

Analysis

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Chau latest in long line of American Christian missionaries

John Chau, killed by members of the Sentinelese tribe on an island in the Andaman Sea, is the latest in a long line of American missionaries who voyaged to the world's most isolated regions to spread Christianity. The first Christian missionaries set sail from the United States for Asia more than 200 years ago, according to Dr Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts.

Adoniram Judson and his wife, Ann, left Salem, Massachusetts, in February 1812 for India but eventually ended up in Burma, where Adoniram spent most of the next four decades. "That's the beginning and then there were several other mission agencies that grew up after that," Johnson said. There were more than 127,000 Americans working abroad as Christian missionaries in 2010, according to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity.

"It's gone up a little bit since then," Johnson said, adding that the figure includes "Christian missionaries of all kinds" - Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, Protestants and others. "Historically, Catholics have had quite a large portion of that, but Mormons I think probably have the single largest number of any group," he said. The 26-year-old Chau was exceptional in that he appeared to be a "complete lone ranger type of missionary," Johnson said, not sponsored by a particular church or organization.

Chau received missionary training from a Kansas City, Missouri-based group called All Nations, but his ill-fated voyage to remote North Sentinel island where he was killed appears to have been his own initiative. On its website, All Nations says its mission "is to make disciples and train leaders to ignite church planting movements among the neglected peoples of the Earth". "All Nations aspires to see disciple making movements in every people group of the world so that Jesus may be worshipped by every tongue, tribe and nation," it says.

Comparisons to Jim Elliot

Chau has been compared to Jim Elliot, an American killed in Ecuador in 1956 along with four other missionaries while attempting to evangelize the Huaorani people. "But Jim Elliot and his four other companions were part of a mission agency, an institutional agency that sent them out," Johnson said. "We're not hearing about any agency behind (Chau)," he said. "We're hearing about his courage and his drive to go where no one else had gone before and that kind of thing. 'It's all part of the missionary narrative but it's unusual in the sense that you're talking about an individual,'" Johnson said.

American Christian missionaries abroad are involved in a wide range of activities aside from proselytizing, including medical missions. "Catholic missions have sent people to hospitals and schools and that sort of thing," Johnson said. "That's really a longstanding mission strategy." He said that word proselytizing is "kind of a harsh word". "I was reading about John Chau - that he went to convert the Indians - which is kind of strong language," he said.

"I think what he went to do was to preach, or let them know what the good news was," he said. "Whether or not they'd be interested is a completely different subject. 'Certainly converting, that's not a good word in India because there are anti-conversion laws and all of that,'" he said. Johnson said most Christian missionaries "wouldn't use that language, wouldn't say 'I'm going to convert.' They would say 'I'm going to introduce people to Christ.'" They would use language that is more religious freedom language - that everybody has a choice they can make."

More diversity

Johnson said missionary work has been hampered somewhat because fewer countries nowadays are issuing what he called "missionary visas". "You could get a visa to go somewhere as a missionary and those are disappearing," he said. "India, for example, had missionary visas during the colonial period," he said. "India received lots of missionaries with that particular visa. 'And now there's no such thing.'" Johnson said that while most American missionaries abroad are linked to established institutions, there has been a rise in the number of smaller churches engaged in what he called "direct sending". "Where, let's say, an independent charismatic church, maybe 1,000 members in Louisiana, they're sending missionaries to Siberia," he said. "There are many, many people in that category, which is really different than John Chau," he said. "They do have an institution behind them, but it's a local church, not a mission agency." Johnson said another trend is for there to be fewer white missionaries from the United States. "It's more diverse," he said. "They might be US citizens but they might be originally from Africa, or Latin America or Asia." — AFP



Iraq seeks to head off sanctions, protests

Iraq's broken electricity sector is planning a long-awaited overhaul to both meet US pressure to halt Iranian power imports and head off summertime protests over chronic cuts. With a freshman at the helm, the electricity ministry is exploring options including revamping stations and lines to cut waste, importing power, and improving bill collection to boost revenues. Baghdad hopes it will generate enough megawatts to feed demand by summer, when cuts can leave millions powerless for up to 20 hours per day.

But it also has an earlier deadline to meet. When Washington reimposed sanctions on Tehran in November over the latter's nuclear program, it granted Iraq a 45-day waiver to produce a roadmap to stop using Iranian electricity and gas. Iraq pipes in up to 28 million cubic metres of Iranian gas daily to feed its stations, and also directly imports up to 1,300 megawatts of Iranian-produced electricity. Now, Baghdad's power ministry has outlined a plan to wean off Iranian electricity within 18 months and resolve some decade-old problems, said spokesman Musab Al-Mudarris.

