

NO PARENT WANTS TO RAISE A BULLY

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An elderly Pakistani Christian at prayer at a Catholic church in Bangkok. Photos: Tibor Krausz, AP, AFP

Hopes and prayers

Denied refugee status in Thailand, thousands of Pakistani Christians have gone into hiding from immigration officials and are eking out miserable existence in Bangkok

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Four-year-old Shazee has one wish this Christmas. He wants Santa to pay him a visit, but is not sure how he will find him.

A bright, lively boy, Shazee has spent all his life inside a small, low-rent flat in eastern Bangkok. He shares the 215 sq ft space with his parents, Shan and Sherry, Christian asylum seekers who fled from Lahore in Pakistan to the Thai capital in fear of their lives in early 2014.

Christmas is a time of bad memories for Shan; he and his family fled their home country after being overheard singing songs and were accused of offending Islam.

Thailand rarely grants asylum to refugees and the couple, who have long overstayed their tourist visas, are technically illegal immigrants. Shazee, who was born in Bangkok, is a stateless child without documentation.

If caught, Shan and Sherry (who asked that their family name not be used) could wind up in Bangkok's notorious Immigration Detention Centre, where visa overstayers are held, often indefinitely. To avoid that fate, they try to stay out of sight. They rarely



Shazee rides a bike outside his family's rented room in Bangkok.

Islamist activists in Karachi protest against the release of Asia Bibi last month. Bibi had spent eight years on death row for blasphemy.

leave their flat, which has become like a prison cell in which they are their own jailers. Their front door has a large padlock on the knob outside to make it look as if no one is home, in case immigration authorities come knocking.

"We stay quiet, eat and lie down, move around, eat and lie down," says Shan, a slim, affable man in his early 20s.

In the company of his dotting parents, Shazee seems resigned to his surroundings, at least for now, although he would love to play outside and go to school.

Some mornings he acts out going to school. He says goodbye to his parents, puts on his imaginary schoolbag and dashes out into the corridor to "catch the school bus". Outside the door he turns around, announces he is back from school, and resumes watching YouTube videos for children on his father's mobile phone.

Right now, though, something else is bothering the boy. Their room has a small balcony, which serves as a kitchen, but there's no chimney. With Christmas approaching, that is a troublesome shortcoming, Shazee believes. "Santa comes in the chimney," the boy says in fluent, unaccented English, which he has picked up from watching English-language

videos for hours on end each day.

"If there is no chimney, how can he come and see me?" Shazee wonders. "You better put out a chimney," he tells his father.

Shan and Sherry are Christians from a conservative Islamic nation where religious minorities, including members of Muslim sects such as Ahmadi, routinely face discrimination and harassment. Churches in Pakistan have been bombed and hundreds of Christians have been lynched by mobs or imprisoned by the authorities, accused of blasphemy.

In a country with some of the world's most draconian blasphemy laws, even trivial comments can be interpreted as crimes deserving of imprisonment or death. In 2010, Asia Bibi, an illiterate Catholic farmhand in Pakistan's Punjab province, was sentenced to death by hanging after two of her Muslim work colleagues accused her of disparaging Islam.

In October this year, when the country's Supreme Court overturned the ruling for lack of evidence and acquitted the Christian woman, who had been on death row, riots erupted across Pakistan. Thousands took to the streets calling for her head. Christians were attacked and their homes were burned.

"At least in Thailand we are

safe," Shan says. "In Pakistan we could be killed. It is very bad for Christians there."

Yet their safety has come at a price, especially for Shazee. The small rented room, furnished with scavenged pieces of old furniture, is the only place the boy has ever known. The farthest he is usually allowed outside, in the evenings, is the corridor, where he likes pedalling around on his yellow bicycle with training wheels.

At one end of the corridor is an opening covered in wire mesh to keep birds out. Through this, the outside world beckons to the boy in the form of a reedy pond and red-tiled houses beyond it, in tropical suburbia. For his parents the festive season evokes bitter-sweet memories.

In Lahore's community of Christians the holiday had a pleasant atmosphere, they say. Yet it was after Christmas in 2013 that they had to flee their hometown.

One late December day, Shan was singing Christmas songs at his family's home with several other young Christians in his gospel band when two Muslim men showed up at the door. "I knew there was going to be trouble," he says.

The men, hearing the music on the street, were angered by the Christian lyrics. After a heated exchange, however, they left.

A few days later, as Shan and Sherry were on their way home on his motorbike after dark, a group of bearded men were waiting for them. The men, the couple say, forced them at gunpoint to an empty car park. "They started beating and kicking [Shan]. They said they would [violate] me," Sherry says. "I thought they were going to kill us."

The men were accusing Shan of trying to convert Muslim youth through Christian music. "They spat in my face. They told me they would burn me for insulting Islam," he says.

One man grabbed a sharp stick from a fire and pressed it into the bridges of his feet, one after the other. Years later, the scars are still visible. "I could not walk for a month after that," Shan says.

Their tormentors gave the couple a choice: convert to Islam or die.



Pakistani Christians evacuated from a Methodist church after a suicide bomber attacked a Sunday service in Quetta last December.

Shan and Sherry say they feigned agreement and were allowed to leave. They spent the following weeks with various relatives, moving from house to house like fugitives on the run. Then they took a flight to Thailand, where they could get a tourist visa, planning never to return to Pakistan.

They are not the only Christians who have fled Pakistan for transit countries like Thailand to start a new life elsewhere — only to get stuck in permanent limbo.

They may venture out only in the dark when they know the police have gone home

FATHER MICHAEL KELLY, JESUIT PRIEST IN BANGKOK

In Bangkok, some 2,000 Pakistani Christians have been languishing for years in identical circumstances. They huddle in small flats, fearing a knock on the door from Thai immigration authorities. Unable to work, they make do on handouts from local churches and Christian charities. "They're desperate and their situation is precarious," says Father Michael Kelly, a Bangkok-based Jesuit priest from Australia.

"They may venture out only in the dark when they know the police have gone home. They fled here, not knowing Thailand has not signed on to UN protocols on the protection of refugees."

Most Pakistani Christians in Bangkok pray they will be recognised as refugees by a welcoming third country somewhere and be resettled there. Until then, they carry on hiding. They stay in touch via social media, follow developments back home fearing for their relatives, and update one another on the latest arrests.

During a clampdown on illegal immigrants in October, some 200 Pakistani Christians were rounded up by Thai authorities. They were taken to the Immigration Detention Centre where detainees, including mothers with young children, are being kept in squalid, overcrowded cells. Yet many of them prefer that to being deported back to Pakistan.

Even short trips to the local corner store can be fateful. Dhara, a Christian woman from Karachi, left her small flat one morning to stock up on groceries at a nearby 7-Eleven. Her husband stayed behind with their newborn son.

That's when police came knocking on their door. "My husband called me and told me to stay away," she says.

He was taken to the detention centre, where he is still being held. That was almost three years ago, and Dhara has been raising their son alone in poverty, surviving on handouts from Christian charities. She cannot visit her husband for fear of being detained herself.

They fled Pakistan after a Muslim couple accused Dhara of trying to convert their six-year-old daughter to Christianity — a charge she denies.

"Living like this, always in fear, has been especially hard on my son," Dhara says. "He asks about his father every day. I tell him his father is away working. I don't want to upset him [by telling him the truth]."

Meanwhile, Shazee frets about the lack of a chimney they need for Santa to pay a visit. The boy would like Father Christmas to bring him a Superman costume.

"He wants to fly away from here and play with rainbows," his mother says.

