

Commentary: Zomi Christians, face of refugee crisis we can't ignore

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(RNS)—“You have come to us at a very low point,” said Pastor Piang, a refugee from Myanmar I met on a recent trip to Malaysia. “We always look to God for our hope, but we also look to the U.S., and maybe they don't want us anymore.”

Piang and his family are among the thousands of Zomi, an ethnic minority displaced by persecution and violence due to their Christian faith.

Piang and his family have been living in Kuala Lumpur for 10 years, waiting with patience and hope to be accepted into the United States as refugees cleared by the U.S. State Department. Now they are afraid the U.S. government is going to abandon them.

They have genuine reasons to worry. The current White House has moved from what was announced initially as a suspension period to a full termination of both U.S. refugee resettlement and more than 10,000 humanitarian aid awards, lifesaving programs that have served vulnerable men, women and children from all over the world for more than four decades and through multiple Republican and Democratic administrations.

Another family, the Khups—a father, mother and their three children—had completed the final steps to receive approval to come to the United States, only to have their flights canceled after Inauguration Day. This precious Zomi Christian family already had given up their apartment and sold most of their possessions in preparation for their impending departure.

For more than a decade, our church, along with one of our nonprofit partners, has been blessed to work with Zomi Christian refugee families in Tulsa, Okla. They've come to us over the years through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, one of our country's most effective means of providing resettlement and full legal status to some of the most imperiled people in the world.

Zomi in Oklahoma

Since the early 2000s, the Zomi have become by far the largest refugee community in Oklahoma, numbering about 20,000 people.

Those who make a habit of stigmatizing refugees never have met a Zomi Christian. Time and again, we've seen Oklahomans' negative narratives about refugees evaporate when they get to know our Zomi neighbors.

Hard-working, consistent contributors to our community, many have opened restaurants or other businesses. Their children are thriving in our schools, they've started several churches and most now own their home. Many younger Zomis have degrees from our universities and work in education, health care or other important service industries.

Many Zomi have earned their U.S. citizenship and are so proud to be Oklahomans that we often hear the terms "ZO-klahoma" and "Okla-Zomis."

Zomi Baptists

Baptists have a particular connection to Zomi Christians because our own missionaries brought the gospel to their people many generations ago. Judson Bible College, founded to educate Zomi students, is named after Adoniram Judson, one of the most famous 19th-century Baptist missionaries to the Burmese.

The Zomi Christians in Kuala Lumpur, like other refugees around the world, are adept at maximizing scarce resources to care for one another. Their highly organized, volunteer-run network of community, health and learning centers stretches UNHCR resources to meet the needs of as many families as possible. Zomi churches are the backbone of this system, and their openhandedness toward one another is unmatched.

Fallout of canceling aid

But it's nearly impossible to be resourceful when all the resources suddenly disappear. The abrupt halt to both resettlement and humanitarian aid is what most troubles those we met at the UNHCR office. They believe, by withdrawing all its support immediately, rather than gradually so alternate plans may be explored, the United States is certain to trigger a global crisis.

After all, it was our haste in withdrawing troops from Afghanistan in 2021 that resulted in Kabul falling nearly immediately to the Taliban. In our work with Afghan families who escaped to the United States at that time, most leaving loved ones behind, we see the effects of that mistake to this day.

The fallout that will follow from ending resettlement and the sudden removal of humanitarian aid to refugees across the globe will impact many more people than we saw in Afghanistan, truly beyond estimation.

Christian conviction

It is my faith, not partisan politics, that drives my convictions on all these matters. I take seriously the Bible's commands to show compassion and offer tangible help to the most vulnerable. I've seen firsthand the devastation that displacement brings among families in many parts of the world.

In Kuala Lumpur, I saw those hardships amplified by the added emotional burden weighing on the already heavy hearts of many families who still believe the United States can be a beacon of hope for them.

I'm a pastor, not a policymaker, but I believe our government should honor the promises made to the families in Malaysia and in many other parts of the world. I'm praying the White House will reverse these terminations immediately.

As a proud and thankful American, I believe we should continue to live out our historic values of caring for the oppressed, afflicted and abandoned, even when sacrifice is required.

I'm praying we do not forsake these families now in their greatest time of need. I pray we don't close our hearts and doors to them or withdraw the aid keeping millions from dropping into utter destitution. I pray, too, the United States will continue to be the compassionate and generous country these families believe we are.

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