

# Christian Freedom International

JULY 2015

## PAKISTANI CHRISTIANS SEEKING ASYLUM

*"Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." Hebrews 13:3*



# THANKFUL, DESPITE HARDSHIPS...

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*PICTURED IS PASTOR JOSEPH & HIS FAMILY*



# “...[THEY] SCRAPE BY IN LIMBO, MORE VULNERABLE THAN REFUGEES LIVING IN A REFUGEE CAMP.

After arriving in Bangkok, persecuted Christian asylum seekers from Pakistan expected the UNHCR would protect them, but Thai police ignore “persons of concern” cards. Thailand never signed the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention that protects refugees’ rights.

To make matters worse, the UNHCR in Bangkok is an enormous, uncaring, inefficient bureaucracy that provides little to no help to Christian asylum seekers.

As a result these persecuted Christian, “urban refugees” scrape by in limbo, more vulnerable than refugees living in a refugee camp.

Despite the hardships, the Christian asylum seekers say they are thankful to be out of Pakistan.



**THE SITUATION FOR PAKISTANI CHRISTIAN ASYLUM SEEKERS IN BANGKOK HAS BECOME SO DIFFICULT THAT EVEN THE MAINSTREAM, SECULAR MEDIA CANNOT IGNORE IT.**

Sources for the following include the Express Tribune with the International New York Times, and Associated Press.

**“THEY WILL KILL US. A PAKISTANI CHRISTIAN FAMILY SEEKS ASYLUM IN BANGKOK AFTER ESCAPE.**

BANGKOK: They were a middle-class family in Pakistan, living in a comfortable three-bedroom apartment with a modern kitchen with three kids, reports The Associated Press.

Fluent in English, the father ran his own moving company while the mother taught art.

A death threat signed by an extremist group with three bullets attached compelled the Christian family to leave it all behind 18 months ago.

It’s relatively easy to obtain a Thai tourist visa.

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# LIFE AS A PERSECUTED CHRISTIAN “URBAN REFUGEE”

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(CONTINUED FROM PG. 3)

Now they live in a barren room in Bangkok, where the children share a double bed and the parents sleep on the floor. They cook on a propane burner on a tiny balcony. A picture of Jesus, the source of their solace and their troubles, hangs on the inside of the door.

This, increasingly, is the life of the asylum-seeker and refugee.

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More than half the 14 million refugees and asylum-seekers under the mandate of the UN refugee agency do not live in the camps they are often associated with. A growing number live in cities and towns around the world. Across Asia, from India to the Pacific islands, there are about half a million such “urban refugees,” according to the agency.

The Pakistani family no longer fears for their lives, but they face other fears like arrest, hunger and the possibility that they will never be able to live freely.

Unable to work legally and with no legal status in Thailand, they and others like them must remain mostly hidden while they scrape by on odd jobs and donations from churches, aid groups and individuals.

Their children, all elementary-school age, do not go to school and spend their entire day indoors.

“We just wanted to save our lives,” said the father, who has overstayed his visa and like the dozen other asylum-seekers interviewed for this story asked not to be identified for fear of arrest.

“We didn’t know anything when we arrived. Now we are just trying to survive.”

Many asylum-seekers pin their hopes on an elusive prize: resettlement in a third country such as the US or Canada through a process overseen by the UN High Commissioner of Refugees.

That can take five years or more, and it often doesn’t happen at all.

The surge of urban refugees challenges reluctant host countries like Thailand, which in the past has allowed refugees from surrounding countries into border camps, but doesn’t legally recognize asylum-seekers or refugees.

One reason is that the number of asylum-seekers in Bangkok has jumped several-fold to more than 8,000 over the past few years, according to numbers from the UNHCR.





## “TEN DAYS LATER, THE SCHOOL RECEIVED ANOTHER WARNING, ONLY THIS TIME IT WAS WITH BULLETS.

The biggest and fastest-growing contingent here is from Pakistan, experts say, while other big groups come from Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Somalia and Syria.

When they land, many are shocked to discover they face arrest once their visas run out.

They expect the UNHCR will protect them, but refugee advocates say Thai police generally ignore UN letters declaring them to be “persons of concern.”

**Thailand never signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention that protects refugees’ rights;** neither have neighbors Malaysia and Indonesia, where thousands more asylum-seekers live.

So these urban refugees scrape by in limbo, freer than those in camp settings but in some ways more vulnerable.

