

*Sr. Alison Munro, OP*



*Sr. Lidia Danyluk, OP (second row center), and participants*

The Department of Pastoral Care for Migrants and Refugees of the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, and Jesuit Refugee Services and other agencies serving refugees and migrants hosted a roundtable discussion on the issues around migration, and policy and legislative changes to the Refugee Act affecting migrants and refugees in South Africa.

In his welcoming remarks the Archbishop of Johannesburg, Buti Thlagale, referred to the need for policies, noting questions around unfairness, injustice and inhumanity facing refugees. Church agencies in South Africa are called to have compassion and be welcoming, sharing information to improve co-ordination of services and enhancing charitable works.

An official of the Department of Home Affairs noted the policy processes currently underway on international migration, on integration and repatriation of refugees, and on The Refugee Amendment Act. Challenges experienced by refugees and asylum seekers at Marabastad, a refugee reception centre in Pretoria are being addressed; improved policies, infrastructure, the training of officials, and an improved IT system are among the measures being put in place to address bureaucratic issues. Questions and discussion after the presentation highlighted the difficulties asylum seekers and refugees, and those assisting them, have experienced and continue to experience when Home Affairs policies are not implemented correctly and when corruption flourishes.

A staff member of Jesuit Refugee Services addressed the issue of the limited rights there are for asylum seekers around health care. South Africa's new National Health Insurance will cover all South Africans, and is meant to ease the burden of financial contributions for those least able to pay, limiting direct out of pocket payments. The contention: It is intended to cover all South Africans and permanent refugees, but cover for asylum seekers is reduced, with provision only for emergency services. "While refugees and asylum seekers do contribute to the economy, why is there just a contingency fund for them?" he asked. "The scheme does not promote equal treatment for all."

The director of the Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa examined the question of why migration policies fail. He noted that "people place too much faith in policies to regulate migration." What policies in fact do is introduce selection and admission criteria, they cannot determine numbers and flows and patterns of migration. "And so it is important to understand why people migrate." All too often there is an implementation gap and bureaucratic failure. And often migration policies are implemented in isolation from health and housing needs. "Every policy," he stressed "needs to look at national interests (security rights of citizens), and at human rights issues. Ideally they need to have the same weight."

In the Apartheid years the country's migration policy was based on a racialized system, with black migrant labour not permanently in the country; there was no refugee legislation, and it was easy to control migration. Post 1994 there was the so called "liberal paradox", closure to migrants and at the same time an openness. There were conflicting approaches: allowing the free movement of people because of a skills shortage; and attempting to balance democratic principles and human rights principles. Later the position became more restrictive because of concerns that migrants might have a negative impact on social services, and at the same time a recognition that deporting people and building fences is an expensive system. The police were given the task of policing the system, leading to possible violations of human rights. Further amendments to the Refugee Act scrapped public participation, giving more power to the Department of Home Affairs and the Minister, and limiting access to basic services for refugees. High numbers of asylum seekers from Zimbabwe led to further policy shifts, the closing of refugee reception centres and a large scale regularisation for Zimbabweans. The 2015 Refugee Amendment Bill, if passed, allows the Ministers to withdraw and end refugee status. There is a strong emphasis on national sovereignty and security and a limited interest in moral obligations. Finally, "how do we balance human rights and security in a policy?"

A speaker from Mozambique outlined the refugee situation in that country. Most refugees are Congolese. They are required to declare their request for asylum status when they cross the border into Mozambique from Tanzania. Registration processes take place in the refugee camp and only those people recognised as refugees can live outside the camp. From 1991 Mozambique has had a law to regulate migrants. After ten years they can apply to become citizens. "Irregular migrants" are arrested, forced to leave the country or deported. Many in the south where there is no conflict are likely to attempt to go to South Africa.

The Scalabrini Sisters work in the Ressano Garcia Mozambique border area, ministering to diverse groups of people among them illegal immigrants arrested, jailed and then sent back to Mozambique from South Africa. Some immigrants say things like "we jumped the fence in search of a better life". "Here our families are starving. It is difficult to cultivate, there is no water, no money." The Sisters assist immigrants deal with border police, help women and children and those who are sick, let them rest before they continue their journey, provide assistance with food, communication, hygiene, and advice re documentation.

The roundtable discussion event with the various Church agencies committing to further collaboration around interventions and responses they want to commit to in the service of refugees and migrants.