

Ten years

An amazing phone call. “Mam I have just got a Permanent Protection Visa”. This is always cause for celebration and is reasonably rare for the people BASP assists. However this one was more unusual than most.

In the mid-1990s a promising young cricketer (let’s call him Ananda) completed his apprenticeship as a mechanic and became involved in a Union, first as a member, then as a local and then regional organiser. While the United National Party was in power in Sri Lanka that was a role that did not bring him any problems. However when the Government changed, he was threatened and beaten in several occasions and threatened because of his union activities. He decide to get a tourist visa and leave for Australia. That did not prove easy because of the involvement of a section of the LTTE with the issuing of visas. So after some very frightening experiences which involved severe back injuries, Ananda managed to get on a plane and came to Australia in 2005.

He applied for protection but was rejected at each stage of the process. It was claimed that as a Sinhalese national he had nothing to fear back in Sri Lanka. Eventually in 2008 he was detained in the Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre. I visited him quite regularly while he was there and one night he rang to say he was being deported the next morning. I was in Adelaide at a meeting and was quite non-plussed about what action to take (if any). However someone said that a direct application to UNHCR could possibly prevent the deportation. Hurriedly and in between meetings on that evening I managed to get an application sent to the UN office. Before the fax even went through Ananda rang again to say he was being taken to the airport. We were not to know what plane he was being put on but a call to the airlines determined that the first flight for Sri Lanka was in the morning at 7am.

Miraculously the UN instructed the Australian Government not to deport Ananda until investigations had been carried out.

These investigations went on and on until 2013. In the meantime I had contacted a wonderful group in Sydney (as part of the Balmain Uniting Church) who took up the fight for Ananda and in mid-2013 the UN told Australia that Ananda had a well-founded fear of persecution if he was returned to Sri Lanka and he should be given a Permanent Visa. Luckily about this time a precedent was set with another refugee and this enabled Ananda to resubmit his case for protection in Australia. After another three years, and about a month ago, Ananda was informed he has been granted a Permanent Visa.

In the meantime Ananda has lost contact with his wife and two children. His mother has been constantly threatened by police because she has maintained she did not know anything of his activities and her house was burned down – with the police refusing to investigate.

This is just one man’s story. There are 67 million displaced people in the world and all have a story of hardship and suffering. At BASP, with a lot of help from our supporting community, we can help just a few of these. A phone call like Ananda’s gives us all renewed energy and commitment to help where we can and to keep working for change.

Brigid Arthur csb