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Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)

Press release

Jesuit Refugee Service lawyer wins United Nation's Nansen Award 2007-09-12

Dr Camilleri's stand for refugee rights and tolerance honoured

JRS lawyer, Dr Katrine Camilleri, was honoured today by the UN refugee agency, UNHCR. Dr Camilleri, who defends the rights of refugees in the southern European island Malta, received the 2007 UN Nansen Award for her courage and commitment to the defence of refugee rights.

The Nansen Refugee Award is given annually by UNHCR to individuals or organisations that have distinguished themselves in work on behalf of refugees.

"I hope that this award serves to draw attention to the suffering detention causes to thousands of innocent people in Malta and elsewhere and that it generates a real search for alternatives which respect people's dignity and rights", said Katrine.

Since 1997, Dr Camilleri has provided legal advice to hundreds of detainees, helping them with their asylum claim or to challenge their detention, especially the most vulnerable, such as chronically ill people and persons with disability or mental health problems. In response to the sharp escalation in the arrival and subsequent detention of asylum seekers in 2002, JRS expanded its services for detainees, establishing volunteer visitors and social work projects and facilitating access to healthcare.

The young lawyer, and mother of two, also runs training on refugee law for university students, organising practical placements, enabling young Maltese people to assist asylum seekers. This is part of a JRS drive to raise awareness about refugees and their rights, thus countering widespread xenophobia. This may have been the motivation behind an arson attack in 2006 on Dr Camilleri's house and car. Yet she has continued to struggle for what she believes in.

"This award is a tribute to JRS workers worldwide who often do tough, unrewarding and even dangerous work to serve and accompany displaced people most in need. If it were not for them, and the staff of similar organisations, many refugees would not get access to crucial legal services, languish in detention or worse have been returned home to persecution," added Dr Camilleri.

States need to assume their responsibilities under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. The following cases of Ali and Sivaswary are just two examples of the essential importance of these services.

Ali fled Sudan. Upon arrival in Libya he paid 1,200 dollars to get to Italy. After such a horrendous journey in which five of his 16 companions died, Ali was refused access to the asylum procedure by government officials. He was later detained. With the

assistance of JRS Italy Ali contested his expulsion and was granted humanitarian leave to remain in the country.

Sivaswary, fled persecution in Sri Lanka and sought asylum in Belgium. Four years later his application was refused and he was subsequently detained. This is where he first met JRS Belgium staff member who put him in contact with a lawyer. After a month in detention, he was released as the authorities feared sending him to a country where he may face torture or worse.

The Nansen Refugee Award, created in 1954, is named after Fridtjof Nansen, the celebrated Norwegian explorer and the world's first international refugee official. Previous recipients include Eleanor Roosevelt and Médecins sans Frontières. The award will be officially presented at a ceremony in Geneva on 1 October at the annual gathering of UNHCR's governing Executive Committee.

Notes to the editor:

JRS works in over 50 countries in six continents around the world. It employs over 1,000 staff: lay, Jesuits and other religious to meet the education, health, social and other needs of over 450,000 refugees and IDPs, more than half of whom are women. Its services are provided to refugees regardless of their race, ethnic origin, or religious beliefs.

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