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JRS Singapore welcomes Pope's care for 'plight of the stateless'

As Pope Francis visits Singapore, the chairperson of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in the country expresses appreciation for Pope Francis' constant care for migrants and the "plight of the stateless."

By Mark Saludes and Peter Monthienvichienchai, LiCAS News

"Many in Singapore and elsewhere view refugees as *persona non grata*. We hope that Pope Francis' visit to our country will raise awareness of the plight of the stateless," said Caroline Seow, chairperson of the [Jesuit Refugee Service \(JRS\) in Singapore](#).

Ms. Seow told LiCAS News that, given the chance, she would also ask the pontiff to help encourage Singapore "to champion the plight of the stateless" and "recognize that closed borders are no barrier to open hands and an open heart."

On Thursday, the Pope will receive an official welcome at Parliament House, where he will meet Singapore's President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Prime Minister Lawrence Wong.

Later in the day, he will attend an event at the National University of Singapore (NUS), addressing civil society, diplomats, and local authorities alongside President Tharman.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are at least 117.3 million forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2023 as a result of persecution, conflict violence, human rights violations, or events seriously disturbing public order.

This staggering increase reflects both new and ongoing conflicts, including the largest humanitarian crisis in Sudan, where over six million people are displaced, escalating violence in Myanmar since the military takeover in 2021, and the conflict in Gaza, where over 75 percent of the population has been displaced, with many forced to flee multiple times.

Given its small size, limited land, and high population density, Singapore is not in a position to accept individuals seeking refugee or asylum status.

While maintaining this policy, Singapore has acknowledged the valuable work of the UNHCR, increased its financial contributions to the UN body, and, alongside ASEAN counterparts, established a trust fund to support emergency humanitarian and relief efforts in response to refugee flows within Southeast Asia.

Ms. Seow believes that Singapore and other nations in Asia can do more to address the refugee crisis by supporting and funding programs that empower displaced people and help them rebuild their lives.

She said JRS Singapore is acutely aware of the growing refugee crisis and is working closely with counterparts in the region and around the world.

"With refugees increasingly remaining in their initial countries of refuge for extended periods, the need to help them rebuild their lives in these places of asylum has become critical," she said.

In 2021, JRS Singapore initiated the 'LEAP@JRS' or 'Lead, Educate, Advocate & Partner' program, which "nurtures 'future-ready' refugees through certified digital skills training, boosting their self-esteem and resilience while equipping them for livelihood opportunities," according to Seow.

LEAP@JRS is an education, livelihood, and community-building initiative focused on nurturing professional skills for individuals and fostering resilience and self-sustainability within communities.

It offers certified educational courses, life skills, and future-ready workshops, and facilitates virtual internships for refugee communities.

Since its inception during the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has assisted over 380 refugees, displaced from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe and now residing in neighboring Southeast Asian countries. Approximately 40 percent of LEAP graduates are women.

Ms. Seow, however, noted that the 380 graduates represent only a fraction of the millions in the region seeking refuge and a better future.

She emphasized that scaling and implementing additional transformational programs would require the collective effort of “the entire human family.”

However, she believes that the voice that amplifies the plight of the stateless and forcibly displaced could begin in Singapore. “As one nation and one people, we can do much more for them,” she said.

Ms. Seow said that those working for the welfare of refugees and the stateless are “deeply indebted and extremely grateful that Pope Francis has been such a champion for the underserved—migrants, refugees, and those who are voiceless in our world.”

“In my lifetime, we have never had a Pope who has been such a strong advocate for people on the margins,” she said.

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