

Radio Interview Transcript (translated) – SBS Radio Arabic Program

Speaking with Hashim Eidam: ACL IHSS Case Coordinator with SBS Radio Arabic presenter Marie Myssy

20 June 2008

Duration: 18 minutes 47 seconds

SBS Arabic Program presenter Marie Myssy: Within Refugee Week, which we are celebrating this week, there will be recognition of the contribution of 700,000 refugees who have made Australia their home for the last 60 years. Today, the 20th of June, is the international day for refugees, the theme for Refugee Week this year is 'A Place to Call Home' and it concentrates on attracting the attention of our responsibilities towards those people who don't have a safe place to live, and also to highlight the situations of those who come to Australia to start a new beginning or life after they lost their homes due to disputes/wars, injustice and persecution. Refugee Week is an opportunity to identify the personal experiences of those people who came to Australia and their contribution in their second country.

One of those is Hashim Eidam who arrived in Australia in the year 2000 coming from Sudan as a political refugee. Hashim fled his country due to persecution because of his political opinions, and he is a good example of a successful refugee. He is working now as a case coordinator – with ACL in their IHSS program (Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy) which provides assistance for newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants to help them settle in Australia and rebuild their life from the beginning.

Now we listen to Hashim Eidam's story.

ACL IHSS co-ordinator Hashim Eidam: I am a refugee from Sudan. I was studying abroad in Libya when the National Islamic Regime NIF took power in Sudan through a military coup. I was an active member of a Sudanese political party which was governing Sudan during the democratic era. So as soon as the military coup took power we stood against the regime, we used to organize political activities at the universities within the Sudanese students unions. I was a well-known opposition activist against the NIF regime; actually we opposed their fundamentalism extremist ideology/way of Islam, their dictatorship and the military coup/way through which they took power of government.

We continued organizing political activities and writing political articles against the dictatorial NIF regime and participated in the activities arranged by the Sudanese opposition in exile. Also, I participated in the activities of the National Democratic Alliance opposition against the Sudanese NIF regime.

All those activities were major factors resulting in my name blacklisted by the fundamentalist Islamic regime from its first day in power. After that I travelled to Asmara and Cairo to attend some opposition meetings and activities. I stayed about two years in Cairo where I participated in most of the political activities organised against the Sudanese regime and revealing their dictatorship.

Marie: Hashim, you mentioned that you were studying in Libya. Did you return back to Sudan since that time?

Hashim: Actually, I returned to Sudan twice for opposition political tasks, both visits were very short and lasted only for a few days. In my last visit to Sudan, I faced a lot of troubles as the security authorities were searching for me at the airport, my relatives and friends who accompanied me to farewell me were surprised when they heard my name repeatedly announced through the loudspeakers at the airport just minutes after I boarded the plane. That was my last visit to Sudan.

Marie: How did you come to Australia?

Hashim: I applied for refugee status at the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Cairo. I received approval for refugee status and then they gave me options for resettlement. It was a list of countries from which I chose Australia. I waited about eight months for the procedures and visa processing at the Australian embassy in Cairo.

Marie: Hashim, the word refugee... someone to be a refugee while his home country still exists? How do you feel?

Hashim: Actually, a refugee is a person who has been forced to leave his country against his will or due to some circumstances. These circumstances could be environmental/natural disasters or catastrophes in which life became impossible in that place, or it could be due to a kind of persecution related to a political opinion, religious sect or ethnic group. This persecution might forced the person to leave his home country because he doesn't feel safe there but absolutely he/she will be broken hearted and might feel grief and sorrow towards his home country and thinking of returning back to it.

Marie: Was it easy for you to settle when you first arrived in Australia? What were the difficulties/ barriers you faced?

Hashim: Yes, there were a lot of difficulties. I remember when I arrived with my wife; they took us to a short term accommodation in Liverpool. We were the first Sudanese refugees there. There was a small number of Sudanese in different suburbs in Sydney but we were the first Sudanese family to settle in Liverpool. So, it was very hard for us to socialise, visit or communicate, or to have a daily social connection/contact with our community. We spent very hard times, yes we had some sort of occasional social communication but it was in long intervals. We tried to put an end to those barriers in communication by spending a lot of time in Liverpool library actually.

Marie: Did you speak English at that time??

Hashim: Yes, because I used to work as a translator for more than 8-10 years, but it was a "written" translation.

Marie: Yes, but that might make it easier for you that you know to speak English!

Hashim: Yes, but I used to practice the translation more than "verbal" interpreting, so it was hard for me to speak or understand the Australian accent. Therefore I tried to concentrate on improving my English language skills. I enrolled at AMEP English classes at (UWS Macarthur - AMEP) in Liverpool – which is an ACL consortium partner. I studied a lot of courses/English classes and attended many community events (and had English

conversations) at Liverpool library. I benefitted so much from those classes. They enabled me to continue my studies at TAFE, as my previous studies were in Civil Engineering, I studied a graduate certificate in Civil Engineering at Ultimo TAFE. I also did other courses in translation/interpreting in order to get some qualifications to help me find a job in Australia.

