

Written testimony for Eddie and Lynn Padilla (Deported from the Village of Hope)

Lynn and I first visited Morocco in the summer of 1996 for 2 weeks with a group of friends. We met preparing for that trip and although we were not married when we went, we knew that we were going to be married. Our first contact in Morocco was at the Children's Haven, a children's home for abandoned children. One year before that the Village of Hope (formerly known as the Children's Home at Ain Leuh) had closed down and all the remaining children were moved to the Children's Haven. We saw the property and hoped for it to re-open someday. We knew at that point that our calling was to come back to Morocco and be house parents for abandoned children. We actually did not pack up and move to Morocco until November 2006, 10 years later, after leading many summer teams to Morocco, and after the birth of our first child, Maggie. But basically our whole marriage has always been focused on moving to Morocco and taking abandoned children into our family.

We lived in Morocco for almost 4 years. During the first year we studied Arabic in Fes. We came back to the United States for 4 months, and then returned to Morocco and started full time work at the Village of Hope (VOH) in February 2008. We were there until March 9, 2010 when we were suddenly deported out of the country.

Our work at VOH was to take in abandoned children into our home and raise them as our own. VOH was a privately funded institution, but it had full government permission to take in children and provide for all of their needs (housing, health services, education). The greatest legal care was taken to ensure that the black letter of the law was followed with regard to taking in children, including the keeping of meticulous files, going to the local family court judge where possible and keeping a record of the birth certificates of the children and where possible both the mother and father of the child. There was also a school at VOH and all of the Moroccan children received the education required by Moroccan law (which included instruction in Islam). The main focus of VOH was to place the children into family units. The children did not live in a dormitory setting. They were placed into homes with couples that had committed to be there for at least 18 years, to raise them until they were grown. We took in our first foster child one month after we returned to start our work with VOH. Samir was 4 days old when he came to VOH, and he was 2 weeks old when he came into our home. A year later we took in our second child, Mouhcine. He was one month old when he came. Both of these boys were abandoned by their birth mothers because they were unmarried and had brought

shame to their families. Aside from our main responsibility of raising children, we also had other roles at VOH. I helped coordinate and host work teams that came from all over the world to work at VOH, and my wife was a supervisor for the playschool on site.

On Saturday March 6, 2010, a large number of policemen arrived at VOH. We were told that they were doing a routine inspection and not to worry about anything. VOH had recently been approved as an institution according to the new governmental standards, and inspections were a part of that process. All of the staff had to go in individually for questioning that day and into the night. An officer was writing our responses down, and then we were required to sign our name after he read the statement back to us. The next day the police were there again. They searched some of the homes and questioned some of the children. That night at 11:00 pm our director came to our house and said that we were being required to give the police our passports and residence cards. We were reluctant to do this but our director told us we needed to do what they were asking of us. After our director left, a police officer pulled up in a vehicle and parked in our driveway. He stayed there the whole night and all of the next day until 12:00 pm when he was asked to move down the road a little bit (We did not live on site at VOH. We rented a home from a private owner a little way down from VOH).

The following morning we called the American Embassy in Rabat and told them that our passports had been taken away and there was a police vehicle in our driveway. They said to keep an eye on the situation and let them know if anything changed. That day I was required to return for more questioning. Then at about 4:00 pm both my wife and I were told to return to VOH. We left all of our children at home under the care of our Moroccan neighbors and good friends. All of the staff was gathered in the community room where the questioning had taken place. One of the officials read a statement to us explaining that we had broken the law by proselytizing to minors, as defined by Moroccan law, that we were now illegally in the country, and that we were all going to be deported. We all had to sign our names on a paper saying that we understood what had been read to us. At the same time that we were receiving this news, there were other officials across the way telling all of the children that their parents were going to be deported. The children were crying hysterically and the parents had to rush over there and try to comfort them.

We categorically deny the charge of proselytism under the definition used in Moroccan law that we were accused of by Moroccan officials. First, the two children in our care were too young to grasp the religious concepts

necessary to be proselytized under Moroccan law (they were 1 and 2 years old). Second, I had limited conversational language skills in Arabic and I was incapable of communicating religious concepts in order to proselytize as defined by Moroccan law. My wife had stronger conversational skills in Arabic but she did not have advanced language skills at a level to proselytize under the definition used in Morocco. Neither of us speak any French. Finally, when we started our work at VOH we signed a statement saying that we would not proselytize as defined by Moroccan law.

My wife and I returned in tears to our home. When we got there, we called the Embassy again and told them that we were being deported. This time they replied that they already knew that information, and that we needed to do what they were telling us to do. I was connected with a man named Matthew who interviewed me. He asked how we were being treated and about the events that had led up to the news of our deportation. We thought we might have 1-3 days to prepare to leave, but then we got a phone call that a bus was going to take us to Casablanca no later than 11:00 pm that very night. The bus arrived in the early evening and we were actually on our way at 9:38 pm. We had only 3 hours to pack up a few belongings, and then we had to drop off our two precious Moroccan boys at VOH before getting on the bus. We had about 10 police officers in the bus with us, and two police vehicles that escorted the bus all the way to Casablanca. We stayed a few hours in a hotel by the airport and the following day, Tuesday March 9 our family was escorted by the police all the way to the door of the plane, where we were given our passports back.

My wife and I assert that we did not do anything contrary to Moroccan law. During the interrogation and deportation process there was no paperwork or evidence presented to us regarding the charges that they read to us. We were never given a chance to defend ourselves.

Concerns about our children and the whole situation:

All of the children that had been taken in by families at VOH were abandoned at birth, unwanted and unloved. They are considered outcasts in their society. Babies born out of wedlock are either left in hospital wards, left to die in trash bags, or left to grow up on the streets doing whatever they can to survive. We took these children into our homes and loved them unconditionally. We wanted them to grow up in a family, to be educated, and to be able to be productive citizens in their own country. These children have been abandoned again, torn apart from the only

parents they have ever known. We have been told that our 2-year-old Samir still asks for “Mommy” and “Daddy” every time he passes our vehicle that we had to leave at VOH. Their very basic needs may be met (food, clothes, housing) but only God knows the emotional turmoil that they are dealing with now. We do not get a lot of information about the welfare of the children. Our biggest concern is that the lives of these children were the least of the Moroccan government’s concern in all of these proceedings. We love our boys. We love all of the children. We know all of the children by name and we have known all of them since they were infants. There are Moroccan workers trying to take care of them now, but they cannot be parents to the children. Our family and all of the families that were there have been torn apart; a hate crime has been committed against these innocent children.

Our desire is to be reunited with our children and have them back into our care. We committed our lives to them.