



Newsletter: Victoria Coalition for Survivors of Torture - VCST

SEPTEMBER 2003 Volume 1:2

VCST - Email: info@vcst.ca

Website: www.vcst.ca

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UpComing WORKSHOP:

The VCST invites you to join us in the upcoming Workshop, **"Refugee Resiliency: Part III. HEALTH SERVICES for REFUGEE Claimants"**. Date: Friday, October 24th, /03 Time: 9:00 AM to 1:00PM. Location: 3100 Foul Bay Rd., Wilna Thomas Cultural Centre, Camosun College. Victoria. Fee: \$50.00 (\$25.00/student/refugees)

Registration: pre-registration via mail, or at 8:30 on October 24th. Limited space available. **Contact Person:** Cristina Shore : 250-886-

7380 or 388-4728 ext:108. **Who would be interested?:** those in the health care professions; those who work with refugees; those who are interested in the experience of the refugee, particularly the refugee who has experienced torture. **Description:**

This workshop responds to an overwhelming number of requests following the Refugee Resiliency Conference in February, 2003, and the Refugee Resiliency Part II, in June, 2003. The aim of this workshop is to increase our awareness and understandings regarding the challenges and barriers experienced by the Refugee Claimants, and to hear and discuss how resiliency for the Refugee Claimants can be supported/enhanced. The panel will focus on health concerns and services and will examine the process of the refugee claimants' health care. Panel speakers will include a Refugee Claimant, medical professionals and an Immigrant/ Refugee Settlement representative.

The attendees will be treated to a delicious multicultural lunch.



Refugee Resiliency Workshop: Part II, The Legal Process for the Refugee Claimant. The Panel: Okot Alfred, Ochen, Tomoko Okada, Thomas Kemsey, Marlene Tyshynski, & Peter Golden (Chair)

The VCST was established in 1991. It is a non-profit organization that is deeply concerned with the health and welfare of people who have experienced torture.

The VCST Mandate is:

- 1 - to help survivors of political violence overcome the legacy of violent oppression and return to leading normal functional lives.
- 2 - to provide specialized knowledge to professionals and to increase public awareness regarding survivors of torture.
- 3 - to cooperate with the health community, social service agencies, immigrant settlement workers and the broader community to ensure that the needs of survivors of torture are recognized and met at all levels.

Torture is "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted by or at the instigation of a public official on a person for such purposes as obtaining .. information or confession, or punishing.. or intimidating him, her or other persons." (UN Declaration, 1975)

Many thanks to the "old" board for its commitment, work and dedication.

Welcome to the New Board:

VCST Board Members:

Howard Dieno: President & Website Manager
Marco Andino: Past President
Sherri Hohert: Vice President
Ken Agar-Newman: Treasurer
Joan Schwartzenger: Chief Secretary
Peter Golden: Assistant Secretary
 Tomoko Okada
 Cristina Shore: Meeting Chair
 Andrea Monteiro
 Alfred Okot Ochen
 Marianne van der Meij
 Penny Whillans: Newsletter Editor
 Jan White

All are welcome to attend our next meeting. Please call Christina Shore at 388-4728 ext. 108 for the date and location . We invite you to become a part of our board and our activities.



Workshop FEEDBACK

**Refugee Resiliency, Part II,
The Legal Process and the
Refugee Claimant:**

by Ken Agar-Newman

Every year the VCST commemorates the United Nations Day of International Support of Victims of Torture by developing workshops and events on the 26th of June. The VCST held a **Refugee Resiliency, Part II “The Legal Process for the Refugee Claimant”** Workshop. The workshop was a success. Much was learned through the interaction of the panel and attendees. It was a time of ‘cross fertilization.’ New growth and understanding took place.