Marie: So, we can say, the first barrier eliminated was the English language?

Hashim: Yes

Marie: What were the other difficulties/barriers?

Hashim: Feeling homesick. It was hard at that time to make overseas calls (nowadays there are a lot of overseas calling cards) but at the time it was expensive to call overseas through direct landline.

Marie: Do you still have family members in Sudan?

Hashim: Oh yes, my parents, and some of my brothers and sisters are in Sudan. Some were living abroad in other countries due to the political situation.

Marie: So, you completed your English classes, then studied Civil Engineering and interpreting courses at TAFE? All that before you started working at ACL. Now you are working at ACL – what is your role at ACL?

Hashim: My role is as ACL IHSS case coordinator, assisting newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants who are eligible for settlement services according to the referrals from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship within the IHSS program, a perfect complete program to assist newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants to settle in Australia. But I used to work in the same field in my previous jobs – as a volunteer with the Sudanese Settlement Services organization assisting newly arrived Sudanese to access mainstream services such as Centrelink, banks, Medicare and all required services. I also volunteered with St Vincent de Paul, then worked with them in the HFS program providing household goods assistance to newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants under the IHSS. I worked with St Vincent de Paul for three years, which helped me so much to get this position at ACL.

Marie: What do you think of your work? I mean, you were assisted before, and then you got a job to help others. Do you think this is an opportunity to pay back some of the good deed to this society who helped you?

Hashim: Yes, sure, because my first impression about this country was a positive one about how the people here are so helpful. I remember that we were visited by some people from St Vincent de Paul and other community organisations offering their assistance to us. That gave me the idea of volunteering in the community – this idea became like a dream for me to get the opportunity to give back some of the kindness and assistance that we received from government and non government organisations (most of them working under Department of Immigration programs). So, my previous job at St Vincent de Paul and my current job at ACL is an attempt to repay the kind act. I am trying now to make every effort to help and assist newly arrived entrants in all services whenever I am able.

Marie: As you are working now as a case coordinator with newly arrived refugees, what do you think are the difficulties they might face?

Hashim: Our clients are newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants. They have different visa categories referred to us by the Department of Immigration, but all of them as new arrivals as their first time in the country. They do face many difficulties in their settlement process and our role is to assist them to ease or overcome these difficulties and to enable them to settle better and adapt in this country. We assist them to access all services they need from the government and non government service providers such as Centrelink, Medicare, schools and all necessary services. And now through our IHSS program, funded by DIAC, we provide free rent up to one month (for refugees holding visa subclass 200 and 204). Also we provide transport assistance in cash, according to their family size, to assist them using public transport to access mainstream services for their first month and they can also claim for extra assistance in the second month if they have acceptable reasons. Actually, we try to eliminate the difficulties they face in the first days of arrival. We look after them for up to six months (this can be extended) and then we refer them to other service providers who will provide other settlement services.

Marie: This week we are celebrating Refugee Week and today Friday 20 June is International Refugee Day which is a special event to celebrate the contributions of refugees, contrary to what some people say that refugees are a burden in our society. Are refugees able to contribute to the community? I mean, like yourself, you are a good example of a successful refugee!

Hashim: Yes. Sure, most of the refugees who arrive in Australia have a lot of contributions, I can recall in the media release by ACL Government Programs General Manager Michael Cox saying that “we recognize and celebrate the contribution that refugees and newly arrived migrants make to society”. Refugees have an important role as far as contribution in Australian society – because most of them have good experiences overseas in different fields.

Marie: That means we can benefit from their contribution?

Hashim: Yes, sure. But there may be some barriers like language and it may take some time for Australian society to recognise and benefit from this experience. Many refugees come with experience in “in demand” fields but they may face barriers such as language or it may be because they don’t know where or how to access relevant services or where to get information or how to get local experience or where to get recognition for their qualifications. These skills may need a period of time, may be up to two to three years to obtain recognition and information that may assist them to get a job in his area of speciality. So it may take some time but after the preliminary period, I mean after they settled, they will be able to show their skills and play an important role in Australian society.

Marie: Coming to the end of this interview, the theme for Refugee Week this year is ‘A Place to Call Home’. Do you consider Australia as your country?

Hashim: Yes, sure. Actually, the theme ‘A Place to Call Home’ is very true for us refugees and particularly for me personally as a refugee, because everyone is supposed to have a place where they can feel safe, settled and secure. They should feel they have a future for himself and his family that place can be called “home” therefore I consider Australia my home and country because I live and settled away from the troubles in a country that is secure. I feel I am living in my country because through my permanent job, my kids are at schools, so I can feel there is a bright future for which I can work hard to achieve my dreams for that future. I hope I will be able to do something good to contribute to my country Australia and to provide every possible assistance to newly arrived refugees and migrants and to pay back some of the kindness and assistance to those generous people who helped me in this open handed country.

Marie: I would like to thank you Hashim – we are proud of you and people like you because you are an example of a successful refugee in Australia.
That was Hashim Eidam – a case coordinator at ACL, he himself came to Australia as a political refugee from Sudan.

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