

## Thailand Visit 2017

# “TOO WEAK TO DEFEND THEMSELVES”

*By Ijaz Zulfquar*

Date: February 25<sup>th</sup> to March 9<sup>th</sup> 2017

Purpose:

1. To file a formal request at UNHCR Bangkok for reopening the Talib Masih Case.
2. To meet NGOs working for educating refugee students and providing legal assistance to refugees.
3. To get updates on the situation of Pakistani Christian asylum seekers and refugees.

What did I do:

*1. Meeting Life Raft International, Bangkok*

I met Chris Woodruff, President and Evette Rivera, Program Director of the organization Life Raft International. In partnership with churches in Bangkok about 60 volunteers of LR minister to almost 400 refugees. Their “Learn-Serve-Teach” program provides resources that enable refugees to obtain food and shelter. LR also provides scholarships for refugee students to attend schools and enable other families to homeschool their children. LR also visits the prison bringing food, water and toiletries for the detainees.

I also visited 4 Learning Centers where refugee children are given education. Although the UNHCR encourages refugee students to go to regular Thai schools or to Bangkok Refugee Centre, most parents can't send the kids there because of security risks and the BRC center being far away. Some of these Learning Centers are well managed and adopt an international educational standard like the ACE system, such as the Glory Education Center of pastor Danny Foo or Gcel of pastor Emily.

Others, like the Community Education Centre of pastor Adam Ali or the Hope in Christ Ministry School of pastor Nadeem Nasir, should be admired for working with minimum financial resources. Teachers have to make laborious efforts by collecting old books and downloading materials from the internet to prepare lessons and prepare test papers. Almost everyone's visa is expired, so they work under fear of police and immigration raids. Sometimes they have to lock the children in the school rooms for hours to avoid arrests.

*2. Meeting Pakistani Christian community from Gojra*

More than 50 houses and a church were looted, destroyed by setting them on fire on 1<sup>st</sup> august 2009 in the Christian Colony Gojra, Pakistan. Eight Christians, including three men, four women and a seven year old boy were burnt alive, never to forget the ninth: an unborn baby. Many of them fled to other countries, including Thailand.

On March 3<sup>rd</sup> I met about 20 asylum seekers from Gojra, and on other days about 50 more in their buildings and in the IDC. It is strange to note that the asylum request of all of them has been rejected, even of Khalid Naz, known as Fojji (the Army man), whose name is in the First Investigation Report (FIR)

of the Gojra incident. Khalid was accused of distributing knives among Christians to attack the Muslims and of firing at a Muslim crowd, in result of which a Muslim attacker died.

In the Immigration Detention Center (IDC) I met high school teacher and political activist William Parkash. William recognized the attackers of Gojra during police investigation. The attackers belonged to a militant organization named Lushkar-e-Jhangvi, which is now an international terrorist organization having ties to ISIS. William is in the IDC for 2 and a half years now. The UNHCR should duly be questioned why they think he doesn't deserve a refugee status.

### *3. Meeting with Pakistani Christian community from Karachi*

I also had a meeting with the Pakistani Christian community from Karachi. Among others I met with Mr. George Masih. In 2013, an extremist called Muhammad Asif chopped off the head of George's father, Boota Masih, on blasphemy accusations. George's wife and children are also in the IDC. Pastor Stanley Emmanuel told me that he and his wife were arrested on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2015 with five children. He speaks of unspeakable mistreatment of the young boys, who are kept with strong elderly males in the same room. The oldest child was six years old and the youngest was less than three months old at the time of the arrest.

I also met Gusher Murad, the driver of Shahbaz Bhatti. Gusher was with this Christian Minister who was murdered by Punjabi Taliban. Bhatti's case is still on trial. Gusher is the only person who can recognize the murderers. He applied for asylum on April 8<sup>th</sup> 2014. I don't know why his case has not been decided yet.

### *4. General impression of refugees*

In Bangkok I saw a poverty and helplessness of my people which I didn't even see in Pakistan. Sometimes they made a cup of tea only for me, because they couldn't afford for all visitors. Most people are living without visa. Men do most of the grocery. Women and children stay indoors for the fear of arrests. Children can't even play outside and are not allowed to make a noise, lest the neighbors complain. They can't find work without papers. To support their families, many take the risk of doing low paid illegal work, which is strictly forbidden. When they get caught, they have to pay huge bribe; sometimes up to 50,000 Bhat (equals ± 1400 Euros).

