

From Academia to NGO: the Role of Repusm in Providing Alternative Education for Rohingya Refugees' Children in Penang Island

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Abstract: *This paper explains the role of REPUSM in providing alternative education for Rohingya refugees' children in Penang island. Rohingya refugees are Muslims from Myanmar (Burma). They are forced to flee across the border of their country of origin due to the persecution of the government and the abuse from the locals Buddhist. This desperate condition leave Rohingyas people no choice, except to be refugees. Unfortunately, lives as refugees are not easy especially in Malaysia because the host government have not recognized them. However, the government still allow the United Nation High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) to assist the Rohingyas and other refugees based on humanitarian aspect. The Rohingyas are lives in uncertainty because the government is not responsible to assist them. Hence the reason why other parties in Malaysia took some initiatives to aid them from several aspects, including the Research and Education for Peace Unit, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia (REPUSM). This department is from academic background that strives to assist the Rohingya in Penang Island. But, as an academic institution, helping Rohingya refugees is challenging because of certain difficulty. Therefore, in order to overcome the problems, the REPUSM took the alternative way to create a foundation body and register it as non-governmental organization to have a better operation for the sake of Rohingya refugees. As NGO, it helps REPUSM to manage and provide alternative education for Rohingya children with hope they can adapt the local culture and environment in Penang.*

Keywords: *Rohingya Refugees; REPUSM; NGO; Alternative Education; Penang Island*

I. INTRODUCTION

Refugee is one the global phenomena nowadays. This situation happened due to natural disaster in an affected country. However, many refugees are forced to leave their own country because of internal conflict such as government persecution and human right violations (Azad and Jasmin, 2013).

One the United Nations agency that has a mandate to protect refugees is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Based on the definition of refugees by UNHCR, Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country (UNHCR, 2019).

Revised Manuscript Received on October 05, 2019.

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Retrieval Number: L40171081219/2019©BEIESP
DOI: 10.35940/ijitee.L4017.1081219

The Statistical Yearbook of UNHCR (2017) shows about 68.5 million persons are forcibly displaced from all over the world. One the ethnic groups that contribute to the number is Rohingya. Rohingya refugees are Muslims from Myanmar (Burma). They are forced to flee across the border of their country of origin due to the persecution of the government and the abuse from the locals Buddhist. This desperate condition leave Rohingyas people no choice, except to be refugees.

Currently, many Rohingyas are seek protection nearby Bangladeshi-Myanmar border by living in a temporary camp. Nevertheless, some of them are flee away to other countries to have a better protection. According to Aizat and Andika (2018), Malaysia is one of the preferred destinations for Rohingyas.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by using qualitative approach. The findings in this study were derived from field works activities engaging the Rohingya refugee's community and REPUSM representatives in 2018 located in Penang island. The information was collected from respondents by using in-depth interview based on semi structure questionnaire.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figures at a glance in Malaysia. Based on data derived from UNHCR Malaysia, there are about 164,620 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with this agency as in the end of January 2019 (UNHCR Malaysia, 2019). The figures also show that majority refugees in Malaysia is Rohingyas comprising some of 84,030 persons.

Myanmar's government persecution. Obviously, the denial of the Rohingyas' right emerged since the military took over the civil ruler in 1962. Ne Win as a leader of the state accused Rohingyas as illegal immigrant who were brought by British government to Rakhine. The 1974 Myanmar's Immigration Act and the Citizenship Act 1982 officially denied the rights of Rohingyas as citizen in Myanmar (Parnini, 2013).

Journey to Malaysia. Malaysia is one of the popular destinations for Rohingyas to come despite other places like Bangladesh, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. There are several ways for Rohingya refugees move into Malaysia. First, they

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travel by plane and to do that the Rohingyas need to cross to Bangladesh and meet the agents who can create fake passport (International Crisis Group, 2014). Second, the Rohingyas travel by land route across Thailand to Malaysia. Normally, the trip will take about two weeks or even longer based on the agents and security matters. The third way is they use the sea route by boat, and this is a popular method for Rohingyas to leave their country recently. But, travel by boat is the most challenging for Rohingyas due to several factors like weather, time and lack of food (Aizat, Amirrudin and Sarah Nadiyah, 2016).

Malaysia's policy towards Rohingyas. Currently, the government of Malaysia has no obligation to assist those refugees since there is no policy to protect them. For instance, the relating law or policy is the Malaysian Immigration Act 1959/63 which has no specific term of refugees (Intan Suria, