

Justice sought at rally for detained Indonesians

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The homes of three Indonesians without legal status who are in sanctuary at the Reformed Church of Highland Park were ransacked.



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(Photo: Cheryl Makin/Staff Photo)

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METUCHEN – More than 500 supporters gathered on a rainy Sunday to bring attention to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) tactics taken in recent days to detain friends and neighbors.

It seemed the least they could do — standing in the rain showing solidarity — while men such as Roby Sanger of Metuchen and Gunawan Liem of Franklin are being held in an Essex County jail. For a brief time, the rain paused, seemingly to let those gathered hear what more than a dozen politicians and advocates had to say.

"The rain may have stopped, but the tears have not," said Middlesex County Freeholder Deputy Director Charles E. Tomaro, who attended the rally on the steps on the Metuchen Borough Municipal Building.

"The tears will not stop until immigrants don't have to worry about looking over their shoulder and worry about ICE taking them away. We need to fight the fight to make sure that immigrants can stay in this country and not have to worry anymore. So, keep up the fight."

The two fathers, both Indonesian Christians, are being held in jail because there were no more beds available at the ICE detention center in Elizabeth. The plea Sunday was for both men to be released and reunited with their families.

"These issues really hit home when you realize there is a child — two children — here affected by this," Mayor Jonathan Busch said. "We will rally behind this family and continue to do so."

READ: [Community supporting Highland Park Indonesians detained by ICE](#)

Both men were taken into custody after dropping off their children either at school or at a school bus stop. In Highland Park, Harry Pangemanan and three others — Yohanes Tasik and husband and wife Arthur Jemmy and Silfia Tobing — entered sanctuary at the Reformed Church of Highland Park to avoid arrest.

"A main focus for today is to show support," Busch said. "A husband, a father and important person in our community. Someone that this community values. At the end of the day, Metuchen is a singular community, and after hearing Thursday's news, people could have said, 'Oh that's unfortunate' and turned their heads, but instead they decided to come together and support this family and do whatever we can to try to get him back here in Metuchen with his family. This is truly upsetting."



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The Rev. Justin D. Karmann of the First Presbyterian Church in Metuchen speaks to a crowd of more than 500 at a prayer vigil Sunday for member Roby Sanger, a father of two arrested by ICE agents after dropping off his daughter at school. (Photo: Cheryl Makin/Staff Photo)

Prior to the rally, a brief standing-room-only vigil for Sanger and his family took place at 1 p.m. in the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church on Woodbridge Avenue, where Sanger has been a member since 1996.

Calling Roby an avid "every Sunday" churchgoer, the Rev. Ellen Clark Clemot noted that Roby's elder daughter had been confirmed two years before, while the younger is in the confirmation class this year.

"Roby Sanger sits in a detention center alone, but he is not alone," said the Rev. Justin D. Karmann of First Presbyterian Church, who also offered the vigil participants top ICE officials' contact information. "We are here together today to pray for justice and mercy. For Roby to come home. We want justice."

Jennifer Vargas of Franklin Park and her daughter knows one of the families involved. The two came to the vigil and rally to show support.

"I keep up on these things, but it just became more personal," Vargas said. "These are our neighbors and it's our community and we are here to support. We are here to let them know they have support."

About 15 minutes later, participants — led by Karmann, the Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale of First Reformed of Highland Park, Busch and several politicians and clergy — joined for a peaceful march on Main Street to the Metuchen Borough Municipal Building for the rally.

READ: [Immigration policy leaves children without dad on Father's Day](#)

After several politicians spoke, offering sympathy, support, solidarity and at times anger and disappointment in the current administration's stance on immigration, the rally concluded with men, women and children — a diverse mix of race and religion — singing "We Shall Overcome" in unison. Many speakers noted their own ancestral family tree filled with immigrants.

"These people have come to our country seeking religious freedom and escape from persecution in their own countries," Highland Park Mayor Gayle Brill-Mittler said. "I'm Jewish. My ancestors came here for the same reason. Please keep supporting the people who come to this country seeking a better and safer life. We need to make it safer for them here."



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More than 500 participated in a vigil, march and rally Sunday in Metuchen to show support for immigrants, particularly Metuchen and Franklin residents Roby Sanger and Gunawan Liam, who were arrested by ICE agents after taking their children to school. (Photo: Cheryl Makin/Staff Photo)

Still others offered words of encouragement and advice on how to help the situation. Sanger's daughter, Caitlyn Sanger, read a statement by state Sen. Patrick Deignan Jr. (D-District 18), who could not be present. State Sen. Bob Smith (D-District 17) was short and to the point.

"Before we lose our soul — America — before we lose our soul, let's make America kind again," he said to thundering applause as he introduced U.S. Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-N.J. District 12) and U.S. Rep. Frank Pallone (D-N.J. District 6), who led a rallying cry calling for action.

"Immigration is important. This country has thrived on immigrants coming here for various reasons and we depend on that to be a great country. Our goal can never be to stop immigration, whether it be for political asylum whether its for economic reasons and regardless of any race or ethnicity," Pallone said as he called for a "pathway for citizenship.

"In particular today, we have a history in this country of saying that people who have been persecuted for religious or ideological reasons can come here and apply for citizen ship as political asylees. It goes back to the Mayflower and the pilgrims. It's a tradition."

Several politicians, including Union County Freeholder Chair Sergio Granados, Franklin Mayor Phillip Kramer, Brill-Mittler, Assemblywoman Nancy Pinkin (D-District 18) and Assemblyman Robert Karabinchak (D-District 17) as well as council members from Metuchen, Highland Park and Franklin and representatives from Metuchen Interfaith Clergy, The Presbytery of Elizabeth, Metuchen Human Relations Commission and ACLU-NJ, also were in attendance and spoke on behalf of the men and the current state of immigration in the U.S.

Highland Park activist and advocate Ashton Burrell, who chairs the borough's Human Relations Council, came to the vigil and rally for many reasons, including support and encouragement.

"One reason being that ICE came for one of my brothers, Harry (Pangemanan), who we just honored the other night on Martin Luther King Day for his humanitarian work," Burrell said. "This is all of our problem. This isn't just one person's problem, and the faster that a lot of people see that, I think the greater we can be."



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More than 500 participated in a vigil, march and rally Sunday in Metuchen to show support for immigrants, particularly Metuchen and Franklin residents Roby Sanger and Gunawan Liam, who were arrested by ICE agents after taking their children to school. (Photo: Cheryl Makin/Staff Photo)

On Thursday morning, Sanger, an Indonesian Christian, was detained by ICE officials after dropping off his daughter at school. Sanger has an order of stay of removal, Karmann said.

"He has done the right thing," Karmann said. "He and many other Indonesians came here seeking asylum from religious persecution and they missed their one year bar to apply for asylum. They just didn't know. Ever since then, they have faithfully reported and attempted to be here the right way, but there is no right way at this time."

Karmann said that Sanger's car was followed after the school drop-off and stopped by ICE agents in an unmarked car who failed to identify themselves until after Sanger had stepped out of his vehicle.

According to a community organizer, Sangr, a "beloved husband, father of two and law-abiding resident," is "a good man and posed no threat to any member of our community, or our nation." An Indonesian Christian who fled religious persecution in Indonesia about 20 years ago, Sanger had "dutifully" checked in with ICE officials with no issues in the past, said Karmann. He was scheduled for his next appointment March 1, a date Karmann and Sanger discussed a week ago.

"We wondered what does he do, but Roby said, 'Pastor, I want to do the right thing,'" Karmann said. "As I have always done. I am here for my family and I want to provide for them, but I want to be in this country the right way. We had no idea that ICE was trailing Roby."

In addition, a resident and father from Franklin, Liam was detained after dropping off his child at a bus stop. Kramer, along with Franklin Deputy Mayor Chanel Robinson, spoke on behalf of Liam at the rally.

"Gunawan Liam was taken from us by ICE. That is not the America I know," Kramer said. "This is the America I know."

The Kenny family came from their home in Union Beach to support Pangemanan. For more than a year in 2015 and 2016, Pangemanan was a regular at their home that was destroyed by superstorm Sandy in 2012. Volunteering his services, Pangemanan led a group that repaired the Kenny home.

"For more than a year, he helped us with everything — from finishing underneath our house, siding, painting, plumbing, finding other volunteers," said Kelli Kenny, who came with her three children and husband, William. "We would not have our house back without him."



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More than 500 participated in a vigil, march and rally Sunday in Metuchen to show support for immigrants, particularly Metuchen and Franklin residents Roby Sangar and Gunawan Liam, who

were arrested by ICE agents after taking their children to school. (Photo: Cheryl Makin/Staff Photo)

State Attorney General Gurbir S. Grewal sent a letter to the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security suggesting Thursday's arrest by federal agents of two Indonesian nationals as they dropped off their children may have violated a long-standing prohibition on immigration enforcement actions at "sensitive locations," and calling for the official to personally review the incident.

The letter, addressed to U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen M. Nielsen and sent Thursday afternoon, expresses "serious concern" about the arrest of Liem and Sanger by ICE agents.

In his letter, Grewal notes that ICE has a "longstanding policy that prohibits immigration enforcement actions "at or focused on sensitive locations," and that schools are deemed to be sensitive locations under that policy. Grewal characterized ICE's action as "deeply upsetting."

"I am not aware of any exigent or unique circumstances here that would justify such a departure from ICE's settled policy on sensitive locations," Grewal's letter said. "Undoubtedly, this creates a chilling environment for parents, who were simply ensuring that their children arrived to school safely. I trust that you will personally evaluate the circumstances surrounding this enforcement action and take any and all appropriate measures to remedy any violation of ICE policy."

The letter goes on to express broader concern about ensuring there are no ICE enforcement actions at courthouses and at state facilities throughout the state.

Enforcement actions at state courthouses would compromise the integrity of New Jersey's justice system, the attorney general said, and such actions at state facilities would be an "undue intrusion" on the function of state government services to New Jersey residents, including children, families and military veterans.

"As a former federal prosecutor, county prosecutor, and now the chief law enforcement officer for New Jersey, I fully understand the need to enforce our nation's laws," Grewal wrote, "but I am equally committed to ensuring that all of the residents of New Jersey have a safe environment to attend to their lives, whether it be to attend school, participate in our judicial system, or access state government services."

READ: [Homes of Indonesian immigrants in Highland Park sanctuary vandalized](#)

On the church webpage, the vigil and march were publicized along with a donation page (<https://www.youcaring.com/robysangerandfamily-1027574>) created to help Sangar and his family. As of late Sunday afternoon, more than \$8,500 of a \$10,000 goal had been raised.

To take action, community members can call Acting Director of ICE Thomas Homan at 202-732-4242, Newark Field Office Director of Enforcement and Removal Operations at ICE at 973-

645-3666. Further, visit www.speakupnj.org on ways to help, donate and obtain call to action scripts.

Pallone has sponsored the Indonesian Protection Act (HR 2642) and will attempt to reintroduce the bill which has been passed on three times before. This bill would protect the status of the Indonesians in the community. Advocates suggested to contact U.S. Sens. Cory Booker and Bob Menendez, both D-N.J., to express thanks of their previous support of immigration rights and ask them to introduce a sister bill to Pallone's.

READ: [Indonesian man from Highland Park deported](#)

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