

# A refugee

Mohammad Zia, aged 18

**B**orn in a country that is totally devastated in decades of a war that has left no sign of justice, humanity and freedom. Especially for people like me who were born into a minority ethnic group to be the victim of discrimination and slavery of the majority ethnic groups. Pushed away from most of the major cities and our property towards the harshest part of the country because of being in a minority without enough power to defend our rights.

Free but you can't move, stuck in one particular part of the country, cut off from the rest of the world. The majority ethnic group surrounds all around this land without access to any sort of facility, from food, market, business, transportation etc. We can't claim our rights for fear of facing sanctions or fear they will stop the flow of food and people would die as result of starvation that was routine. So struggling for our life away from the sight of the world trying not to be ashamed of who we are which has been the case for decades.

The 90s, when a new foreign regime took over the country from a neighbouring country, were the worst for the minority ethnic groups. Because the majority ethnic group was in favour of the new regime. They took advantage of the power as much as they could and started their full retaliation on the minority ethnic group who were claiming their basic rights. So they cleared their way and made every single person obey whatever they wanted and no one was able to claim their rights in the country except them. Because it is for more than a century that we had been trying not to be the victim of brutality, slavery and patronisation.

They took over to carry out their deadly plan and massacred thousands of people from children to oldest people, even animals, to pull off the root and sign of a minority ethnic group. As a 15-year-old, that was the darkest moment of my life to see the bodies of hundreds of people who were executed and children the same as my age and younger were hanging on the power poles in a cruel way. My heart was bleeding to see the cruelty of human beings towards human beings and my feeling was melting away my body from head to toe. The feeling of brutality of humans – it's that I would never be able to explain in words.

My childhood is stolen and I can't remember one good day with other children except being always on high alert of security, occupation and death. On top of that they started sending the entire young male population to the front line of war against our own

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people to conquer the rest of the country. So most of the people gave up their hope and started to send their young and unexperienced kids out of the country to the next neighbouring country in hope of shelter in other humanitarian countries of the world.

Our exhausted country was really stuffed by the new regime. Any sort of media was banned. All the schools, universities, any sort of education systems were destroyed, closed down, or became their military base. A few schools were left open to cover up their shit but they changed subjects to religious stuff and no sign of science and technology and development as before. That was the only way for them to run their government and their business. To keep people in darkness and cut them off from the rest of the world. It became a world of men and women not allowed to do work, study or any other activity as before. They were not even allowed to go to the doctor. Which means if you are sick, bad luck, die at home or recover automatically without a second chance.

As I mentioned before people were trying to get out. But leaving the country wasn't that easy and it was 90 per cent death. Because of the instability and brutality of the majority ethnic group that had been controlling the country, they divided the country between their tribal leaders. So everything from government to the system was under their control. The only way to get out was through the enemies' smugglers. We knew that those smugglers take people and search them in the middle of the way to take their money off them, then dump them in a mass grave, which was their routine job. But we had to trust them because we had no options left.

So after a few months living in hiding with my mum, she decided to send me out of the country in fear that I would be sent to the frontline of war. Dad was in custody in the south of the country and was due to be released after six months. He was accused of running a business in the majority control area. As I said, being in minority, we were not allowed to go out of that particular surrounded block of land and work in other parts of the country.

On that morning I left my homeland

as a 15-year-old, tossed up my life to travel in the heart of the majority ethnic group by smuggler, to pass to the neighbouring country without previous experience with more chance of death which was not easy for me but a nightmare for my family.

The sky was full of black clouds and foggy and was not in a good mood, which was looking frightening. The people around me in a small dirty bus were looking suspicious and they kept staring at me. As I was looking outside through the coach's window, the environment was dead, devastated, harsh, dirty and nasty. The environment that swallowed thousands and millions of human beings. I couldn't see anything except devastation. The weather was so dusty that the distance a few metres away was invisible because of the dust-like powder coming out from under the wheels of the vehicles and running in the air higher than the height of the vehicles. Which was really showing the nature of the devastation and isolation of the human beings.

