Sudanese students offer an insight into their other world

Benjamin Preiss

Sharon Sandy never expected her work at a Traralgon school would involve arranging medical examinations in Africa. Or that she would organise DNA tests so students at Liddiard Road Primary School could be reunited with South Sudanese relatives.

In recent years, Traralgon has absorbed many Sudanese families who have sent their children to local schools.

And Ms Sandy, the Liddiard Road PS student welfare officer, was deeply affected by the stories the children brought with them. “I just thought they were too important not to get down,” she said.

Six years ago Ms Sandy began helping the students write about their experiences. Now they have been published in a book, Donkeys Can’t Fly on Planes, set for release in June. The children created illustrations with string, fabric, and natural objects to accompany the stories.

Despite initial reluctance, the 21 students eventually agreed to contribute their work at them, that people were really interested,” Ms Sandy said.

The stories were written in the simple and direct language of young children. They wrote about fetching water with a donkey from wells, escaping “killers” and moving to Australia, while siblings and grandparents were forced to stay behind.

The stories have given voices to the children, who had seen too much violence, their families divided by war. Proceeds from the book sales will go towards building an orphanage and school in Bor in South Sudan.

Grade 6 student Sunday Garang wrote about her early years in a Kenyan refugee camp where hunger had even sapped her energy to cry. Her mother would soothe her to sleep by assuring her food would grow as she slept.

Nyawech Biliew, 11, hoped the stories would encourage readers to empathise with the experiences of refugees. “So they can see we’re equal,” she said.

The school had to encourage Sudanese parents to become involved in their children’s education. Now parents are regular visitors to the school. Even fathers who were, at first, resistant to educating their daughters have become active at the school and now have strong academic expectations for their children.

“We’re really connected with our families and we make sure they know they’re part of the school,” Ms Sandy said.

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Review of ASIO analysis of refugees

Daniel Flotton

A review of the cases of 55 refugees branded threats by ASIO is expected to be completed “within weeks”, raising hopes they could escape indefinite detention in Australian immigration centres.

Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus and former federal court judge Margaret Stone met in Sydney on Wednesday to discuss her review of the secret ASIO assessments.

But some in Labor Party ranks fear Justice Stone’s findings are not binding, with ASIO able to veto the assessments.

The 55 refugees, most of them Tamils, are officially recognised to have a well-founded fear of persecution at home, but are not permitted Australian visas after the adverse security finding by ASIO. No other country has been willing to offer a home to the group.

Justice Stone was asked in October to conduct an independent review of the secret intelligence used by ASIO to justify the adverse assessments after complaints that some of the group had spent years in detention without right of appeal or knowing the allegations against them.

The 55 refugees have since been provided with a broad summary of the allegations but still have no avenue of appeal against the ASIO assessments.

The Stone review is regarded as the only chance of release for the 55 and is regarded as increasingly urgent after the Coalition flagged it would abandon the review process should it win the election.

Mr Dreyfus told ABC radio it was up to Justice Stone to take as long as needed for a thorough investigation, but “the first group of her recommendations will be made within weeks”.

Labor senator Trish Crossin said the finding of the independent review should be binding on ASIO and it was up to the government to decide whether it should find an alternative to indefinite detention.

Liberal Party deputy leader Julie Bishop said the Coalition would abide by the ASIO assessments.