"In the coming two weeks, we will submit to the Americans a five-year plan including yearly assessments," he told AFP. If the US approves, it may extend the waiver for "a year or two". "But there are no quick fixes," Mudarris insisted. Iraq sits on 153 billion barrels of proven crude reserves, but it needs higher quality fuel and gas for power turbines. Mudarris admitted that while Iraq could do without Iran's electricity, it needed Iranian gas until it could extract its own or capture flares from oil drilling.

Bright ideas

Using its own fuel plus Iranian gas, Iraq can produce a

total of around 16,000 megawatts of electricity. That is far below demand, which hovers around 24,000 MW but can jump to 30,000 in summer, when temperatures reach a sizzling 50 degrees Celsius. Much of the shortfall is technical: when Iraq transmits power, 30 to 50 percent gets lost to poor infrastructure, according to the Iraq Energy Institute (IEI). Some of that is age, but pipelines and stations were also attacked by the Islamic State group before Iraq beat it back last year.

Rehabilitation is a key element of the ministry's plan. Mudarris pointed to recent memorandums of understanding with Siemens, worth \$10 billion, and General Electric, at \$15 billion, to fix infrastructure. Together, they could add up to 24,000 MW within five years: "That would bring us to 40,000 MW," Mudarris said. Electricity Minister Luay Al-Khateeb has also asked Siemens and GE for "fast-track" plans to boost power generation by summer.

Baghdad is finding ways to fund these efforts, including a \$600 million finance deal between GE, the Trade Bank of Iraq, and Standard Chartered announced in late November. Another ministerial initiative involves swapping Iranian power for imports from other neighbors, Mudarris said, including 300 MW each from Turkey, Jordan, and Kuwait, plus Saudi solar power. In a possible omen, new Iraqi President Barham Saleh visited Amman, Kuwait, and Riyadh in his first regional trip since assuming power. Finally, Baghdad wants to recover money lost by the ministry's poor collection service. "We are losing about 60 percent of our revenues to people who don't pay. If we can cut those losses, we can stop relying on Iran," said Mudarris.

'Doomed to fail?'

Last year, Iraq began privatizing by hiring collection services to ensure households paid power bills. Samir Hussein, a 20-year employee of the ministry's distribution department, said privatised collection has already reduced outages in Baghdad. "Those who pay cut their usage by half, which allows me to redirect megawatts to other neighborhoods, preventing cuts there," he told AFP.

But obstacles remain, including overdue bills to Iran for previous imports. A draft 2019 budget shows Iraq allocating some \$800 million for "Iranian gas arrears" and around \$350 million for Iranian electricity backpay, according to an IEI analysis. Another issue is Iraq's bloated electricity ministry, said energy expert Harry Estepanian.

Neighboring Kuwait generates around the same amount of electricity as Iraq, but its ministry employs 12,000 compared with Iraq's roughly 140,000, he said. The body is also accused of widespread corruption, which technocrat and first-time minister Khateeb pledged to investigate this week. "Whatever he is planning is doomed to fail if he does not reform," Estepanian told AFP.

And Iraq's five-year plan must account for skyrocketing consumption as cities are rebuilt post-IS. "Right now Mosul, Anbar, Salahaddin probably don't have high demand. Once reconstruction starts, demand will start to go up by around seven to 10 percent," Estepanian said. "The gap between supply and demand is widening. It's not like it was in 2003 or 2013, and it won't be the same in 2023." — AFP

Stuck at US border, migrants losing hope

Still stinging from the tear gas that beat back their attempt to breach the US-Mexican border, members of the Central American migrant caravan are starting to lose hope, and in some cases are turning back. The migrants have played all their cards in recent days, after more than a month's trek across Central America and Mexico - but with little success. Their surprise bid to rush the border en masse on Sunday ended as abruptly as it began, when US Border Patrol agents fired tear gas and rubber bullets to force them back.

And attempts to sneak across the border alone or in small groups appear to be largely failing. That leaves the roughly 5,000 migrants in the caravan with a handful of options, equally unappealing to most: wait the months or years it could take to request asylum in the United States; settle in Mexico; or give up and go home. Their desperation is palpable at the improvised shelter where they are staying in Tijuana, across the border from San Diego.

Living in crowded conditions, with limited toilets, disease outbreaks and two rations of food a day, many are still shell-shocked from the failed attempt by about 500 migrants to get over the chain-link border fence topped with barbed wire on Sunday. "We thought they were going to kill us. It's going to be hard to get to the other side," said Brayan Casas, a 28-year-old from Honduras, showing the bruises he got when he, his wife and his son joined Sunday's stampede.

Long wait

"They learned their lesson," an employee of Mexico's National Migration Institute told AFP at the shelter, speaking on condition of anonymity. "They've seen they won't be able to cross easily. They're a lot

less rebellious today." The migrants are mostly fleeing poverty and violence in Central America's "Northern Triangle" - El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. US President Donald Trump has however warned of an "invasion" by a group full of "hardened criminals".