Even the vehicles couldn't dare chase each other or take over because of the devastated rough surface of the road. Everything was looking exhausted, devastated, in tears, quiet, sad – and was, it seems, complaining from human's behaviour. I couldn't even hear the sound of bomb and grenade blasts, which was a familiar sound that I had grown up with, nor the passengers that were talking around me.

I was not looking to people because I didn't want to see hundreds of eyes full of blood staring at me. Outside was full of pieces of technology from computers, TVs, tape cassettes and research equipment and hospital's stuff that was hanging on every power pole. As I said their ridiculous religious dogma was to disgrace or tint our nation's religion, history, custom and push people back to 15th century. As I was in a world of dreams, I had a feeling that someone was trying to talk to me and I couldn't hear, my body was so exhausted that I couldn't respond to my feeling. I tried to talk but I wasn't able

so I ignored and remained as I was. It was like I had no connection with my body. So once I felt pain on my face and had woken up, I found a man standing opposite me and laughing at me. I looked at my body to see anything unusual that he was laughing at. All I could see was my top covered in blood and the man swearing and humiliating me in front of everyone in the coach. Everyone was laughing and no one was there with a sense of humanity to be on my side and protect me.

I was gazing around in the bus and seeking help from someone. The wicked man remained standing in front of me and asked me in abusive language to leave the coach. I was totally patronised, dehumanised, humiliated and knocked out of the coach that I had already paid double fare for and no one said why except teasing me. It was night time, a dark night in autumn. The weather was in freezing condition in most parts of the country and down to -40° in some parts. I kicked out but I don't know exactly how cool the weather was. All I can remember when touching any sort of metal or piece of steel was my hands getting stuck and I couldn't take my hands off the metal. My hands' skin was out of clothes frozen and started to break up.

It was a frightening and humiliating night. A night in a world of loneliness, a night of total injustice, the first night that I was without my family, a night with no one to console me and a night of brutality in the middle of nowhere. A night without a moon and I couldn't even see the stars properly, just hundreds of vehicles running in every direction. I was on the side of the road and every motorist was laughing at me, which was like something slicing every single part of my weakened body.

After passing the darkest night of my life in that freezing condition I didn't expect to survive, but I did survive to bear the rest of the harshness of life that came on top of us and we have to bear. In the early morning while my body was half frozen and I had given up the hope of life, I managed to stand up on the road in the way of a truck to die under its wheels or to get on board. Finally the truck stopped, and through pleading and paying some money, the driver agreed not to squash me in a spot under the load of his truck like a piece of rubbish. He agreed to keep

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me away from the sight of other people for three days without food and a little bit of water that I had with me. Finally I arrived in the neighboring country not fully dead and not fully alive.

In Pakistan with a world of uncertainty without documents or understanding the language. In a strange country I didn't know where to go or what to do in fear of getting caught by police. In country that had a history of human rights violation and an unbalanced society. On the other hand scared that I could see the new regime that was in my country because Pakistan was their main homeland to get training and support and cross the border to create devastation in my homeland. So there was no doubt that I could be caught in Pakistan as well.

I hung around for the whole day although I hadn't eaten for three days and my stomach was squashed, but because of the language problem I was not even able to buy some food while I couldn't stand up.

After a while a couple got my attention and they were speaking the language of a tiny ethnic group in my country. Although I didn't know that language properly, at least I was able to solve my problem because that language was a part of my school study for a while. When I approached them and started to talk to them and they looked at my pale face and my situation, they said come with us tonight because now it's too late and we will be able to help you tomorrow.

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I went to their temporary and small boarding house to spend the night there, then I found we were the same nationality but they came from some European country for a family reunion. I spent that night full of messy dreams and the next morning the two nice couples introduced me to smugglers who had a staff that could speak my language to help me to get somewhere.

