

Giving the Refugees □ Children A Ray of Hope

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Thursday, 03 January 2008 00:00

Born in Malaysia, these refugee children have birth certificates but are not allowed to have identity cards. They face a tough life from the moment they were born!

However, with education, there will be hope for them. In this respect, UNHCR, Tzu Chi and the refugee community have jointly come together to bring hope to these children with no country...

Children are our future. Every child should go to school to receive a formal education. However, going to school is just a dream for the children of the Myanmar Rohingya ethnic group. The most important issue for this group is to fill their stomachs. For them, the future is so unpredictable and full of unknowns.

The Myanmar Rohingyas are Muslims, and their children's educational level lags far behind the other refugee groups. NGOs have been concerned about this issue and realized that it is important for both the parents and children to understand that education is their only hope to escape the vicious circle of poverty and illiteracy!



Under the United Nations' Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951, a refugee is a person who is residing outside the country of his/her nationality due to a well-founded fear of being prosecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. Owing to such fear, he/she is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself for the protection of the country in which he/she has sought refuge.

Since the 90s, many Myanmar refugees have settled down in Malaysia, the majority of whom are Muslims from the Rohingya ethnic group. Some are already third generation refugees. As their population is large, their chances of being accepted by a third country are relatively slim. The Malaysian government schools do not provide education for their children.

According to Mr. Alan Vernon, Representative of UNHCR (United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees) in Malaysia, there are 31 million refugees worldwide as of 2008. More than 45,000 refugees have been registered in Malaysia and of this, about 13,163 are children. There are 7,253 children from the age of 7 to 17. To-date, only about 800 people have the opportunity to go to school.

UNHCR forms partnership cooperation with governments, regional organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations to help provide solutions to the refugees' plight.



Community-based Literacy & Numeracy Programme (CLNP)

Due to their refugee status, the children, and especially teenage girls because of their culture, normally stay home. And home is usually just a small room or a house shared by several

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dozens of people.

Teenage boys have to work and share the burden of their fathers to feed their large family. And, to avoid being arrested by the authorities, they live like nomads.

According to UNHCR's survey, most Rohingya children under 10 do not go to school, and some cannot even read the alphabets. Therefore, education is very much needed by the refugees.

UNHCR Tzu Chi Education Centres

Since October 10, 2004, Tzu Chi and UNHCR have been collaborating to care for the refugees. Tzu Chi has been providing monthly free medical service and educational programmes for children seeking refuge in a religious school in Selayang.

On September 19, 2007, UNHCR and Tzu Chi Kuala Lumpur discussed the implementation of the Community-based Literacy & Numeracy Programme (CLNP) for the refugees' children. Funded by the US Embassy in Malaysia, this programme was jointly implemented by Tzu Chi, UNHCR and the refugee communities. It involved the largest educational funding for refugees in the history of UNHCR Malaysia. UNHCR's representative in Malaysia, Mr. Alan Vernon, said that Tzu Chi was selected as an implementing partner because it had carefully identified the refugees' needs and its objectives were in line with UNHCR's.

In order to understand the refugees' needs, Tzu Chi and UNHCR carried out their research on more than ten refugee communities in Klang Valley and Kuala Lumpur since October 2007. They finally chose Kampung Pandan, Taman Teratai, Taman Tasik Tambahan, Taman Tasik Permai and Selayang for the implementation of this programme. With help from the refugee community leaders, they found suitable buildings for the educational centres; and the parents were asked to bear some of the expenses for the utilities. They then recruited suitable teachers within the refugee community and the selected ones were provided training at Harvest Centre Bhd.

Currently, UNHCR is discussing with the Malaysian Ministry of Education about the possibility of allowing the refugees' children to receive formal education in the local schools. Meanwhile, it is hoped that the programme could at least help the children to master the basic reading and writing skills, and to learn basic arithmetic.

The Lucky Few

Standing at the entrance to the Tasik Permai Educational Centre, I could hear the happy voices of the children reading aloud. Climbing up the stairs, I reached a classroom where the children were seated on the floor reading, and each had a board to write on. Their teacher was helping them with their pronunciation.

The children greeted us with broad smiles. Obviously they had improved a great deal through the moral education given to them.

Although the five UNHCR Tzu Chi Education Centres are not as spacious as the standard schools, Tzu Chi had renovated and painted the classrooms in order to give the children a

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conducive environment to study in. All the classrooms are also well lit. Teachers from the Tzu Chi Teachers' Association decorated the walls of the classrooms with educational posters and Jing Si Aphorisms (translated to Malay language). Since their opening in January 2008, a total of 284 refugee children have enrolled in the five centres.



