

Our moral duty towards Afghan refugees

Vincent Long Van Nguyen 30 August 2021

I was one of the boat people who escaped from South Vietnam. The escape happened after South Vietnam had fallen to the Vietnamese communist forces in 1975, and my world descended into total chaos with an international embargo, wars against China and Cambodia, forced collectivisation and the insidious spread of what were termed 're-education camps' — but were really communist gulags. My siblings and I grew up in a world of poverty, isolation, oppression and constant fear of what might happen to us or our loved ones.



Finally, my parents, who had escaped by boat themselves from North Vietnam in 1954, encouraged my siblings and me to escape. The boat journey was risky, and there were far more people on the boat than it could carry safely. By the third day, we'd run out of food, water and fuel and were at the mercy of the elements. On the seventh day, we drifted near an oil rig, half alive and half dead. Fortunately, we were rescued, and brought to a refugee camp off the coast of Malaysia, where I stayed for over a year.

In December 1981, I was accepted and brought to a country I knew nothing about: Australia. Here, I built a new life, and worked hard to become a priest, a dream that I had held since I was 13 years old. Growing up in war and later transiting in a refugee camp, all I wanted to do was to help people who suffered, and so in Australia I was finally able to follow that dream properly, eventually even becoming a Bishop, something I never would have imagined when I was clinging to that boat on the ocean.

Today, even though it's been decades since I fled the war, it all comes flooding back as I see footage of people clambering onto planes. Some of the images of people dangling off the stairs to aircraft in Kabul were eerily similar to what happened in Saigon in April 1975.

My Catholic faith compels me to try to address these kinds of injustices, ones that remind me of what I and my loved ones experienced in Vietnam. I believe in the universal and inclusive love of God, a love that seeks to embrace all people, most especially those at the periphery, who are experiencing poverty and injustice.

I also believe that people of faith, and Australians more broadly, must stand for social and moral issues, because this is the only way that we can build the world we want to see in the future. And this is a pivotal moment for us to step up and support those in need in Afghanistan. I hope to see the same level of bipartisan support for Afghan refugees now as there was for Vietnamese refugees then.

'We must extend the temporary visas of all Afghan citizens in Australia so that they will not be at risk of forced return to a dangerous country, and extend permanent protection to any Afghans on temporary protection visas.'

We must offer additional refugee resettlement places for Afghan refugees immediately, as we did in 2015 for Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Canada has already committed to 20,000 additional places for Afghan refugees, and we could match this offer to show that we are ready to shoulder our responsibility to those in need.

We must extend the temporary visas of all Afghan citizens in Australia so that they will not be at risk of forced return to a dangerous country, and extend permanent protection to any Afghans on temporary protection visas. Finally, we must support family reunion applications for Afghan Australians whose families are in danger.

We need to support the Afghan people. And we need to live up to our international obligations, and also live up to our status as a prosperous society, one with a courageous past that

welcomed previous waves of refugees en masse from Asia.

Australia has changed for the better with each successive wave of new arrivals, because people like me have brought our determination and drive for a better future. We need to honour this legacy by showing the Afghan people our compassion and solidarity, because I believe that this is the true identity of the country I have made my home. In view of our involvement in the war in Afghanistan, we also have a moral duty to do so.

Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv STL DD is the Catholic bishop of the Parramatta Diocese in Western Sydney and Chair of the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service within the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

Main image: Afghan Refugees Arrive At Dulles Airport (Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images News)