**REFUGEE LIVES IN MALAYSIA**

One day in October 2008 I bumped into someone at the Selayang wholesale market who happened to be a Rohingya refugee. I greeted him, and we introduced each other. Mohamed Hasan was tanned and he looked sad. I asked him about his life as a refugee in Malaysia.

“I go around in the neighborhood to collect and sell recycleable items for a living,” he replied.

I asked him if I could follow him to his house. He agreed; so I waited for him to finish his work. There, I found his family of eight members living in a rundown house with one little room and a small hall. Upon seeing the condition of his home, I asked him why he did not rent a spacious house for the family. He told me that he could not afford it and that they live from hand to mouth.

Mohamed Hasan has been in Malaysia since 1985, a few years after the first major crackdown on the Rohingya community by the Burmese military. He experienced a lot of difficulty because he does not have any legal documents. Refugees in Malaysia have no rights; the Malaysian government does not recognise they have any special status. Often he had to hide for fear of being arrested by the local authorities. He also had to endure hunger as he could not earn sufficient income, because he has few opportunities and no protection at work because he has no right to work.

It was in 2002 that he finally was able to obtain a document (a refugee card) issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. But he continued to face problems because the UNHCR Card still does not give him any rights and cannot fully protect him from being arrested by the local authorities. In addition, local thugs often robbed him of his money.

In 2005, Mohamed Hasan’s family from Arakan, Myanmar arrived to join him. The family struggled to make ends meet because of the irregular and meagre income that he earned. To make matters worse, Mohamed Hasan alleged the authorities often stopped him and extorted money from him. In the past two years, he has been arrested six times. Each time he was detained, the family was forced to beg for their daily needs. Many refugees suffer the same fate as Mohamed Hasan.

The Rohingya refugees first started trickling into Malaysia in the early 1980s. There are no refugee camps in Malaysia; so the refugees live in towns and cities across Malaysia in small low-cost flats or crammed delapidated houses next to local homes. It is common for a few families or a dozen individuals to share a living space to save costs and for security reasons.

In the eyes of Malaysian law, the refugees are not different from undocumented (‘illegal’) migrants. The refugees are often at risk of arrest and detention if they are stopped by the authorities. The absence of legal and administrative frameworks to safeguard refugees leaves them exposed to the abuse of their basic rights such as local employers taking advantage of refugees’ vulnerabilites.

The refugees are trying to survive working in informal sectors with extremely low pay or no wages at all. But the refugees are unable to report their employers to the authorities for abuses at the workplace due to their lack of legal status.

The refugees have access to healthcare facilities in Malaysia - but they have to pay ‘foreigners’ fees’ which are very high. The prohibitive cost of treatment and their irregular income make it unaffordable to them. In some cases, refugees died from preventable and curable diseases because they could not pay for the treatment. In some cases, it has been known for hospital authorities to hold new-born babies until the refugee family can pay the bill.

Malaysian law does not allow refugee children to go to national schools. This means the only opportunity is if local voluntary groups set up schools. There are some, but they provide places for less than half the children at primary, and less than a fifth for secondary or pre-school. The m ajority of children get no education at all.

The refugees are often torn when the police stop and ask them whether or not they are working. If they say “yes”, the police would ask them why they are working with a UNHCR card – something not allowed under Malaysian law. If they say “no”, the refugees may be asked if they resort to theft or robbery to feed themselves; otherwise how else do they survive? Either way, it is all too common that the refugee has to pay some money to avoid further harassment or arrest. Thousands of refugees do end up in detention centres, meaning their families have no income at all, and many refugee children and women have little choice but to resort to begging to survive especially when the sole breadwinner of the family has been arrested.

The immigration officers often carry out raids at the workplace of housing projects and in villages where the refugees with their families live. There are times when refugee women and their children, including infants, are arrested and put into detention camps. The conditions in these immigration detention centre are horrible. There is not enough food or water; there is over crowding; there is lack of sanitation; there is little for detainees to do; and communication to the outside world may only happen if you pay for it.

In some immigration detention centres, the authorities allow the detainees to take a shower with only five small bowls of water - which is hardly enough to wet the body once. If a detainee falls sick and asks for medicine, the authorities shout at the detainee saying the budget for medicine is not for foreigners. Some camp authorities forced the women to do sit-up for hundred times as a punishment in detention centre if their babies cry.

In a nutshell, the refugees in Malaysia find themselves trapped in a vicious circle of living in a legal grey area and being arrested. They have three options; repatriation, local integration and resettlement.

For Rohingya refugees, repatriation is not a possible option, and the chances of resettlement to a third country is slim. Local integration is the only option for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, and Malaysians can play a big role to make it possible.

With no quick solution in sight, Rohingya refugees have to live in Malaysia for an uncertain period of time. So why not allow the refugees to work here legally so they can contribute to society? It would solve so many issues to everyone’s immediate benefit.