

Christian refugee begs Canada for help after more threats

A Pakistani Christian refugee in Thailand, begging for help from Canada, has had his family's location revealed for the second time in a month.

In a video posted to social media, a Pakistani Muslim youth leader calls for loyal Muslims to find Faraz Pervaiz and take him to Thai authorities. He then reads out the address where 10 members of the Pervaiz family, including four children, were living in a one-room apartment. The family has since moved.

Muhammad Taha Cheema, who calls himself the official president of Pakistani Muslim Youth in Europe, with nearly 20,000 followers on Twitter, accuses Pervaiz of blasphemy and terrorism – crimes punishable by death in Pakistan. However, Cheema said he is not urging violence against Pervaiz and his family.

"I never said that he must be killed," Cheema said in a Facebook Messenger chat with *The Catholic Register*.

Urging vigilante Muslims to find and arrest him is equivalent to calling for his murder, Pervaiz said.

"There is no precedent of people being safely carried into custody. It is more likely that these people will cause harm either by beating me or killing me or my family," said Pervaiz in an e-mail. "These people have no intention of safely ensuring that I am conveyed to police custody."

A Jesuit priest working in Thailand, Rev. Mick Kelly, has issued a plea for Canada to rescue Pervaiz through the Canadian embassy in the country.

On July 16 a Pakistani Muslim refugee in Bangkok called for Muslims to find and kill Pervaiz in another video that also revealed his address. Pervaiz said that keeping his family safe and hidden has become an impossible task.

"My life is in imminent peril and so are my family's lives," Pervaiz wrote in an e-mail.

"This situation has exacerbated my mother and father's already precarious health. Please act expeditiously to save us and our family."

The Pakistani fundamentalist political party Tehreek-e-Labbaik put a 10 million Pakistani rupee price (\$83,200 Cdn) on Pervaiz's head. That bounty was then topped with a 20-million rupee reward offered by Pakistani cleric Abdul Aziz.

Pervaiz frankly admits he committed blasphemy by producing cartoons that satirize Islam's founder and most important prophet Muhammad.

"It was me invoking my freedom of expression. Granted, this constitutes an offence under Pakistani law, but I was in Thailand where this is not a contravention of any law in Thailand," he said.

Cheema told *The Catholic Register* his personal definition of terrorism extends beyond violent acts intended to sow terror.

"What Faraz did is really bad. He hurts the feelings of many Muslims. His motive is to hurt Muslims and fly to Europe for asylum," he said. "Freedom of speech has limits."

Australian lawyer Lara Hall, who has met and befriended Pervaiz in Bangkok, said Pervaiz has made his own situation worse.

"He has done things that have endangered himself," she said in a phone call from Perth, Australia.

However, Pervaiz's right to free speech is recognized under international law, Hall said.

"He has a right to free speech. We should not just capitulate (to threats of violence)," she said. "I've never heard of anybody dying because they insulted Jesus."

The danger Pervaiz and his family face are reason enough for some Western government to get them out of Thailand as quickly as possible, said Hall.

"He should be expedited. He should be triaged against people who don't have these fatwas hanging over them," she said.

Pervaiz is not among the 63 Bangkok Christian refugee cases under consideration for private sponsorship by Catholic entities across Canada. However, Pervaiz's history of publishing material likely to draw attention wouldn't disqualify him from consideration, said Deacon Rudy Ovcjak, executive director at the Office for Refugees, Archdiocese of Toronto.

"It's not the prudent course of action. I would discourage him from doing that," Ovcjak said. "This would certainly be a case that, if it was submitted, we could make a case to Immigration (Refugees and Citizenship) Canada to expedite the case."

Office of Refugees, Archdiocese of Toronto (ORAT) experience indicates an expedited case can deliver refugees in about three months.