

# Conversations with refugees in PNG

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In a motel's car park in the balmy air of two-seasons tropical Port Moresby, I had an invigorating conversation with a man who asked me about snow. 'Does it snow in Melbourne? I have not seen snow in six years. Where I am from there are seasons, and a foot of snow in the winter.' He had a curiosity about everyday life, culture and religions. It was apparent he has had time to think on many different things.



Another man told me he has not seen his family in six years. His son is now 23, with a disability, and his family are in the camps of Bangladesh, stateless. He has no answer as to his legal status as refugee.

In spite of the six years spent in PNG, some of these men still do not know if they will be considered refugees or not. Even those who have been recognised as refugees know that title still doesn't mean much. 'Refugees/not refugees — here it is all the same,' a man tells me with a shrug. There seems to be both recognition of the impossibility of the situation for all who have been left here — but also an attitude that no one should be left behind. Their solidarity and mateship has been forged through bonds far stronger than any UN ratified convention or category.

In Australia, being accepted as a refugee is a thing to be celebrated. Although the ['legacy' caseload](#) remains an exception, where people are only granted three or five-year protection visas, generally when Australia recognises someone as a refugee, this status allows the lifelong security of a permanent, safe and secure future in Australia. It is not that it isn't still tough to secure work or integrate with Australian culture, but the fear of being returned can slowly dissipate.

There are a few refugees who are living in the community in PNG, now with their new families, and trying to find some work, but this path is truly difficult and an impossibility for the majority. While there has been some hospitality shown to West Papuan refugees it has been in the spirit of 'Melanesian brotherhood' with little formal recognition and associated rights afforded.

There is no tradition of — or institutional support for — refugee resettlement in PNG, and the local way of life, how private property is conceived and the complexity of cultural differences is stark for the men Australia has transported there.

The men I spoke with talked about the many relationships they have made over the six years in PNG, their interest and confusion at aspects of cultural difference, of systems and politics in this unique country. They speak of the many differences between themselves; it is an incredible mix of cultures, backgrounds and stories rich with a confusion of anecdotes — loved ones and family from back in their country of origin, frustrations with the system they have been dealing with now for years and a fascination with the Australian electoral cycle and media rhetoric.

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The time span is significant and they have weathered many storms. There have been waves of protest, mental illness and self-harm. They have seen riots, death and brutality, and received hospitality and disdain in seemingly equal measure. They have often been dismissed, but at other times listened to and heard across the world.

The Medevac transfer process has been difficult. Some have been transported to Australia for treatment, while others I spoke with have been accepted but inexplicably their transfers, sometimes for months, are delayed. Medevac is vital for getting much-needed medical treatment, but it was evident to me that this legislation alone holds no answer for their deeper ailment, which goes beyond solely physical health needs.

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The Catholic Church in PNG has reached out in support to the refugee group in various ways. The conditions these men find themselves in, a controlled existence with an indefinite period of waiting, has often compromised their human dignity. The Church has been both an outspoken advocate and a source of comfort and material support to many.

'You have traded the mountains of Pakistan for the slums of Port Moresby — a bad choice,' local senior priest Fr Giorgio Licini says to one man. Although the comment was taken with intended joviality, the reply to it trailed off, tinged with sadness: 'It is not the place, it is the people there ...' The man looks off into the night, now quiet. The 'people' are those that he fled from more than seven years ago. A memory, but it holds fast, visceral.

Licini is kept busy in his role as General Secretary for the Bishops Conference of PNG and Solomon Islands, but he spends most Sunday afternoons and some evenings visiting the men. He continues to publicly advocate regarding the ongoing lack of choice these men have had regarding their situation. He is well known and clearly well liked.

Although there will be much to do in regards to public comment, practical following up with material needs, and advocating for complementary or alternative pathways and resettlement options, the everyday-ness of these men's lives and conversation will be what remains with me. The knowledge that they are truly human persons with now six years of rich, interesting and traumatic life experiences, at my country's behest, is haunting.



Josh Lourensz coordinates the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum, a broad alliance of organisations, parishes, individuals and peak bodies from across the Catholic community, which is co-convened by Jesuit Social Services and Jesuit Refugee Service (Australia). He visited Port Moresby for a few days over the first weekend of November as part of a delegation of leaders from across the Catholic community.