



Testimony of a Broken Exile: My Journey as an Asylum Seeker in the Philippines

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This testimony recounts the lived experience of a Burundian asylum seeker detained in Manila International Airport for over a year after attempting to seek protection in the Philippines. Beyond a personal narrative, it exposes the structural realities of migration control in transit zones, where asylum claims are informally obstructed through detention, deprivation, and psychological pressure. The account highlights how legal frameworks meant to protect refugees can be undermined in practice, creating spaces of exclusion and vulnerability. It calls attention to the urgent need for accountability, humane treatment, and the effective implementation of international protection mechanisms.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I stand before you today to give voice to those who have been silenced, locked up, forgotten, ignored, and scorned. This testimony is the story of an exile that was meant to be a journey of hope—but instead, it became a descent into hell.

We were fifteen Burundians, united by a single dream: to flee instability, insecurity, fear—and to find a place of refuge somewhere, a welcoming land, a helping hand.

On June 14, 2024, we arrived at Manila International Airport. We were six asylum seekers coming from Singapore. Though highly organized and technologically advanced, Singapore is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. In our search for asylum, we had contacted the UNHCR office in Bangkok. The answer

was brutal: no entry into Thailand without a visa—and for Burundian citizens, this was impossible. The UNHCR then proposed another country in the region that had signed the Convention and allowed visa-free entry: the Philippines.

What we didn't know was that we were simply moving from one prison to another.

Upon arrival, we declared our intention to seek asylum to immigration officers. It was treated as a crime. We were immediately ordered to step aside and wait behind the line of regular passengers. The airport emptied. We were left alone. No welcome. No explanation. Even janitors, with a dismissive wave, told us to back off further.

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Sleeping conditions for Burundian refugee group at air transit lounge, Manila Airport, 2024/2025.

Photos provided. Image curation: Arifin Graham

After long hesitation, we gathered our courage to return to the immigration booths. Our passports were confiscated. We were placed in a glass-walled room under constant watch. An officer assured us that UNHCR had been contacted and that we would be housed for the night, pending their arrival the next day.

That was a lie.

Without our knowledge, the authorities issued deportation orders. A Philippine Airlines flight was already being prepared to send us back to Singapore.

When the security agents returned, accompanied by flight attendants, it was to force us onto that plane. We pleaded. We cried. The women among us fell to the ground in tears, praying. An irritated airline representative coldly told us:

“It’s our country, sir. Go to your country.”

We resisted. The police were called—but too late. The plane left without us. We thought we had escaped injustice. In reality, it was only the beginning of our ordeal.

A mocking officer said with a grin:

*“Come, we’ll show you where to eat and sleep for free.”
Then he added, “You’ll see!”*

We were locked inside a tiny transit room, barely 6 meters by 2, with four metal benches, each seating three people. That’s where we lived for an entire month. No showers. No blankets. No privacy. No dignity. We were under surveillance day and night. Every attempt to bathe was shut down. When we asked to wash ourselves, the response was:

“Go wash in your own country!”

We alerted the UNHCR. Their answer was chilling: our case had been referred to the DOJ-RSPPU, an obscure unit within the Philippine Department of Justice supposedly in charge of asylum claims. In reality, it was just an extension of our detention. It aimed not to protect refugees, but to deter them.

Asylum application forms were handed to us at 1 a.m., written in complex legal English. We were given until 8 a.m. to return them. A trap—like a teacher designing an exam to make students fail.

We were treated like criminals, even animals. Some security guards insulted us openly:

“You’re stupid!” “You’re worthless!” “You’re not like the others!”

For a month, not a drop of shower water touched our bodies. Some of us resorted to using toilet water late at night. Not a single full night’s sleep. No blankets to protect us from the freezing air-conditioning. Food? At first, nonexistent. They watched us spend the last of our money—until we had none left.

They waited until we were physically broken before making a move. Then came the so-called food rations: 100 pesos per person, three times a day. But it was a façade. Initially, we received cheap bread worth 3 pesos each. Often, the portions weren’t enough. One day, we were nine people and got one piece of bread to share.

More asylum seekers arrived over time—fifteen of us eventually crowded into the Terminal 1 Transit Lounge.

The poor-quality food caused stomach pains.

Curiously, about five months later, when an Asian asylum seeker arrived, our food suddenly improved.

The pain stopped. A month and a half later, he was released—escorted away to an unknown destination.

We, the Africans, were still there. Still curled on metal benches like strays. Still humiliated. And once he left, the decent food vanished—and the stomach pain returned.

As for medical care, it was just for show. Whatever the illness, the only medicine ever offered was paracetamol. An illusion of care. A placebo of humanity.

No real lawyer was assigned to us. The so-called legal representatives were often biased against us and never met us in person. Exchanges happened by email—merely to justify a prewritten decision: a systematic rejection.

NGOs that tried to intervene were silenced.

And when rejection letters arrived, the real pressure began: repeated interrogations, suspension of food rations, relentless psychological pressure to sign "voluntary return" papers.

Some security agents, apparently sent by the DOJ, pretended to be kind. But their only job was to convince us to give up.

The message was clear: "Leave voluntarily, or we will break you until you do."

Each day, the intimidation increased:

"Why are you still here? DOJ already decided."

Even those who wanted to appeal were denied the chance.

A clear strategy: exhaust, dehumanize, and coerce.

Some received rejection letters without ever being heard.

As of today, the day of this conference, eight of us remain. Seven fled, seeking refuge in Kenya, hoping for less cruel treatment. But even that departure represents a failure of the system. An abandonment. A new exile. And the trauma remains.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What I experienced is not an exception. It is not a mistake. It is a method. A deliberate strategy. A mechanism of exclusion designed to make the lives of refugees unbearable until they give up their most basic right: the right to live in safety.

Young children, innocent, sleep on the airport floor. No toys. No smiles. No one even remembers they are children. Those who are supposed to protect us look away. Those who want to help are silenced.

Today, I speak for those who couldn't resist. For those who were deported. For those who gave up. For those who died in silence.

I stand before you as a witness of a detention that hides behind another name. A place where water was a luxury, food was humiliation, dignity was seen as defiance, and silence was a weapon.

This is not just my story. It is the story of men, women, and even children who asked for only one thing: protection.

In such a hostile and dehumanizing context, our only hope is resettlement. Not as a privilege—but as a fundamental right for every person seeking refuge.

We are asking for the respect of the 1951 Convention. We are asking simply for the right to live—without begging for a wash, a meal, or a moment of peace.

I beg you, as a global community, as a collective conscience—do not look away. Let this conference not be just a fleeting moment of compassion, but a turning point for action.

Help us emerge from the shadows. Give voice to those who've been silenced. Give back a future to those being slowly pushed into despair.

I speak to you with a wounded dignity—but still standing. Because asylum is not a favor. It is a right.

Thank you.