The workshop was introduced and chaired, respectively by Howard Dieno and Peter Golden. Alfred Okot Ochen who is a Refugee claimant, gave his reflections on the refugee process, including outlining the horrific situation in Uganda, his country of origin. Tomoko Okada talked about the task of supporting refugee claimants through the process of claiming legal Refugee status in her role as Settlement Coordinator at the Inter-cultural Association (ICA). The legal perspective was presented by Marlene Tyshynski, a lawyer for the Human Rights Tribunal and by Thomas Kemsey, a member of the Refugee Protection Division (RPD) of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). Thomas’ role with the RPD is to read through the documentations and written testimonies of the Refugee claimants and to hear their verbal testimonies. It is his role to determine if the claimants meet the legal definition of ‘refugee’ and can then therefore be accepted in Canada, as a legal Refugee. ...Continued on Page 3.



Marlene Tyshynski and Thomas Kemsey,
on the Workshop Panel, Part II, The Legal Process for the Refugee Claimant

**Your Feedback and
Contributions are**

IMPORTANT. We invite you to include your thoughts in this newsletter. We are interested in printing your articles, your experiences, your poems, your words. Please send them to us at: VCST Newsletter 930 Balmoral St., Victoria, B.C. V8T 1A8. E-mail us at: vcst@info.ca Visit our webpage www.vcst.ca

On the Front Line:

A Personal Connection:

by, Tomoko Okada

I have been working as the Coordinator of Immigrant/Refugee Settlement Services for ICA for over 16 years. This is a vital front-line service for immigrant and refugee communities. In my capacity as Coordinator, I provide information, orientation, referrals, advocacy, interpretation, and counseling for immigrants and refugees. I believe

strongly in public education and therefore, I also frequently give talks to many community organizations about current immigrant/refugee issues. I have, for example, talked to the students and teachers at educational institutes such as university, college, and elementary schools; and I also frequently talk with governmental branches and community agencies. continued on page 3.



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My involvement in human rights and survivors of torture issues is based on my strong commitment to work with immigrant and refugee communities and to provide them with more effective services. The satisfaction and the challenge I receive from my work is not only professionally significant, but it is also personally meaningful and rewarding. Interacting with newly arrived immigrants/refugees and assisting those who need support has taught me to respond both to a changing society and to the call for justice to promote human rights. I have learned and continue to learn to balance humanitarian compassion, and respect for individual and collective self-determination, with an egalitarian society and my skills to assist my clients. To work with and to assist people who are less fortunate and who often experience difficulties integrating into society is challenging, and I have found that most helping professionals will often view disadvantaged people as isolated beings, instead of viewing them as part of a larger society. This can make the assisting of immigrants and refugees more challenging.

In Canada, social workers with an immigrant background are under-represented. Therefore the issues of immigrants whose situations and needs differ from those of the Canadian born visible minorities, have not yet been well addressed. When I began Immigrant/ Refugee Settlement work, the majority of the workers were members of the white dominant group and the service model was based on charity framework. I believe that part of my commitment comes from the need to fill this gap and to demonstrate effective leadership among the immigrant community. I would also like to explore further, the liberating and reconstructing anti-oppressive leaderships among members of minority groups.

I have learned that knowledge and skill based approaches will not change the world human rights violations, however, I have also learned that a small number of people with intuitive commitment can organize social mobilization, and that this demands particular community development efforts. These community efforts are, to raise awareness, to get community supporters, to develop resources, and to strengthen full participation and self-reliance.



Tomoko Okada

I was raised in Tokyo right after the devastation of World War II. I was therefore one of the first generations to be introduced to a concept of democracy while Japan was under the U.S. occupation. While I witnessed the turbulent history of gain and loss in the shadow of national priority for economic development, I grew up with a strong sense of social justice. In many ways Japan maintained its traditional conservative and patriarchal society and this clashed with the concept of democracy. My Japanese background influences me in performing my role as a woman and as a person/citizen who values respect, honesty,

cooperation, and harmony among people and who is eager to learn and be patient, open-minded, non-judgmental, caring, and compassionate.

