

Dear Lord Alton and Katharine,

Thank you very much for what you are doing for asylum seekers in Thailand and I must tell you that many of them pray for success in the work you do for them. I was very sorry as I had to leave early but I mentioned about the hearing to Archbishop Justin.

My wife Moseena Rana visited Thailand between 2-9 of November, what she experienced and some information she got could be categorise as follows:

Problems and suffering of A/s and refugee community of Thailand

1. UNHCR process

The UNHCR process to select and initiate the resettlement of refugees into a third country is a long and painful one for families living in Thailand. They have no legal status and if arrested by police face indefinite detention in the Bangkok immigration detention centre until they are either bailed or resettled. As of 2013 there are 8000 refugees and asylum seekers in Thailand. Over 80% of the population are asylum seekers waiting for a decision from UNHCR with no real idea of how long they must wait to get a decision and whether they will be resettled elsewhere. Somehow, the families must find ways to survive, feed themselves, educate their children as well as avoid arrest or detention for the usual time frame of between 7 and 8 years. The interviews with the UNHCR are usually very long, very stressful and very intense times. They question the faith of the refugees, and inquire into the situations which took place in their home country. Due to the nature of the UNHCR process, it seems to be impossibly long in the minds and hearts of the refugees.

2. Visas

During the 1951 and 1967 international conventions which concerned the status of refugees, Thailand refused to allow asylum seekers living in their country to be considered legal. Thus, all 8,500 (documented and undocumented) asylum seekers living in Thailand are considered illegal under Thai law. They can be arrested or detained at any time during their extended stay in Thailand (which is usually between 7 to 8 years, in which the UNHCR resettles them into a third country). In virtually all cases, refugees come to Thailand and receive only 30 to 90 days of tourist visas to remain within the country. These are refugees from the countries of: Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Somalia, Iran, China, Cambodia, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo and Egypt. Obviously, they are forced to remain for much longer than this period of time, usually between 7 and 8 years to receive replacement into a third country by UNHCR. Thus, the visa issue becomes a very serious one since there are regular visa checks for all foreigners residing inside of Thailand. This single issue creates a necessity for the refugees to hide and avoid police during their entire stay in Thailand.

3. Security

During the stay of refugees in Thailand, there has been a constant onslaught of security threats to both families and individuals. There have been many instances where, because of the refugee's inability to access visas, work permits or proper documents to legally live within Thailand, they are harassed by police and arrested. Quite often, the refugees are hassled by the police to give several thousand baht in order to remain safe. When they are

not able to come up with a proper amount of money, they (both families including children and individuals) are thrown into prison and held there until they are resettled, which could take years or until they are bailed. Bail from the detention centre is only available to those with refugee status, 50,000 baht (1000 GBP) and an approved Thai guarantor. This is currently a rare occurrence and only available to those with serious health issues.

4. Medical

This is a serious issue affecting refugees residing within Thailand, since health problems and diseases affect them at a higher rate than the normal populace. This is due to a lack of opportunities to have a healthy diet, extreme distress under pressured circumstances, prior diseases which they arrived in the country with and virtually no access to medicine or hospital assistance. This is due to a total lack of any medical insurance, extremely limited resources and inability to visit hospitals due to risk of arrest or detention. UNHCR Thailand and partner organisations used to provide basic medical assistance and fund hospitalization in emergencies. The service has reduced to simply emergency assistance. There is no health insurance in place so no alternative to free medical services. We see very distressing cases on a regular basis. The current situation leaves asylum seekers and refugees with little means to receive medical assistance.

5. Survival

Virtually all refugees living in Bangkok are self-funded. They have no financial support from elsewhere, for example relatives abroad or NGOs. Due to the fact that these people cannot obtain work permits, valid visas or any of the other documents required for both formal and informal job placements, the conditions for survival are made extremely difficult. The very basic necessities of life which most people once had are now non-existent. This forces the refugees living in Thailand into survival mode on the very lowest grade of living, which becomes extremely stressful and life-draining for all parties involved. Several organizations (Asylum Access gives legal assistance, Jesuit Refugee Service helps partially with rent for three months, para churches assist for three to six months with minimal food stuffs) have partnered with refugee families in provision of resources for a restricted time frame of several months at a time, but this should be the responsibility of UNHCR to fulfil most of these things.

6. Serious Health Conditions

Many refugees living in Thailand are forced to live deprived lives, both in their health, diet and lifestyles. At times, only deplorable foods and resources are available to them. Those detained in the detention centre are living off rice and soup for months and even years unless they have funds to supplement their diet or regular visitors. This creates many issues, including hypertension, diabetes and heart issues. Women, especially, are prone to sexual health because of severe restrictions in their ability to maintain good hygiene and receive proper check-ups.

7. Education

A majority of refugees enter into Thailand as a nuclear family with one or several children. Because the families are all living illegally and have virtually no financial resources at their disposal, they are unable to send their children to receive proper education. Thus, are

usually no two options available: either send them to a poor “refugee house school” with very few books and teaching materials, or otherwise the parents themselves undertake the sole responsibility for teaching and instructing their own children. Obviously, both of these options are very poor and the children suffer greatly, both in their social skills, common knowledge, and lose opportunities for good careers in the future.

8. Immigration Detention Centre

The practice of the Thai authorities sending refugees to detention centres is a vast source problems for the refugees staying in Thailand. First, the practice of sending family member(s) to centres creates great confusion and distress within families, especially toward woman and children. Second, this practice creates great financial issues for families, sometimes forcing them into hunger or starvation because of financial issues. Third, it creates bad health for the people detained because of the food available inside of the prisons which are low in nutrition. If the detainee can afford to buy additional food at the prison shop/s it is often food that the asylum seeker is unfamiliar with and finds hard to eat.

9. Language

Especially in Thailand, the language barriers are extreme for the refugees. Out of all the nations in ASEAN, Thailand was rated the absolute worst in their English language. On top of this, Thai is one of the most rigorous to learn because it is tonal and extremely linked to the Thai life. There are not enough financial resources available at the disposal of refugees to purchase proper education in Thai language. Thus, refugees simply cannot communicate for virtually their entire stay inside of Thailand. Communicating in Thailand in the areas of housing and apartment facilities, work opportunities, requesting needs, going to purchase necessities, interactions with authorities, Thai government facilities are all very difficult. This creates significant problems for every single refugee family living inside of the country.

10. Freedom of Worship

Over the last two years, there have been severe police and military crackdowns on all illegal peoples (including refugees) living within Thailand. This has reached the point of police raiding religious worship centres (i.e. Christian churches) in order to find and identify people who have no valid visas. This makes the refugees feel at severe risk even when they are attending religious services and worshiping. Thus, refugees feel their basic necessity of spirituality restricted and limited because of this problem being posed in their lives. This creates moral and ethical cases toward the Thai government and police force, since the laws and regulations clearly state that this should not occur.

Hope this is helpful.

Best regards,
Rana