

Viewpoint

For Many Asylum-Seekers, Jakarta Is Just a Layover

Leighton Cosseboom

Ali Nowroz sits quietly in a bar on Jalan Jaksa in Central Jakarta. Nearby, a small group of expatriates analyze their careers and love lives as Nowroz, 25, recalls a not-so-distant past, when the Taliban tried to kidnap him.

Nowroz is from Quetta, Pakistan, but is of Afghan descent and is an easily recognizable member of the Hazara ethnicity. Because of this, he has endured racial and religious persecution his entire life. Pakistani Hazaras, who are mainly Shiite Muslims, have been prime targets of Sunni radicals for several decades.

As a teenager in Pakistan, Nowroz joined his friends and family in an Ashura procession in 2004, a peaceful Shia religious celebration that was obliterated by suicide bombers. In shocking detail he paints a horrific mental picture of his people scrambling in the aftermath.

"I saw people dying, body parts of both the victims and the attackers," he says, calmly recounting the event.

In December 2010, while pursuing his master's degree in business administration at Balochistan University, Sunni extremists affiliated with the Taliban attempted to abduct Nowroz. Fearing for his life and for his family's safety, as well as receiving several subsequent death threats, he made the snap decision to flee his home country.

"I couldn't complete my MBA," he explains. "I was halfway through my last semester." Leaving it all behind and heading to Indonesia via Thailand and Malaysia, the plan was to ultimately seek refuge in Australia.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Indonesia has seen a steady increase in the number of new arrivals in recent years. The problem is that countries like Malaysia and Indonesia lack the necessary legal framework to deal with asylum-seekers, or even offer a baseline of assistance.

In Indonesia, the UNHCR is the sole entity responsible for protecting and liaising with asylum-seekers and refugees.

UNHCR external relations associate Mitra Suryono explains that her organization tries to assist the growing number of asylum-seekers who come to Indonesia to escape human rights violations.

"There is no fixed number," she says of the new arrivals per week. "It can be in the tens this week, but even in the hundreds next week."

According to the International Organization for Migration, since 1996, migrants primarily fleeing the Middle East and Central Asia have paid large sums of money to people smugglers, who organize their passage and obtain fraudulent



Zaafar Khan from Myanmar displays his UNHCR-issued identity card at a police station in Banten. He was arrested along with a group of 12 asylum-seekers who were allegedly planning to sail to Australia's Christmas Island. AFP Photo

documents and visas to get to Australia. In almost all cases, their journey to Australia involves a stopover in Indonesia, where many are left stranded.

The majority of asylum-seekers who arrive in Jakarta come on boats from Malaysia and Thailand. The IOM speculates that the flow of undocumented migrants between Malaysia and Indonesia is the second largest of its kind in the world.

"Oftentimes, these people on boats will face extreme danger," Mitra explains. "Some of them sink, some of them run out of gas and float around for months. Some of them make it, but a lot of them don't."

In April 2011 there were 137 people on Nowroz's boat, which was inbound from Malaysia. After a seven-day journey, the leaking vessel finally sank.

"The boat collapsed and we survived," Nowroz says. "Then the Indonesian police arrested all of us."

He was swiftly carted to the immigration detention center in Bogor, where he lived for 16 months

before escaping in July 2012.

Escaping from an immigration detention center in Indonesia involves great personal risk.

According to a UNHCR press release, last year a 28-year-old asylum-seeker was mysteriously killed and three more were hospitalized due to serious injuries after an attempted escape from the Pontianak immigration detention center in Kalimantan. The incident ended with Indonesian authorities apprehending the escapees.

The UN declared that it would conduct a rigorous investigation, yet no new information has come to

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light. There are 13 immigration detention centers spread out across Indonesia.

"Capacity is always a problem in these places, so we always encourage Immigration to release the asylum-seekers," Mitra says.

The known number of immigrants in Indonesia is immensely skewed due to a high volume of illegal entries. Mitra says there are currently 1,938 people with official refugee status in Indonesia and 7,288 registered asylum-seekers. The number of asylum-seekers is grossly outweighed by the estimated number of illegal immigrants, which is likely more than double that amount.

Last July, the highest reported number of immigrants came from Afghanistan, accounting for 58 percent of the total influx. Of the total number of refugee claims processed that month, 116 claims were rejected, including Nowroz's.

Mitra refers to the application process as "not quick and not short," while Nowroz credits a mountain of bureaucracy as the main problem

involved with obtaining refugee status in Jakarta. After living in the detention center for several months, he was eventually granted an interview in August 2011. Another 10 months later, his application was rejected based on confusion between his Afghan ethnicity and Pakistani place of birth.

Nowroz was forced to resubmit his application from the beginning and was only granted refugee status late this past February.

Worldwide, the UNHCR offers asylum-seekers three options: voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement in a different country. Voluntary repatriation for people like Nowroz is impossible because their homes are not safe for them to return to. Local integration into Jakarta is out of the question for any refugee, as Indonesia has not yet ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, which allows a nation to take asylum responsibilities.

The UNHCR in Indonesia continues to advocate for this condition to change as one of its primary objectives. But for now in Jakarta, Middle Eastern refugees from conflict areas have only one option. They must continue to wait for resettlement.

Nowroz still has his sights set on Australia, but there is no way of knowing if it is even possible for him to be moved there.

"It completely depends on the foreign government," Mitra says.

In an effort to move on and finally start their lives, many asylum-seekers and refugees in Indonesia hop on illegal boats, yet again, to reach Australia. But this is also a dire decision, as it could mean death or another long stint in detention.

The Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledges that thousands of asylum-seekers and many refugees are currently being held in immigration detention in Australia. Detention in Australia is indefinite. There is no legal limit to the length of time for which a person may be detained. Some spend long periods of time in detention waiting for their claims to be assessed.

The year following Nowroz's exodus from Quetta, he learned of his aunt being killed in yet another bombing of a local transport van. With a newly gained refugee status, he thinks objectively of rescuing his family. But Nowroz has only one card to play, opting for foreign resettlement.

Reflecting on his dangerous journey to Jakarta, he explains, "My future is not what I wanted. I know I would be marginalized anywhere I go. My hope is to save my family out of that hell."

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