Most live on food package support from local churches, which is shrinking day by day. Very few are lucky that they get support from NGOs and churches for house rent and children educational scholarships. John Shan, a local politician from Karachi, now works on 12-14 hours seven days a week. His eyes welled up when he told me he can't afford to bring home a small pastry on the birthday of his children. His elder brother, Patras Shan, brings food every day to the IDC for those who get no visitors.

### *5. Visiting the Immigration Detention Center*

On March 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> I visited the Immigration Detention Center Bangkok. The inmates tell horrible stories about this place. Pakistani males are kept in room number 3. It is a windowless hall room. Sometimes it is so crowded that people can't even lay straight on their backs, so they have to sleep packed like breads. The room has three bathrooms. Due to close contact and poor hygiene, diseases like scabies, tuberculosis and dengue spread.

Some have died in the IDC without medical help, like Shafqat Masih. His wife Barbra is still in the IDC with her sister. Nayyab Mehboob is there with her two daughters; 1 and a half year old Nimo and 5 years old Abigalo. According to the news on March 28<sup>th</sup> 2017 19 children under 15 are staying in the IDC. Two

boys and seven girls are under age seven. This may call for the attention of the organizations working for children's rights.

I met Esther Merab, who is only 19 months old. She's suffering from a complex heart disease. She will require four consecutive surgeries to avail a chance to a new life. Her father Emmanuel has diabetes and high blood pressure. Quite often her fragile health condition deteriorates and she's needed to be rushed to a hospital. Only Emmanuel can do that but he's been called back to the IDC. I wonder if those who saw the dead body of a two year old boy washed ashore and opened their borders to Syrians, could also see the suffering of Pakistani children like little Esther Merab.

#### *6. Meeting with Asylum Access Thailand*

AAT is an American NGO giving legal assistance to refugees in preparing their asylum applications and appeals. They work in partnership with the UNHCR to assess people's vulnerability on the issues of persecution, women's rights, child protection, domestic violence, etc. They guide the refugees about the procedure with the "The Self Help Kit" document to prepare their applications, but refugees are also welcome to get help on specific issues related to their cases.

#### *7. Meeting with UNHCR*

On my last day I met two senior officials of the UNHCR, the RSD Officer and the Senior Protection Officer, on behalf of Jubilee Campaign. The purpose was to submit a formal request to reopen the case of Talib Masih. Talib lived in Korian Village in District Toba Tek Singh in Punjab, Pakistan. He along with his son Imran Masih and another Christian were accused of desecrating pages of the Quran in July 2009. The accusation resulted in the destruction of all Christian houses and churches in Korian and two days later the aforementioned burning of the Christian Colony in Gojra and 8 deaths.

Talib's case was rejected and the file was closed by the UNHCR on failing to prove his identity. Last year Talib requested Jubilee Campaign to provide assistance. Jubilee Campaign USA worked on this case since October 2016 together with Jubilee Campaign The Netherlands. I worked with NGOs and churches in Pakistan and made contact with Talib Masih in Thailand and his family in Pakistan.

The UNHCR accepted the file and is ready to reopen the case, but is asking for more evidence. It has asked that the letter of the Bishop of the Church of Pakistan should be written under oath, which seems like unfair. In my meeting with the UNHCR I felt that they think all Pakistani Christian cases are untrue and they have come here to find a way of better life into the west. I wonder what economic benefit can a high school teacher gain by staying in the IDC for 30 months, while getting twice older and sicker by each passing day. What benefit can people get by working for 12 to 14 hours for just 7000 Bhats? And what hope their future generation is having after staying in Thailand for 5 to 7 years without food, medical care and education?

## Overall conclusion

The situation of the refugees at this moment is getting worse. The UNHCR seems to be refusing their cases, rejecting the appeals and closing the files. In the week from 20<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> March cases of more than 100 Pakistani Christians were rejected. On the other hand Thai authorities are cancelling their bails and calling them back to IDC. The plan seems to be like putting behind bars as many as possible to increase pressure on them to return, not realizing that before they return to Pakistan their news will.

First of all they will be on the mercy of the FIA (a border control, counter-intelligence and security agency under the Ministry of Interior of Pakistan) whose corrupt officials will demand heavy bribes for their release, which they will not be able to pay. Then the over-ambitious interior minister would like to punish them, and finally the extremists will be waiting for them to settle scores and create more fear in people's hearts by preying on the innocent. At the moment the powerful world seems too busy to pay attention to the plight of about 3000 Pakistani Christian asylum seekers who are TOO WEAK TO DEFEND THEMSELVES.