

Ruben's Refugee Story

My name is Ruben (not real name). I arrived in Canada last fall as a newcomer; thanks to the efforts of the Archdiocese of Toronto's Office for Refugees and, the community of Yorkminster Park Baptist Church, who are helping me and my family during our initial months of settling in Canada.

I was living a normal life with my family in Lahore, Pakistan with my sister, wife, and my little daughter. We belong to a Christian family and live a typical Christian life. My elder sister, who is very strong in faith had a strong desire to work for Christ and spread the good news among other people. Her long awaited wish came true in 2009, when our Pastor offered my sister and me to come to a small prayer meeting in a rural village. After that, we started going to rural villages near Raiwind for prayer meetings and fellowship with other Christians with my pastor, sister, and me. We continued doing this till December 2013.



On this fateful day December 2013, we went to a rural village near Manga mandi, where almost thirty Christian families were residing.

Half an hour into the meeting, our Pastor gave everyone an opportunity to share their testimony. The owner of the house shared his testimony and then I shared my testimony. As I was giving my testimony, about how Jesus Christ had saved my life from an accident a week prior to this meeting, some Muslim men entered the house and, (it is common in rural villages to hold meetings in the open yard) introduced themselves; that they belong to this village and wanted to know my name, where I came from, and what I was doing there. I told them my name, where I came from and, that we were having a prayer meeting.

They became angry and told us to stop our meeting. My Pastor asked them, who they were and why they were telling us to stop the meeting. One of them disclosed his name and identified that he was a member of Jamaat ul Dawa (well-known Islamic militant organization in Pakistan).

We tried to explain to them that we were just having a normal prayer meeting with our brothers and sisters. They did not believe us and accused us Christians of taking advantage of poor Muslims to convert them. We all tried to explain and calm the situation. It was during this time that one of the men started insulting me and attacked me; I was accused of blasphemy for saying that Jesus is God in my testimony. In my self defense, I fought back at the attacker. However, all of them joined in and started hitting me. My sister and Pastor tried to stop them, but they too were beaten. Gun shots were fired in the air, as some of them were armed and they threatened us with consequences. People in the meeting helped us to escape the village.

After two days of hiding out at night, my neighbor informed me about the police visit to our house; that a complaint was filed against us and, we were summoned to the Police station. Fortunately, we were not home and arrived only after the police had left. The next day we went to discuss the matter with a lawyer, and, with the help of the lawyer, we filed a petition against Ghulam and his companions,

once we found out that the complaint filed against us to the Police was from them.

After filing the petition, this resulted in a long battle of hardships. We receive threatening phone calls for filing a petition against them and were told to accept our mistake of converting innocent Muslims to Christians.

We often fled from village to village and city to city. Even with the legal help of a lawyer, our pleas fell on deaf ears; we were constantly threatened and told to accept our mistake of converting Muslims to Christianity and told to accept Islam.



When we refused to accept their demands, in January 2014, Police raided our house because of a false blasphemy charge. We fled the province and went to the southernmost part of the country. We escaped to live in Karachi. We found a rented house with the help of my, cousin. We were living in a very dense Christian area, but we were always in constant fear. The longer we stayed, the noose became tighter on us from the allegations on us. The police started asking my neighbors about my relatives and whereabouts. We were afraid of that they would eventually find us. We knew we could not hide forever in the country. As a minority, once labeled as a blasphemer in Pakistan, it does not end well. We were afraid of getting into the hands of the police or the mob. Being a Pakistani national, we did not have many options to get a visa for other countries except Thailand at that time. We were able to get our passport, visa, and tickets for Thailand

through our lawyer and we decided to flee the country. We fled for refuge to Thailand in April 2014.

After fleeing Pakistan with my sister, wife, and my daughter, and arriving in Thailand we went to the concerned authorities (UNHCR) in Thailand, discussed our situation, and sought asylum. We thought we were safe, but little did we know, we were to face many hardships, despite being under the protection of UNHCR and recognized as refugees. Thailand considers refugees who are without visas as illegal and not people of concern. We were strictly briefed by the UNHCR that in case of arrests for being illegal, UNHCR would not be able to do anything for us.

We were a stateless people with a piece of paper issued by UNHCR (Asylum paper) that was worthless in the eyes of the Thai authorities. We tried looking for work but were not allowed to work on a tourist visa. The situation became harder when our tourist visas expired, and we were unable to extend our visas or transfer it into work visas.