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'Feedback' continued from page 2

As an attendee, Marianne voiced concern about the RPD/IRB's need to determine credibility and the possible result of re-traumatization of the torture survivors during this process. This concern was recognized as valid, especially when the testimony of a claimant holds inconsistencies. The question was raised regarding vicarious traumatization of IRB members themselves; especially in relation to the types of decisions that might be rendered by a member who is experiencing vicarious traumatization. The concern was that denial and disbelief which can be the prominent coping symptoms of vicarious traumatization, could severely effect the decision made in a legitimate survivor's case.

Thomas answered this question by noting that having a thorough psychological report helps to alleviate a bias towards disbelief. The panel and attendees recognized the difficulty of obtaining such reports following the cutbacks to legal aid.

The 'safe first country rule' was a topic of concern. This rule states that if a claimant has entered a 'safe' country prior to entry into Canada, s/he must be sent back to the first 'safe' country that s/he arrived in to make a refugee claim. The definition of 'safe' was questioned and it was recognized that a country that is seen as democratic is deemed safe. The status of the U.S.A. as a 'safe' country was questioned. Members of the panel recognized that there are safety issues associated with the U.S.A..

Thomas was asked about non-verbal communication vis-a-vis..... continued on page 4.



"Feedback" *continued from page 3*
understanding a Refugee claimant when 90% of communication is through this method. The questioner wondered if there was training about non-verbal communication among IRB members. Thomas said that non-verbal communication has a minor role in the refugee claimant's testimony.

The VCST board would like to extend a special thanks to those who took part on the panel. Your willingness to be present and speak directly to these issues aids us all in the process of understanding the roles that we can undertake to aid the Refugee Claimants and in giving us more comprehensive knowledge from which to work.

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MY NASTY EXPERIENCE, IN THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM, AND EQUALITY

by Oket Alfred Ochen

My motherland Uganda, the pearl of Africa, with all her fascinating natural resources, has not only gone to the dogs, but the dogs have invaded her, my beloved home. Citizens in Uganda now live in fear. They are not sure of the next hour: they fear that they might be abducted by the rebels, or by the despotic regime itself.

I have always been inspired and consoled by the words of late brother, Steve Biko, who died as a struggler for freedom and equality 28 years ago. He said that always "spirited minded human rights activists are encountered by mediocre minds."

I did not know I would be in a military jail and be forced to leave the country. But this is how I found myself; in bondage surrounded by "humans who are more equal than others; if that is, humans who have absolute powers to determine whether you can enjoy your fundamental human rights or not.

I have been convicted by the dictatorship, and I have been a target for the dictatorship in Uganda. I have been detained in the military jail a number of times. In jail I had to go through nasty experiences. We were denied a normal life style, like having decent water and sanitation services. The same room we used to live in was the same room we could use as the "washroom," where excrement could be in the basins.

If one is not strong hearted, in the struggle for freedom and equality, one can easily 'throw in the gloves' for favours, because some methods of torture are so dehumanizing that one can not narrate them with pride in society. For instance, when I was stripped off and remained in my natural "birth cloth" then you could glance at the way your comrades are being abused, and you can only cry like a child who is defenseless.



Oket Alfred Ochen

It was a serious psychological witnessing to see the way my bosom comrades in the struggle were being castrated. One can't hold his or her tears any more, friends were yelling for assistance, but all of us were so incapacitated. This was among one of

the worst experiences I have encountered. When I recall this time I spent in jail with my friends (who are still not accounted for), I feel home sick and depressed.

One night, while we were in prison, the security officials came and took all of us to a special room where there were pythons [snakes] without fangs. This was another terrifying moment: having body contact with non-poisonous snakes I felt like sinking under the ground. All these kinds of psychological torture make you feel unwanted in a society.

When it came to basics, like food, it was another real form of torture. We were given food once in three days, and to add insult to an injury, the men who were more equal than others, would prepare very delicious food, with very nice smells, next to our doors, so that we only got the smells and became more hungry.

