

A refugee's perilous story: Afghanistan to Christchurch

Tess McClure 12:17, Jun 20 2015



DAVID WALKER

It took Zarif Mohammadi two perilous years to travel from Afghanistan to Christchurch. He was later joined by his wife and they now have three children, including daughter Rahima, 8, left, and son Zia, 4.

Zarif Mohammadi settled in Christchurch after a two-year journey from Afghanistan, traversing seven countries to start a new life. On International Refugee Day, TESS McCLURE tells his story.

It started with a phone number.

A number for friend of a friend of a friend, passed from family to family, it landed in the hands of Zarif Mohammadi, a young man living in Mazari Sharif, a city in the north-west of Afghanistan.

He made the call.

The man who answered claimed he had the golden ticket: passage out of the country.

For Zarif, an ethnic Hazara man persecuted by the Taliban, it was a tantalising promise: a new start, in a safe and friendly country where he could bring his young wife, raise his children, and live without fear.

The promise was also a costly one. \$US6000 to a man he'd never met, for safe passage across Asia. The man's reputation was riding on the recommendation of another friend who, years before, had made the trip and arrived safely in Australia.

It was mid-2000 when Zarif packed his things, and left the family farm he had grown up on.

His journey to New Zealand took him across seven countries and hundreds of thousands of kilometres. He moved by foot, by truck, by boat and plane to get here. It took more than two years, during which he was unable to send word to his family to let them know he was alive.

They left in the night

About 10 men crammed into the back of a dusty van. Zarif and the smugglers decided to take a difficult route over the foothills between Afghanistan and Pakistan. They left in summer, when temperatures in the valleys reach 40 degrees Celsius. The trip over the hills took them more than a week.

They travelled at night, sometimes crammed together in the van, other times circling checkpoints or towns by foot.

"All along the way was Taliban, and it was difficult to move especially for Hazara people," Zarif says now.

A week later, they came down the other side, avoiding the checkpoints at the border, and stumbled into Pakistan.

From there, Zarif decided trek into Iran to try for refugee status there.

"But when we reached Iran too, it was very difficult. They were not happy for us to be there."

He spent several months working labouring jobs for cash in Iran, before he heard from the friend who had made their way to Australia. He decided to try again – whatever the cost.



ANNA PEARSON

A road snakes its way along a mountainside descending into Panjab District, Afghanistan.

"I talked to them and they said it was not easy, but I decided to go."

Once more he crossed the border into Pakistan, and found people smugglers who promised to take him to Australia.

It would cost \$US6000 to get there. The smugglers supplied him with a passport and visa, and flew with him to Malaysia.

Halfway point, but worst to come

Malaysia marked the halfway point of Zarif's journey, but the most difficult legs were still ahead.

The route from Southeast Asia to Australia is by sea, and many do not survive the trip.

Thousands of asylum seekers have drowned when faulty or overloaded boats sank. Many barely make it off the coast before going down.

Again, they left in the night. At the beach, Zarif lay crammed in the boat's hold with 14 others.

The smugglers nailed planks of wood over them.

It was a tiny fishing boat, Zarif says, and gestures: barely from here to here. Raised

in land-locked Afghanistan, he had never sailed on the sea.

"The first night, the water and the wind was really bad," he says. "The noise was loud and we were very afraid. Because it was our first time on the boat we were very, very afraid."



ANNA PEARSON

About six hours later they arrived in Indonesia.

Zarif remained there for nine months. Along with hundreds of other potential migrants, he made a temporary home along the shoreline, waiting for his turn on the boats. Each time, they left at night. Between 150 and 300 people would load themselves onto the boats – fishing vessels that were never designed for this kind of a cargo.

The first time, Zarif says, "The boat was broken, we did not get very far. The people from Indonesia they said this is not working, we should go back."

The second time, he says, "We were on the sea but the Indonesian police catch us, they took us back to the city, to the camps there."

Undeterred, he tried again. The third time, the boat was wrecked, and broken up by the waves. Zarif lost everything – photos, papers, money and mementos of home. He motions to show the wave sweeping over him, emptying out his pockets.

"So we brought nothing with us."

After three failed attempts, Zarif wondered if he would ever make it to Australia.

In his early efforts, he was lucky the boats failed soon after they left Indonesia – so they could swim or be rescued close to the shore. The prospect of such a failure occurring on the 3500 kilometres of open sea between Indonesia and Australia weighed heavy.