We did not flee Pakistan with much money. We relied on the churches for financial support, but they too were not able to do much. We worked odd jobs with our illegal status and lived in a small room (10ft by 10ft) for almost 6 and half years. We were lucky to find a good Thai landlord, who knew about our situation and gave us a room to rent in the apartment. The room became our kitchen, dining, living, and bedroom. We could neither access proper medical facilities nor proper schooling for our daughter due to our status. Our landlord always warned us of potential police raids. Whenever Thai Immigration Police came to do their search operations, she would warn us. Thai police conducted raid operations several times a year for illegal tourists who overstayed their visas.

There were many incidents where police broke the doors of houses and arrested illegal tourists and deported or sent them to detention centers. The Bangkok Immigration Detention Center (IDC) is worst as the prison. Often hundreds of detainees are cramped into rooms that can hold no more than 40 people at a time, including children. Detainees would have serious skin diseases and asthma. In one case one man died in the detention center because of a lack of medical attention. During the raids and fear of getting arrested sometimes we would hide in our room, switch off the lights and electric fan and sit quietly for the whole day. Sometimes we would flee the apartment and go to malls or hide on the rooftop for hours in the sun.

My daughter would always wonder; why we always had to run and hide from the police? why we cannot go outside like a normal people? why she cannot go to school like other students? why do we always stay in a small house? Why does she not have a sibling? She had so many questions, but I was unable to answer her.

My family was so depressed, and we felt a sense of hopelessness. I would encourage my family and try to give them hope; but deep inside I was shattered. I didn't know who to ask for help except for God. Whenever we prayed, we knew God has a plan in our life.



My wife started a small stitching business at home, and I was able to work for a well-known organization as a translator. We were earning and self sufficient but still there was no sign of a legal pathway to being accorded legal rights to move, work and study as a protected refugee in Thailand for us.

After 4 years in Thailand, in 2018, a friend told me about a Jesuit Priest, Father Michael Kelly who had great empathy and desire to help persecuted Christians to find resettlement to a third country. I met Father Michael Kelly and told him about my family's situation. He gave us hope and promised that he could investigate our situation, but the process could take few years. We prayed and relied on God for his guidance and patience.

In 2019 our prayers were answered when a team of representatives from the Archdiocese of Toronto's Office for Refugees (ORAT) visited the Jesuit refugee mission in Bangkok, Thailand and decided to meet with the refugees and interview each Christian refugee family. While it was not apparent at the time, if anything would result from this chance encounter, we later learned that we had been selected to be considered for private sponsorship to Canada by the Archdiocese of Toronto.

In the following months, we were asked to complete immigration forms and these forms were submitted for processing to the Canadian embassy in Singapore. Now we had to wait.

Waiting was also one of the most difficult times, especially as this was when the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak started, bringing everything to a halt. We were afraid that we might have to wait for another 1 or 2 years excluding the immigration process. My wife was jobless but by God's grace, I had some survival jobs here and there to support my family.

In September 2020, what we feared like all refugee claimants in Thailand, came true. In 2015, our landlord decided to sell her apartment to another person, who did not know about our situation.

We were strictly told by our former landlord not to talk about our refugee status and expired visa status to the new owner. Immigration officers received a tipoff about us and arrested us all. They confiscated my phone. We were taken directly to IDC office to file a report.

We tried to plead for our release, but Police refused to let us go. Inside, I felt helpless, yet a voice within told me that we were not going to stay there long. We prayed and refused to believe in our current situation. We prayed for a miracle. Later that day, after 9 hours we were released. We were given assurance that no one would come to arrest us, and we could stay in the same apartment. The officer gave me his number to call, in case we got arrested by the police in the future so that he can help. We highly doubted it and knew we could be arrested again.

We went back to our apartment and decided to move out of the apartment as soon as possible and fled out of Bangkok to one of my friend's houses for a few days. Later, we were unable to find a house and were able to rent a small storeroom and lived in it for three months. In early fall of 2022, we were booked on a flight by International Organization for Migration (IOM) and arrived safely in Canada. How did we feel when we arrived in Canada? All praise to God! I cannot explain what Freedom feels like.

My hope and dream for my family is to grow and contribute to our community that has helped many families like us to come to Canada. We want to pay it forward so that we may help others like us and create awareness about the ongoing persecution of refugees in other parts of the world.

