



Rohingya Find Safe Haven

CURRENT CONFLICTS

Australia's shores provide safe haven and a new start for some Rohingya people escaping persecution in Burma.

SHESHTYN PAOLA reports.

In Australia, the right to study, marry, work and live is something we take for granted. But for those who have escaped oppression and braved oceans in the hopes of starting a new life, the peace and equality embedded within our culture means the world.

For this reason, many of those who reach our shores are tremendously grateful and determined to give back to the country that has taken them in. This includes warm young men such as Muhammad Azzi*, 26, who came to Australia with his siblings and parents in 2009 and is now settled in Queensland with his family. Muhammad is a Rohingya - one of the persecuted Muslim minority from Burma who fled the region in search of a better life.

"Back at home we had a lot of problems, we were afraid. There were restrictions on marriage, we were not allowed to run businesses. In Burma, Rohingyas have been subjected to systematic discrimination and gross human-rights violations for many decades," he says.

"But in Australia we have democracy; all citizens deserve and practise equal rights, regardless of race, religion and culture. Almost all services here in Australia are much better and more peaceful than in my home country Burma."

After a stopover in Bangladesh where Muhammad studied English, he has been working in Australia full-time, and is also excited at the opportunities afforded to the younger generation of Rohingya, including his siblings.

"I can see Rohingya children are doing good at school and universities. They are picking up English very

quickly, and some of them even found jobs on their own," he says. "My two brothers and I are working full-time, while a fourth brother is studying pharmacy at the University of Queensland. He wants to be a doctor. Our other siblings are at high school and primary school, and all are working hard to earn qualifications."

Muhammad emphasises the "great responsibility" he feels to give back for the opportunities he has been given. "My whole family and I are determined to pay back Australia in return for the boundless plains it shares with us," he says. "We call Australia home."

Like Muhammad's siblings, Nurul Abser, 20, is also taking Australia's educational opportunities by the reins. Born in Bangladesh to Burmese Rohingya parents, Nurul migrated with them to Australia in 2010. He is studying a Bachelor of Biomedical Science (Honours) and also aspires to become a doctor. Nurul eventually hopes to provide medical assistance to those in third-world countries.

"My life is filled with hopes and dreams that are yet to be achieved and brought into reality. The greatest goal of my life is to be a highly respected and well-educated man, enabling me to enrich and make a turning point for the Rohingya ethnicity and the Australian community," he says.

He is happy to be living in a country that affords basic human rights, a sharp contrast to the treatment of the Rohingya in Burma and Bangladesh. "What I like most about Australia is the equal freedom and opportunity it offers to every individual," he says. "I also like that it is a multicultural country that respects every religion and race."

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A drainage canal in the Thet Kal Pyin Refugee Camp collects standing water which poses many health risks, increasing the likelihood of the spread of disease and infection. January 24, 2015. PHOTO: DAVID MAURICE SMITH / OCULI

Sumaiya Ayatullah, 25, is also thankful for the opportunity to bring up her newborn in peace and safety in Australia. Originally from Burma, she came to the country with her husband in 2013 with dreams of starting a family.

The shy new mother brightens with joy chatting about her three-month-old baby. She has already gained a qualification in child care in Australia, and hopes to continue her studies once her own baby is a bit older.

“If the Australian government gives me the opportunity, then I will study, and if I have time I will get a job. If given the opportunity, I hope to work with children,” she confides. “I am enjoying life in Australia - the freedom, without any stress... I am happy.”

Despite the beaming optimism of these young men and women, life in Australia for Rohingya refugees is not without its challenges. For those who grew up for the most part in Burma without access to education, it can be hard to integrate into the community and find employment.

Some of the common challenges Rohingyas face include communication problems, because of the language barrier, says Muhammad, whose parents are currently enrolled in an English program.

Nurul agrees. “The language barrier was a challenge when I first came to Australia, and it has been challenging for me to adapt to the Western culture, as I am from a third-world country that has different cultures,” he says.

It is not easy to find jobs either, due to lack of skills. “There is a dearth of educational opportunities in their country of origin, so it’s difficult to find gainful employment,” confirms Shaun Nemorin, a Project Officer at STARTTS who also worked with the Rohingya people in Bangladesh for the UNHCR in 2011-13.

While some that have come to Australia are qualified in a discipline, many of these qualifications are not Australian and therefore not recognised in this country, Muhammad points out. This means to work they have to take a test or do another two-year long course to be Australian qualified.

Most Rohingya refugees in Australia are also single adults who came by boat and are considered “illegal maritime arrivals”, he says. Being on temporary protection visas means they are unable to sponsor their families to come over until they get Australian citizenship.

“They have to work and wait to get citizenship and their family. Some of them have very small children [in their home country] with no one to take care of them.

This is very difficult for them mentally and emotionally,” says Muhammad. “Some of them spent years on the way with no place to live in, and they’ve been here for two or three years, but cannot apply to get their families.”

The community as a whole also deals with a “significant amount of trauma” as they try to leave behind their difficult past, according to Nemorin. “There’s a sense of hopelessness, given they’ve been essentially rejected by everyone. They have weak community links - you can tell they’re a traumatised community.”

Rohingya in Australia are beginning to build community links once again as they settle into life in a new country. Community support organisations, such as the Burmese-Rohingya Community Australia (BRCA), based in NSW, help to guide these relationships.

This group is particularly able to serve the vulnerable Rohingya community in Sydney that consists primarily of single male asylum seekers who have come by boat, connecting them with lawyers and interpreters, and providing social and emotional support.

BRCA president Anwar Sha says the organisation does its best to help fellow Rohingya in every possible way. “We support any Rohingya as much as we can,” he says. “When somebody comes to Australia, if they’ve got any issues, they can come to us for advice.”

Similar groups exist across Australia, including the Burmese Rohingya association In Queensland Australia (BRAQA), the Australian Burmese Rohingya Organisation (ABRO) in Victoria, and the Australian Burmese Rohingya Association (ABRA) that is also based in Sydney.

These organisations hold rallies in their cities to help bring awareness to the Rohingya cause.

Friendliness and respect from the Australian community also goes a long way towards relieving the Rohingya’s burden of trauma. Both Muhammad and Nurul say Australians have been mostly welcoming and kind during the difficult transition period.

“I’ve found the majority of Australian people have been welcoming, cooperative and friendly towards me,” says Muhammad, and Nurul’s experience is similarly positive. “Australian people have acted friendly, with positive and decent manners, towards me. Throughout my experiences in Australia, there have been no such Australians who acted in a biased manner,” he says.

While many challenges lie ahead for the Rohingya, Australia represents a safe haven for those who are regarded as some of the world’s most persecuted people.

“The future for asylum seekers no one knows, but as long as they’re safe and they’re not being persecuted anymore - they’ve been persecuted since they were born ... they don’t have to worry much here in Australia because everyone helps each other as much as they can,” says Sha.

“It’s good because they haven’t got any life to do anything back home. At least here they have some rights. In my own experience, I can’t expect any more than the life I’ve got here in Australia.” ☞

** Name has been changed*