The children learn to read and write, paint and do handicraft. During recess, they play and laugh happily. The centres are indeed their fun land where they learn new knowledge and enjoy a happy childhood.

The children, aged between 7 and 15, are divided into four classes based on their ability, and they are taught English, Malay, Mathematics, Science and Religion. The teachers start with the kindergarten's syllabus; and a review is carried out every three months to check on their progress.

In the last year, they recorded a 75% attendance and 90% passing rate in their year-end examinations. In comparison to some 7,000 refugee children in Malaysia who are still unable to receive education, these children are truly the lucky few!

I Can Read and Write Now

Upon completion of their exercise, a few girls excitedly showed their exercise books and read out what they had written to the volunteers.

Twelve-year-old Halimah happily told the volunteer, "I can read and write now. My neighbours won't make fun of me anymore."

Prior to the set-up of the educational centres, Halimah did not have the opportunity to go to school. As an illiterate and a refugee, she developed an inferiority complex and also realized that she was different from the Malay children in her neighbourhood who could all read and write. She felt sad when other children made fun of her.

She truly enjoys studying at the UNHCR Tzu Chi Education Centre as she has made good friends and met great teachers there. She hopes to become a teacher one day.

On a hospital visit, Halimah's mother noticed that her daughter could read the signboards there. "Now wherever I go, I would bring her along so that I won't lose my way," said the mother. Like many refugee children, even though Halimah will not receive any academic certificate from the Malaysian Education Department, she could at least study happily.

A Dream Comes True

At 7.30 each morning, Nurbi and her brother, Ibrahim, would hold on to their two younger

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brothers when they walk along a winding flyover, cross a busy road and walk another 10 minutes to reach the Selayang Centre.

Everyday, they have to spend an hour on the road. If they were caught in the rain, they would either brave the rain and proceed, or wait until it stopped. If they were tired, they would stop to drink some water before continuing their walk. They would sometimes be late by half an hour or more, but they were never absent from school. Their teacher, Juvita, is very understanding and sympathetic. She provides whatever assistance she could to help them catch up with the others in their studies.

"They never complained about the walk or their tiredness; and they study very hard. They are excellent students both in conduct and studies," said Teacher Juvita. She also told her own children about the diligence of these four siblings so that her children could learn from them.



Education is the priority

Nur Hussin, the father of these four siblings, is a contract cleaner with the Town Council. He has asthma and cannot work for long hours. In one month, he can only work 12 days earning a salary of RM360.

The mother, Suruzon, had an operation a few months ago, with financial help from friends and medical aid from UNHCR. As she has not fully recovered, her eldest daughter has to take care of their household chores temporarily.

This couple has seven children. According to their culture, their eldest 19-year-old daughter has to stay home. One of their 18-year-old twin sons, Habibullah, works as a cleaner while another does odd job at the construction site. Their monthly income of RM 540, plus their father's take home pay have to feed their family of nine.

Nur Hussin is illiterate; he cannot even write his own name. Although the family is living from hand to mouth, he insisted on providing education for his four younger children. As Habibullah did not have the opportunity to go to school, he has to labour to earn money to support his family, as well as, provide education for his younger brothers and sisters.

Nur Hussin would often become breathless when he sweeps the roadside, and would have to use the asthma spray to relieve his discomfort.

"I don't mind working hard as long as my children can go to school and have a better life in future," he said.

Children of poor family mature earlier

The four younger children are very understanding and would not ask for anything. After lunch, the girl would help with the housework, and then the four of them would sit down on the floor to study.

Suruzon, who is very strict about etiquettes, has taught her children to greet their parents and

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kiss the back of their hands each time before leaving and also upon returning home. Being devout Muslims, the boys would go to the mosque on Fridays while the girls pray at home. Coming from a poor family, these children would wish to get out of poverty. "Without education, I don't know what I will be in future," said Ibrahim. A difficult life and an uncertain future will not deter Nur Hussin from giving an education to his children; and to Ibrahim and his siblings, poverty and the lack of necessities will never be their excuse to stop their studies.

A Universal Parental Love

"We cannot give much to our children, but it gives us great comfort to know that when they grow up they will be able to fend for themselves," To see their children given the opportunity to study is like a dream come true for all parents at the refugee communities.