“This is the future,” said Mireille Girard, the Thailand representative for the UNHCR. “We really have to adjust to providing assistance in urban environments.”

Despite the hardships, many say they will never return home. They are too afraid. “We’ll just face the same sort of threats again,” said the mother. “I’m not willing to sacrifice my children for that.”

### ‘WE WILL SHOOT YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN’

In Pakistan, this couple and some Christian friends helped run a small, free school for poor children.

One morning in 2013, a warning signed by a militant group was slipped under the door of the school office.

“Stop giving missionary education to Muslim children. Otherwise, we will shoot you and your children,” said the threat, which was viewed by The Associated Press.

Ten days later, the school received another warning, only this time it was with bullets.



The school volunteers filed a complaint to the police; the AP viewed a copy of the document, which had been stamped by local police to indicate they had received it.

The couple’s account was corroborated by several people contacted by the AP. The couple said the school never taught Christianity to Muslim children, but did teach Bible stories and prayers to the Christian kids when their Muslim classmates were not there.

They said that sometimes the Muslim kids would hang around, hear the prayers and recite them at home. Pakistan’s religious minorities are increasingly persecuted – not only Christians but Hindus and Ahmadis.

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## “WHEN THEY ARRIVED IN THE STEAMY THAI CAPITAL, RELIEF QUICKLY TURNED TO ANXIETY.”

(CONTINUED FROM PG. 5)

The couple from the school say that although no one has been executed under the country's harsh blasphemy law, it has been used to threaten non-Muslims and incite mob violence.

In November, another Christian couple was killed by a mob for allegedly desecrating the Quran.

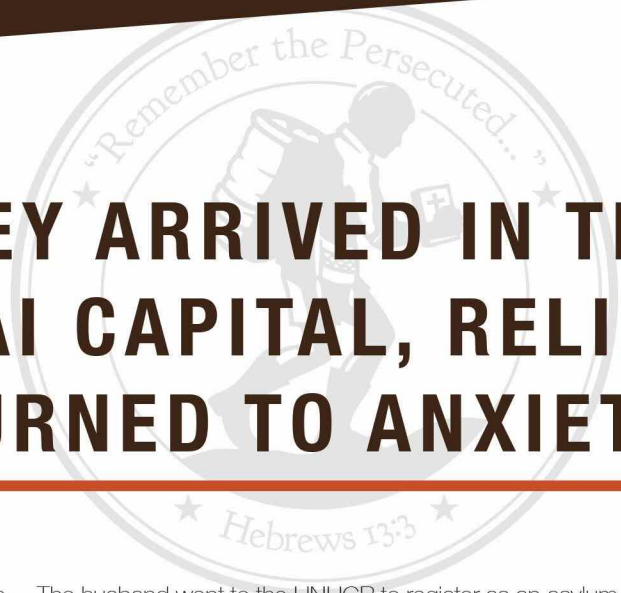
This threatened couple fled to Thailand because friends said it was easy to get a tourist visa and because other Christians had gone there. “People told us, ‘Save your lives first, then worry about the other things,’” the husband said. After hiding for a month, they packed two suitcases of their belongings and boarded a midnight flight for Bangkok. When they arrived in the steamy Thai capital, relief quickly turned to anxiety.

The food, the language – everything was new.

The husband went to the UNHCR to register as an asylum-seeker and was shocked to learn he would have to wait two years – until September 2015 – just to get his first interview in the “refugee status determination” process. Now, for new arrivals, the wait is three years.

The UN agency has more than 60 staffers in Bangkok working to verify thousands of asylum-seekers' stories and determine whether they are refugees with well-founded fears of persecution, said the UNHCR's Girard. Each case must be examined to screen out those trying to exploit the system, such as those being trafficked by smuggling rings.

“We have to be very strict in recognizing who is a genuine refugee and who is not,” she said. For those waiting, money quickly becomes an issue.







After exhausting their savings, the Pakistani family visited churches for support. Most turned them down.

Those arrested typically wind up in the Immigration Detention Center. The only way out is paying for your own flight home or finally gaining resettlement overseas.

Some stay in detention for years. Veerawit Tianchainan, executive director for the Thai Committee for Refugees Foundation, said the Thai government fears that recognizing asylum-seekers and refugees would draw more of them.

He said Thailand's location and ease of access will draw desperate people anyway, and reforms are needed to address that reality.