To sum it all, to be a human rights activist, an upright politician, or a freedom fighter, one has to forego a number of cardinal earthly things in my homeland. In Uganda to be a human rights activist, an upright politician, or to fight for freedom you have to bear in the back of your mind, three things, DEATH, PRISON OR EXILE.

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Questions Concerning Health Care for Survivors.

by Howard Dieno

The next workshop we are offering on October 24th is **Refugee Resiliency:**

Part III, Health Services for Refugee Claimants. In the interests of wanting to hear how other Canadian agencies support survivors of torture, I circulated an e-mail questionnaire. The Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT)

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in Toronto and the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society - Survivors of Torture, Host Support Group (CCIS SOT) replied in time for this printing. Here is what I gleaned.

1. *What happens in your locality when a refugee claimant who has been subject to torture needs medical treatment for physical symptoms or disorders directly resulting (in your view) from the torture?*

CCVT: A certificate is obtained from Interim Federal Health Plan (IFHP) by the treating physician or by the referring CCVT staff if the client needs treatment. Sometimes it is difficult to get IFHP and in situations like this we rely on the generosity of our physicians on our network and /or community health centers.

CCIS SOT: If I understand correctly, the key word is 'claimant' and from our program perspective we make no distinction between clients based on their immigration status. We provide access to medical treatment by referral to appropriate professional services such as Alexander Community Health or 8th & 8th Health Centre.

2. *Do you have specific physicians you refer to in these cases?*

CCVT: Yes, we have over 60 physicians that are members of our Health Network.

CCIS SOT: Yes, they are part of our professional network working out of the above agencies and participating in educational workshops hosted by us at CCIS

3. *Is there a standard procedure for following up on the treatment these people then receive?*

CCVT: (No response)

CCIS SOT: Our SOT program plays a coordinating role in referrals and follow-up with attending professionals.

4. *Are there any particular physiotherapists, massage therapists, or other bodywork therapists that*

these people are referred to?(As we all know the timing and sensitivity of approach needed will likely be very individual, and some clients may never feel safe in pursuing this kind of treatment. Yet for others, it may be a major step forward on the road to reclaiming some important aspect of their lives.)

CCVT: We have two Art Therapists on staff that are provide individual as well as group therapy for adults and youth.

CCIS SOT: We have a connection with physiotherapy and Massage therapy at the Calgary Chronic Pain Centre as part of our network.

5. *Does the physical therapy which is offered, and taken up, fit within a team approach-which also includes medical doctors and psychotherapists?*

CCVT: Yes, we have some cases that have benefited or are benefiting through team approach. Since there is no uniformity in the individual reaction to trauma the treatment depends on the trauma history of the individual and the treatment recommended by the physician as well as the cost.

CCIS SOT: Yes, the work is coordinated within our professional network to meet clients' specific needs.

6. *Do you have any suggestions for changes in that process that might improve, or make it more respectful for the health care delivery to these clients?*

CCVT: The most important recommendation we might have is accessibility. These days it is increasingly becoming very difficult to access some health services.

CCIS SOT: I'm not sure what is meant by 'more respectful' (than what?), but we have found that continually offering workshops to the professional community to educate them about the topic of torture and the sensitivity of it's surrounding issues, has been successful for us.

7. *Do you have any other comments or suggestions to offer to this information-gathering process?*

CCVT: If you could share your findings.

CCIS SOT: Good luck in your new position. We would be interested in feedback on the results of your information gathering.

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All respondents will be given a report of our findings. I hope that we will see you at this workshop, and that we at the VCST can learn from any input you may bring to this discovery and discussion process.



Howard Dieno, President VCST.