However, despite having been given the opportunity to go to school, some students are unable to attend classes everyday due to family problems. A child going to school means less income for the family. Twelve year old Anwar Hussin and his brother, Mohamad Hassan, have to collect scraps after school each day to help their family make ends meet. But with the present economic downturn, the price of recycled items has gone down, and the brothers can only make RM10 a day, as compared to RM20 ~ RM30 in the past.



As both their parents are sick and fragile, the family collects scraps to make a living. They scrimp and save on their meager income to provide for the family of seven.

The father is pleased to find that his children are able to read and write nowadays.
Lessen their misery

Compared to other refugee families, Ikbal, and his family of five, who live in Taman Teratai, are fortunate as they do not have to worry about food.

Ikbal is afflicted with dizziness from an accident a couple of years ago. He is unable to work under the scorching heat, so he collects scraps for sale together with his two sons in the evenings.

His wife, Zarinah, a cleaner, works at a nearby market, earning RM500 a month. The hawkers, who are aware of her family's financial constraints, will give her their leftovers to take home. Zarinah makes salted fish from the leftover fish for sale at RM5 ~ RM7 per kg as extra income. Ikbal loves his children very much. Everyday, he walks to the Education Centre with his children's lunch, thus making sure that they will not go hungry.

A sweet burden

As of August 2008, all students at the five educational centres are required to put on school uniform. As a result, all parents have to scrimp and save to get their children the uniforms.

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Despite being pregnant, Roziyah would walk the half hour journey with her child to the centre everyday; and she would always wait at the back of her child's classroom while the lessons are being conducted.

With the few Malay words she had learned, Roziyah said, "I am so happy to see that my child can read! I come here everyday so that I can learn something too. Sometimes I help clean the classroom so that they have a clean environment to study in."

Parents are always the 'cheer-leaders', urging their children on at all times. They are happiest when they find even the slightest progress in their children!

Going Overseas for An Educational Mission

Out of a total of eleven teachers at the five educational centres, five are locals and six are Rohingya Burmese. Although they have different educational backgrounds, all of them are dedicated in serving the refugee communities.



In 2006, Faizal came to Malaysia to run a small school with 20 students. He recalled that one night in August 2007, some 400 refugees in his community, which included most of his students, were arrested by the authorities. He was then forced to close the school.

After learning about the joint efforts of UNHCR and Tzu Chi at the refugee communities, he was determined to build a new life and re-establish his career. He passed the tests and continued his teaching career at the UNHCR Tzu Chi Education Centre in Kampung Tasik Permai.

"Many people came to Malaysia to make a living. I came for the sake of imparting knowledge to the next generation," said Faizal, who hopes to improve his teaching methodology to give his students a better education.

Faizal's wife is also a teacher teaching in Myanmar. The couple would exchange ideas via the internet from time to time. Faizal said, "I would stay on until I am no longer needed by the students and the Centre. Then, I will go back to my home country."

For Faizal, religion plays an important role in his life. Living in a foreign country, he fasts whenever he encounters problems. At the moment, he is happy with his life here, because the children have an opportunity to be educated.

They Are Not Discriminated

The establishment of UNHCR Tzu Chi Education Centre and the participation of local teachers have proven to the refugees that they have not been discriminated.

Mohd Haidzir vowed to be a good teacher. His parents are intellectuals and five of his nine siblings are working in the education industry.

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Following the Islamic system of education, Mohd Haidzir has integrated moral education into the syllabus.

He commented that the students have improved a great deal after a year of schooling, both academically and also in discipline.

"If no one tells them that stealing is bad, they would probably steal for a living," said Mohd Haidzir. "A child without education is a child without the ability to look after himself/herself. They would not know how to contribute to the country. They might even pose a problem for society."



Gratitude and respect

Since the commencement of school, Mohd Haidzir has taught his students to show respect to the country that has nurtured them, and to sing "Negaraku", the national anthem of Malaysia. He hopes that the children will be grateful towards the nation even though they are not Malaysians. "To show respect to the national anthem of Malaysia is to show respect to this country. It is also to show respect to oneself!" Before school dismisses each day, he would lead the students to sing "Negaraku".

Mohd Haidzir cannot guarantee their future, but he can educate them. He is always patient and kind, and he teaches the students to have good learning attitude and moral values, in the hope that they would turn out to be good citizens.

Translated by Hew Kwee Heong, Chiang Sook Chen, Ng Chong Seau Horng

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« да редкие всплески воды.

Это тоже часть моих неприятностей.

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