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Desperate Pakistani Christians languish in Thailand. The U.S. should provide asylum

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The friendly, informal nation of Thailand draws visitors from around the world. Filling some backstreet Bangkok neighborhoods are impoverished Pakistani Christians, stranded in the Thai capital while hoping to gain religious asylum elsewhere. They survive with support from my friends at Christian Freedom International, which aids victims of religious persecution, and other humanitarian groups.

The situation reflects social and legal discrimination and persecution, often violent, against religious minorities in Pakistan. Noted the Global Minorities Alliance: “an increase of attacks against minorities in Pakistan ... has led to Christians heavy-heartedly fleeing their country,” many to Thailand.

There’s not much the U.S. government can do to ease Christians’ plight in Pakistan, other than press Islamabad to protect the lives, dignity, and liberties of all its peoples. But Washington could accept the few thousand Pakistanis stuck in Bangkok, essentially people without a country. Even the Trump administration should welcome religious minorities fleeing Islamist oppression.

Pakistan long has been inhospitable to anyone other than Sunni Muslims. Open Doors ranked Pakistan as the world’s number five persecutor on its World Watch List. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom rated Pakistan a Country of Particular Concern. The State Department put Pakistan on its “Special Watch List.”

The British All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief recently detailed the awful state of religious liberty in Pakistan: “Pakistan presents a particularly bleak environment for individuals wishing to manifest their right to freedom of religion or belief. Across the country there are individual and communal cases of discrimination and oppression.” Noted Umair Javed, a columnist for the Pakistani newspaper Dawn, “Violence against minority groups is deeply embedded within political and social processes in Pakistan.”

It is small wonder that many Pakistanis sought sanctuary elsewhere. I have talked with refugees now living in Bangkok and heard tragic stories of threats, attacks, hostility, and violence. Many were physically assaulted. Most had good reasons to flee.

A few years ago Thailand became a hoped-for way-station because the land of smiles was one of the few nations which permitted Pakistanis to enter as tourists. Moreover, the United Nations was present, having long certified as refugees Burmese fleeing persecution and conflict nearby. So Pakistani Christians hoped they could gain resettlement in the West, and especially America.

At one point there were an estimated 11,500 Pakistani Christians in Thailand, but it soon became evident that the latter was no sanctuary. Even my short visits over time, aided by CFI, highlighted the many challenges asylum seekers face.

The UN took months, even years, to interview Pakistani refugees. Thailand never ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and does not respect UN refugee designations. Pakistanis cannot legally work or purchase property.

Alas, the situation has worsened as the Thai government intensified efforts to find and arrest refugees. Detainees are stuck in overcrowded, squalid immigration detention centers. Some detainees end up in prisons, confined alongside hardened criminals.

CFI aids Pakistani refugees in numerous ways, providing food and sundries to families, supporting a church focused on refugees' needs, visiting and bringing food to detainees, finding employment opportunities for adults, counseling family members, and running a school for children. But the group can only assist a limited number of families. Needs dramatically outrun resources, despite CFI's best efforts.

Nevertheless, hope remains. CFI's Wendy Wright relates stories of Pakistani refugees threatened at home who find spiritual growth and happiness among fellow believers. Pakistani expatriates who gain fulfillment serving their even more desperate countrymen and women. These brave souls fled utter darkness at home and now reflect God's light in another country.

The Trump administration should encourage Bangkok to test alternatives to mass incarceration, such as bail backed by ankle bracelets and other forms of official supervision. Thailand also should consider creating official migrant housing and work opportunities, at least for religious refugees desiring to be resettled overseas.

Most important, Washington should take in Pakistanis currently stuck in Bangkok. The number is quite small. Having been persecuted, they are among the best candidates for U.S. citizenship, almost certain to appreciate their new home. Opening America's door, even only a crack, would help ease criticism of the administration for its ungenerous approach to refugees.

It is easy for Americans to forget how blessed they are. Washington should allow Pakistani Christians stuck in Thailand to make the U.S. their home, to replace the one they gave up in their search for respect, safety, and liberty.

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