



2 more Indonesian Christians seeking asylum deported by ICE

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The fallout from the arrest of four Indonesian Christians who were seeking asylum in the U.S. continues: three of them have now been deported and the fourth could soon follow.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement deported two of the men this week: Rovani Wangko on Thursday and Saul Timisela on Friday. The third, Arino Massie, was removed two weeks ago. The remaining refugee, Oldy Manopo, learned his "stay of removal" request was denied and could be deported at any time.

The four were among nine Indonesian Christians who took sanctuary at the Reformed Church of Highland Park in 2012 after they were targeted for deportation. The following year, ICE gave all nine men permission to stay in the country as long as they ended their sanctuary and periodically checked in with ICE.

In May, four of them met with ICE for a scheduled check-in and were detained.

"I do not believe it is somehow the will of the divine to desecrate the planet through greedy, war-mongering policies — to participate in the creation of a refugee/asylee/immigrant crisis and then to have our 'solution' be to racially and ethnically clean house through hate-crime executive orders," said Seth Kaper-Dale pastor of the Reformed Church of Highland Park who has advocated on behalf of Indonesian Christians seeking asylum in the U.S.

A spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement confirmed Wangko was deported. He said he could not confirm the status of Timisela and Manopo, but ICE's jail database still lists Manopo in custody.

Like many Indonesian Christians, the nine arrived on tourist or work visas in the 1990s. They overstayed their visas, fearing religious persecution if they returned to the Muslim-majority country. They arrived in the U.S. shortly after the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 took effect, requiring asylum seekers to file their applications within a year of reaching the U.S.

The four who were arrested all applied for asylum past the deadline and were denied, Kaper-Dale said.

The group's arrests in May sparked the revival of a Congressional bill that would grant extensions to certain Indonesian Christians, allowing them to reopen their asylum cases.

The Department of Homeland Security released new guidelines in February directing ICE agents to target all unauthorized immigrants, not just those charged with violent crimes or drug-related felonies.

David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, said that under the Trump administration immigration authorities seem to be going after "convenient" cases of unauthorized immigrants, rather than weeding out those with serious criminal records.

"Under the Obama administration, there were many, many cases of a similarly baffling nature where there seemed to be a removal that was not in the public interest, someone who should not have been a priority for removal," Bier said. "So I'm hesitant to say that this is something that would definitely not have happened under the Obama administration."

ICE declines to discuss individual cases at length, but the agency previously said in a statement that, "aliens who illegally enter the United States and those who overstay or otherwise violate the terms of their visas have violated our nation's laws and can pose a threat to national security and public safety."

Wangko's wife learned of her husband's deportation after she stopped by the Elizabeth Detention Center Thursday for her daily visit, Kaper-Dale said.

Friday morning, she received a call from Wangko from Japan, where he was waiting for a connecting flight to Indonesia.

Kaper-Dale called the removals a sign of "ethnic cleansing" led by ICE officials and the Trump administration.

Bier of the Cato Institute said there's no evidence to suggest the federal government would specifically target Indonesian Christians for deportation. In fact, he said, Trump had said during his campaign that he would find relief for Christian refugees and asylum seekers.

"I don't see it as an effort to target this specific community," Bier said. "I think this is an issue that is affecting many different immigrant communities."