Still, he decided to make another attempt, joining a boat with 135 asylum seekers, and aiming for Ashmore Island, a desolate hunk of coral just inside Australian territory. With no soil or drinkable water Ashmore barely qualifies as an island, but it falls in Australian-administered territory and has become a target for asylum seekers.

This time, they made it.

"We got there and it was a very small island, just like a house," Zarif says.

"The people from Indonesia said: You should go down onto the island, because they wanted to take the boat back to Indonesia. We said, we will not get off the boat. It is not safe out there."

The asylum seekers argued with the boat's captain, refusing to leave. Zarif worried that the tide could rise and cover the low-lying island. "When we first saw the Australian navy boats," Zarif says, "we were happy."

"But when they came, they said, you must go back to Indonesia."

"But we said no, we are not going. They said no, the policy has changed, refugees cannot come to Australia any more. You should go back."

INTERACTIVE: [click here to see the map of Zarif's journey in full screen](#)

By then, the boat was beginning to founder. With engines failing, the boat had snagged on Ashmore reef.

"After a couple of hours the water was really bad, the boat was coming down and it was stuck on the rock. A couple of times it almost turned," Zarif says.

Afraid the boat could capsize, the Australian Navy transported the asylum seekers off the boat and to safety.

"They said, we will take you to Nauru. Refugees were going there and they would take us there also. They said there was another boat, the Tampa."

On Nauru Island

Nauru Island is a holding ground for asylum seekers who make in to Australian

territory, but are denied refugee status.

An Australian Government report into conditions on the camp, released earlier this year, paints a grim picture, with refugees at constant risk of self harm, sexual assault or physical violence.

After a three-day inspection of the site, Amnesty International labelled the camp "a human rights catastrophe with no end in sight".

Asylum seekers are held there for indeterminate lengths of time. Many are told that they will never leave the camp, unless it's to go backwards. Zarif has little to say about the camp now. It is a bad memory, he says.

"It was very bad," he says. "Life was very hard. We were always thinking about what would happen next. We didn't know how long we would stay."

There were no buildings to house Zarif or the boatload of refugees he arrived with. They slept in tents, plastic covers supported by wooden frames, with no sides.

The days were unbearably hot, he says, reaching 40C with little relief.

"When we arrived, the place was just a camp, but we were not allowed to go out of the camp. The people came out and they said 'Welcome to Nauru'."

Zarif was held in the camp for nine months, undergoing interview after interview to establish whether he would be granted refugee status.

The first round, he says they interviewed around 800 people from Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq.

"After a couple of months they said, "no, nobody here is a refugee". People were very angry. After that we thought maybe we would have to go back, because it was very tough, the interview was not easy."

But they kept interviewing.

"I was interviewed many times. The last time they said, yes you are a refugee but still nobody knows where you are going."

Zarif's file was given to different countries. Eventually, New Zealand immigration visited. They granted him refugee status.

Zarif arrived in New Zealand on August 29, 2002. He still remembers the date easily.

It was from Auckland that he contacted his family for the first time since he had left. It had been almost two years.

He stayed 6 weeks in Mangere refugee resettlement centre, before being transferred to Christchurch.



ANNA PEARSON

The dusty roads of Afghanistan are long, unsealed and often dangerous.

Safe in Christchurch

Today, Zarif and his family live in a small flat in Richmond, surrounded by the shells of quake-damaged houses and empty lots.

From the outside, it's a classic 1990s Kiwi bungalow, but slipping off your shoes at the door there are echoes of an Afghani home.



SCOTT FISHER/GETTY IMAGES

Suspected asylum seekers arrive at Flying Fish Cove, Christmas Island, after being intercepted by the Australian Navy.

A leather couch sits in pride of place, but Zarif prefers to sit on the Iranian-woven carpets that cover the floor. Plastic flowers sit in the window. He offers green tea and caramels from a crystal bowl.

ADVERTISEMENT

Advertise with Stuff

After three years in New Zealand, Zarif was able to bring over his wife Kubra, also as a refugee. They now have three children.

Almost two years ago his brother joined him. Zarif sponsored him to come over. Today they run their own tiling company, Tiles R Us.

"Sometimes we miss family," Zarif says. "That is all we miss – the family, parents, friends, our city. Everything is different here."

But he says he has never regretted leaving his home, or the difficult journey that brought him here.

"It is still very bad for the Hazara people. In the past the Hazara people, they take them and they kill them very easily. Every area of Afghanistan now is very bad."

"Sometimes I am still thinking about Nauru. Nauru and on the boat. They are bad memories, when we were on the boats. But I happy now. I have made it to New Zealand."