Some migrants have tried to sneak into the United States alone, without much success. "I've tried five times already," said Danilo Mejia, 26, a skinny Honduran man in an oversized leather jacket, who says the US Border Patrol sent him back to Mexico each time. "I thought if it was dark they wouldn't see me, but they're real watchdogs." He says he does not have the \$10,000 or so he would have to pay a human trafficker, or "coyote," to bring him into the United States.

But sneaking in through the desert alone is a perilous strategy. Hundreds of migrants die trying every year, of dehydration, hypothermia or snake bites. Seeking asylum in the United States is not much easier. In Tijuana, the waiting list to enter the US at an official border crossing and apply for asylum currently has more than 5,000 names on it, including caravan members and other migrants who were already in line. And the US is backlogged with asylum cases: Requests increased by 2,000 percent in the past five years, and there are currently 700,000 pending.

Arlin Gutierrez, 40, traveled here from Honduras with her three young children, and is unsure what to do next. "We'd have to wait more than three months to be called (from the asylum wait-list), and who knows how much longer for our case to be resolved," she said, shaking out her baby's disposable diaper to use it again. "We can't wait for so long, living here like animals."

Trump issued an executive order earlier this month barring migrants who sneak across the border from filing asylum claims. That policy has been temporarily blocked by a federal judge. Undaunted, Trump tweeted Saturday that migrants seeking asylum will have to remain in Mexico while their claims are processed - though Mexico has not publicly agreed to such a plan. Facing a hostile welcome and little hope, a growing number of migrants have decided to turn back. — AFP

Chapo's high life: Swiss clinics, mansions and zoo

Rejuvenation treatments at Swiss clinics, a beachfront mansion in Acapulco and a private zoo of lions: the US trial of drug baron Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán was given an extraordinary glimpse Tuesday into his life of excess. At the height of his power as one of the most notorious criminals in the world and most prolific drug traffickers on the planet, Guzmán reputedly profited to the max from his ill-gotten gains. But behind the glitter and gold, he was paranoid to the core, splurging \$10 to \$12 million a month on bribes to protect himself from arrest, paying off his enemies and wiretapping his multiple girlfriends.

That was the picture painted Tuesday by one of his former associates, Miguel Angel "El Gordo" Martinez, a former pilot and Sinaloa cartel bigwig in Mexico City who is today part of the US witness protection program. In the early 1990s, smuggling Colombian cocaine into the United States-Guzmán's lifeblood - was "the best business in the world," Martinez told the American jury in the Brooklyn federal court.

Guzmán's profits were jetted in by the plane load to the tune of \$30 million a month, delivered by private jet from the Mexican border town of Tijuana to Mexico City for successfully delivered US drug shipments. It was a heady lifestyle and mind-boggling pay packet for a man born into poverty, who turned to drug trafficking as a teenager. Throughout Tuesday's testimony, a suited and booted Guzmán listened intently in court to the turncoat, never once taking

his eyes off Martinez on what was the second day of the third week of his trial.

Four private jets

"In the '90s he had four jets, houses on all the beaches, ranches in all (Mexico's) states," Martinez testified. The Acapulco property alone cost \$10 million, he estimated. "We traveled all over the world... to Brazil, Argentina, Aruba, throughout Europe, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Peru, Cuba, Colombia, Panama," he said. If some were work trips, many others were for pleasure, such as gambling sprees in Macau.

They flew to Thailand, he testified, with the goal of buying heroin for \$10,000 a kilo, shipping it through Mexico and onto the United States where it could be re-sold for a whopping \$130,000 a kilo. But the plot collapsed, he alleged, when Thai drug traffickers and the heroin pointman in New York, Raul Santana, were arrested. Even at 61, Martinez pointed out, Guzmán still has a full head of hair and no white streaks - and referenced past trips to Swiss clinics "where they put cells in you to make you younger", Martinez explained.

He claimed that Guzmán kept tigers, lions, panthers and deer in a zoo at his home in Guadalajara, on an estate so vast with swimming pools and tennis courts that the defendant would get around by a little train. But if he spent lavishly on bribing police, and paying off his "four or five" fancy women, Guzmán was generous when it came to gifts. Martinez claimed to have earned \$3 million in just a few years of working for Guzmán and said the defendant bought him a Rolex encrusted with diamonds.

He was once tasked with buying more than 50 expensive cars - Buicks, Cougars and Thunderbirds - worth \$35,000 each - to dole out to Sinaloa cartel workers at Christmas time. He claimed Guzmán stashed up to \$20 million in cash in secret compartments designed by architects at homes purposely bought just to hide money. — AFP