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VCST AGM, June 26, 2003;

a review by Ken Agar-Newman

The President's report was presented by Marianne for Marco Andino. The summary of activities included the following: during June 2002 we participated in the peace walk and had a VCST booth during the peace activities: Liz Stannard left the coordination and moved to Saskatchewan. Janice Hlady was hired as coordinator and she organized the Part I of the conference on Refugee Resiliency.



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... **"AGM"** continued from page 5.

There were 67 participants, and 12 speakers, volunteers, and invited refugees. It was very successful. In April we welcomed Cristina Shore as coordinator and she organized the Part II workshop, which was also a success. During this fiscal year we developed a web-site. The VCST expressed appreciation to Howard Dieno for creating the website as well as donating both his time and money to the web site development. During this year the VCST introduced a newsletter, edited by Penny, as well as an updated pamphlet. Concomitantly Howard edited a video of Refugees sharing their experiences through their poetry. He also developed a power point presentation about VCST. We also created an updated database and mail out list for our conferences/ workshops.

Ken presented the financial report. He reported a total revenue of \$3,410.84, and total expenses of \$2,984.67. The May 31st bank balance was \$2,216.44.

A new board was elected. As incoming president, Howard explained that he would continue enlarging the health services and continue the learning from the conference in the fall, and that he wished to develop more possibilities with the website. He expressed excitement about the newsletter and he added that it needs some formatting changes. He stated too the he would like to see some way to obtain accreditation with the IRCT and he hoped to implement the necessary initiatives for IRCT accreditation. The board members discussed some of the activities we would need to do in order to establish ourselves as an accredited member; for example, front line work with the clinical programme, and VCST accredited counselors working under the auspices of the VCST. Joan mentioned that many of us are working on the front line already. The

attributes of IRCT accreditation were outlined; for example, funding opportunities, publicity and networking. For accreditation, a committee is needed to look into this; and that it is clear that it would be necessary to have direct care facilities available.

The board discussed future plans; conference on the medical aspects of torture. The next meeting for July was set with the goal of prioritizing long-term goals and brainstorming for the conference/ workshop.



Ken Agar-Newman

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VCST & Current Affairs:

by Penny Whillans. As stated in the last Newsletter, we wrote letters of concern about the funding cuts that will effect Refugee Claimants' abilities to be adequately heard and represented in the claim process. We heard from Jeff Bray MLA and via him from Hon. Geoff Plant, BC Attorney General. We have also heard from Dr. Keith Martin MP, and David Anderson, MP. In brief we are told that the province deems that this funding is a federal matter; the federal representatives inform us that this is a joint federal and provincial responsibility and that this matter is under review. We are unclear about what this specifically means.

IRCT AWARDED

(excerpts from a letter from Jens Modvig MD PhD, IRCT Secretary General) IRCT (International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims)

This summer the IRCT was named as "the recipient of the **2003 Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize**. The Prize is the world's largest humanitarian prize (USD1 million), equal only to the Nobel Peace Prize. The Hilton Foundation has been familiar with the IRCT since 1998. The Prize recognizes the IRCT's achievements and developments in the past few years. The Prize will provide a very important investment for our work in strengthening the global network and our collective capacity to secure the rehabilitation services needed for torture victims, to document the prevalence of torture, and to increase our collective impact towards the prevention of torture. This year's Hilton Humanitarian Prize is in recognition of the extraordinary work performed every day by the staff in rehabilitation centres for torture victims worldwide, supported by the IRCT. More importantly, it is a tribute to the torture victims and their families and the strength of the human spirit they display in their determination to overcome the horror of torture to live in dignity." ... Jens Modvig MD PhD IRCT Secretary General

Steven Hilton, President of the Hilton Foundation (www.hiltonfoundation.org) writes; "By addressing the unimaginable suffering of men, women, and even children who have endured torture, IRCT personifies the purpose of the Hilton Humanitarian Prize, which is to recognize and support the work of organizations alleviating human suffering throughout the world."

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Congratulation to **Jan White** and her family on the birth of their baby this summer. Best wishes to all.