Government ministries have had informal discussions about legislation that would protect asylum-seekers and refugees for one year, without granting the right to work, Veerawit said.

Sihasak Phuangketkeow, the permanent secretary at Thailand's Foreign Ministry, said the proposal merits a serious look, but is not in the pipeline for formal consideration.

## THE FIRST INTERVIEW WITH THE U.N. CAN BE TRAUMATIC.

Refugees are asked to provide evidence of persecution. Some break down in tears or can't express themselves clearly, said Medhapan Sundaradeja, the Thailand director for Asylum Access, a nonprofit group that gives asylum-seekers free advice.

Decisions can take months. Inconsistencies can lead to cases getting rejected, though asylum-seekers can appeal.

Files of people recognized as refugees are then sent to potential host countries to be considered for resettlement, a process that typically takes another 12 to 18 months.

But of the roughly 860,000 most vulnerable refugees worldwide

believed to need resettlement in 2013, only 80,000 spaces were available.

The Pakistani father says they have no choice but to wait.

He has no doubt what extremists will do if he returns: "I know they will kill both of us, my wife and me, and they won't spare my children."

So he waits and dreams of a life where they don't need to hide and where his children can freely attend school. "We just want to go where our lives are safe," he says with a sigh, "and we have some freedom."

# WHAT YOU CAN DO:

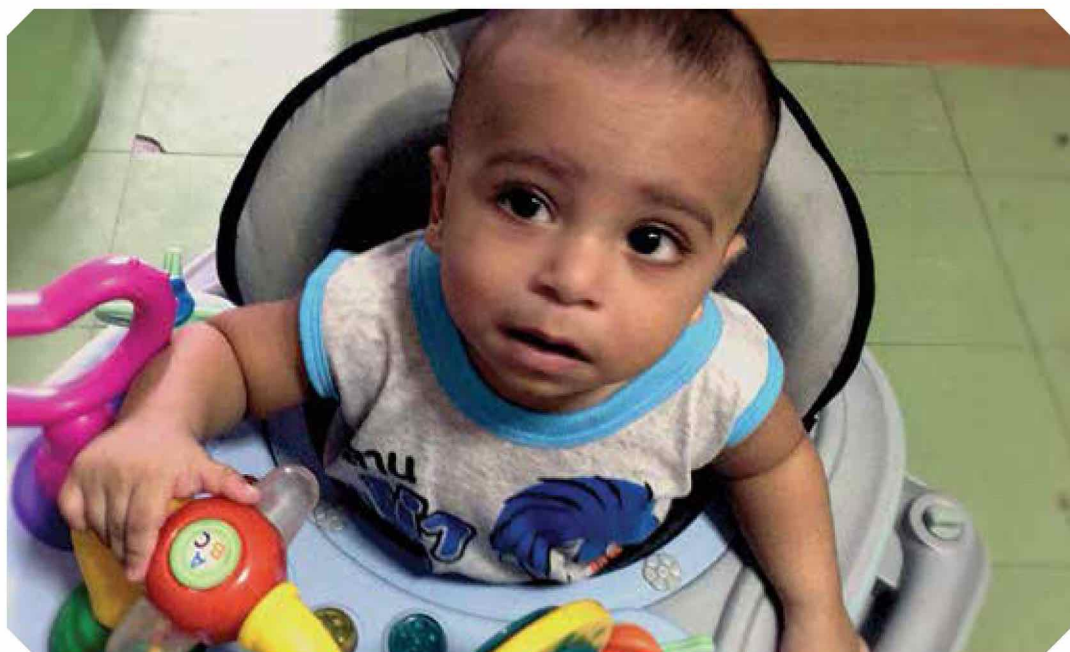
**HELP**



**KEEP  
OTHERS  
INFORMED  
ABOUT  
the  
PERSECUTED  
CHURCH**

**PLEASE**

PASS THIS NEWSLETTER  
ALONG WHEN YOU ARE  
FINISHED READING IT.



Become a "Friend" by prayerfully considering a sponsorship of \$100 per month. Your friendship with a persecuted Christian family will provide for their most basic, lifesaving needs. You may communicate with the family you sponsor through monthly correspondence.



Pastor Joseph Wakeman from Texas, along with CFI coworkers, visited, provided help, and prayed for Joseph and his family. They were also able to bring Joseph's wife to a hospital in Bangkok for much needed heart examinations. Please also pray for her.

**CONTACT US!**

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