The smugglers asked me to pay \$6000 – it will cover all your expenses, accommodation, false documents, flight to Indonesia then the ship fare to Australia, one of the humanitarian countries that can help you. But not your other expenses once you are out of Pakistan. I was so worried that they might leave me behind like those people in the bus. Anyway, I had to trust and I paid the money that my mother gave. I was so lucky that I was not searched while travelling in my own country. But after paying their money, nothing was left for me except a few hundred. The money that I had I have no idea how my mum managed it. Sold her jewellery, borrowed, sold something from the house, gave all they had, nothing left for them. God knows and I still have absolutely no idea.

So they accommodated me in a small dirty flat with two others that I didn't know and I couldn't even speak their language. Waiting for nothing and I had no hope because no one was trustable in that part of the world and everyone is like a hunter to get money and run away. For two weeks stuck in a room with no hope, while my body was exhausted from humiliation and dehumanisation. I was not allowed to go out because I would get caught.

After a few weeks they managed to make false documents to send me to Indonesia. Some people were deported from the airport because of false passports. Finally I passed the check-in and our flight was ready to go. After a few transits in other countries we arrived in Indonesia. Someone from the smugglers' network picked me up and took me to a motel. In Indonesia the situation was not good

because the police were catching people every day. After a few days the smugglers began sending people to Australia. But we had to travel about three and half days by bus to the nearest island of Indonesia to get to Australia. The next morning we started to go island to island with uncertain future to be able to catch a so-called ship. We were going with our bus into the ship carrier to jump from island to island. After travelling three days in the coach I was tired and hungry. I was trying to eat some food that was supplied by the bus but I couldn't eat that leftover food.

After 75 hours squashed in the coach, we were about to arrive at the island that they were talking about. We received a phone call from the first bus that had departed 10 hours before our bus that Indonesian police had caught them and were looking for us in other parts of the island as well. So we had to turn and go back 75 hours to Bali where we came from. Everyone was tired, sick and quiet, and didn't have the energy for argument. We came 75 hours back to Bali. One week squashed in a bus that never had a stop or break to stretch our body except for fuel. Every one became sick after one week in the bus eating leftover food, and then for one week we were all in hotels or motels, taking basic medication to recover.

After about 10 days when everyone had recovered from the week before and the arrested people came back, the smugglers began their second attempt to send us. But this time we succeeded in reaching the island and I could see a small boat far away in the ocean and each time a few people were going in her by another little boat. We were half of us in the boat and I was with the other half on the beach when the police again caught us.

But this time it was the whole group of us and we were kept for the whole night in freezing conditions but in the morning the people who had a visa were sent back to Bali and the people with expired visa were taken away. Back to our first location, stressed and given up any sort of hope for success and everyone was blaming the smugglers and for most us our one month visa had expired. But a few days later the third attempt started but this time they paid huge amounts of money to Indonesian coast guards to send us away without any doubt because their cost for the first two attempts had blown up in the air. So we started to come to Australia.

Yet again tossing up our lives in the endless ocean to Australia, 150 cramped up in a small and leaky Indonesian fishing boat that we had been told was a big luxury ship! It was my first journey that I ever had on the ocean and in a boat that had nothing except a small engine and a broken frame. Everyone around me was exhausted, depressed, no one had the energy of even talking to each other. Because of exhaustion and most of them young and inexperienced no one had checked whether there was enough food or water. A few hours later we found out that there was not sufficient food and water for us in a journey that we didn't know how long it would take.

But we managed to supply only one meal and one small bottle of water per person per day. The mechanics that we had on board were working tirelessly around the clock on the engine of the boat to keep it running. Because the boat was small with too many people on board the engine was exhausted. Other people were on different shifts to throw water with bucket out of that leaky boat.

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Mostly at night we were facing storm and high waves. The storm and waves were throwing our boat like a piece of rubbish weightless everywhere and water passing from the top of us and making everyone wet. More chance to be drowned. After seven days our lives got threatening because we had run out of food and water.

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