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24 August 2017

IHRP Final Report 2017: UNHCR Bangkok



Some of my colleagues and I in the UNHCR Bangkok office with Thai celebrities to promote the welfare of refugees in Thailand.

My fellowship this summer has been profoundly rewarding. I've engaged with a diverse and rich amount of work and made lifelong friendships with people from all over the world. I've also met highly competent colleagues who have enriched my experience and taught me about human rights law, the UN, and the humanitarian field. My colleagues and friends have been supportive and fantastic mentors who have been eager to give me insight to their personal experience in the interview process. Equally, my supervisors have been kind, passionate, and valuable mentors that I was constantly learning from.

During my time at the UNHCR Bangkok, I have learnt about the legal regime concerning refugees in the Southeast Asian region. I've also learned about the political, social, and religious issues in countries of origin, such as Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, and Somalia. I worked at the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) unit of the UNHCR Bangkok office located in the UN ESCAP

building in Bangkok. Our office differs from the field offices along the border as well as the regional office. Our team deals primarily with assessing asylum seekers for refugee recognition and providing protection services for urban refugees who live in Bangkok and Thailand. I invested my time in a diverse programme of work, including research-intensive support for the eligibility officers (EO) on my team through country of origin information (COI) reports. I was also able to apply my legal knowledge when I produced a legal memo on the use of Article 33(2) in adjudicating cases in four different jurisdictions.

My legal analysis was enhanced further when I had the opportunity to interview and adjudicate derivative status claims for family unity in the later part of my fellowship. In this role, I interviewed applicants who wished to merge their cases and adjudicated their case to determine whether they had a genuine and dependent relationship with one another. Specifically, I worked on two spousal cases from two different countries of origin. It was an eye-opening experience that helped me refine my interview and client skills, and it also helped me learn about how to handle challenging parts of the interview, such as clarifying inconsistencies or asking for greater details. I also learned how to work effectively with my interpreter when articulating my questions.

I also continued writing notification letters for applicants, which outlined the reasons for the Office's decisions on their claims. Notification letters are essentially the last leg of an EO's work, as the EO has interviewed the applicant, written the assessment, and now needs to deliver the notification of an asylum seeker's status to them. I found this part of the work helpful to my learning because I had to read the EO's assessments and therefore am better able to pick up the legal arguments which makes a claim under the 1951 Refugee Convention. In the later part of my fellowship, I began providing notification counselling to applicants who had been rejected or recognized. In this capacity, I counselled applicants on their rights of appeal, referred them to other legal aid organizations, provided information about how to live in Thailand after they were recognized, and generally answered questions. These counselling sessions helped me contextualize and put a face to the cases that I was working on.

I was also able to gain greater exposure to the lives of applicants in Thailand when I was responsible for the hotline phone for one week. The UNHCR has a hotline phone for the UNHCR's persons of concerns and is available during out-of-office hours in cases of emergency such as police raids, detention, or medical need. I had to carry this phone with me at all times after work and in the weekend in order to respond to such needs. These calls often required me to counsel applicants in emergency situations and to refer them to the relevant people. The experience was emotionally challenging for both parties on the line, but I also learned how to better navigate emergency situations and provide help to people at crucial periods of time. It also helped me better understand asylum seeker's day-to-day lives in Thailand, particularly as I was

on the RSD team and thus focused more on their claims from their countries of origin instead of their situations in Thailand.

Lastly, perhaps my biggest work this summer has been to develop a COI research tool for the next caseload of applicants that the UNHCR Bangkok is working to adjudicate. The confidential caseload involves a particular group of people with similar claims, so I was tasked with developing a tool that would facilitate the research and assessment portion of the entire RSD process. My work aimed to enhance the Office's understanding of the particular group of people so the EOs can better adjudicate their claims. Ultimately, I facilitated one portion of our internal training in preparation for this caseload. This project has required the most commitment and time (ie. half of my fellowship), and I'm proud of the tool and the knowledge that I have acquired in working on this assignment.

Overall, I have been able to better comprehend the limitations and constraints that the agency faces on all sides - whether it's from the UN headquarters in Geneva, by the local government, or from receiving countries. I've also been able to understand the various actors involved and invested in the process, including the legal representatives of asylum seekers and refugees, the Royal Thai Government officials, the protection and eligibility officers on our team, resettlement colleagues, the psychologists, the interpreters, and the reviewers who supervise all the EOs and my work. Thanks to the IHRP, this summer has been a pivotal experience that has allowed me to immerse myself in human rights and legal work in a fast-paced, legally challenging, and thought provoking setting.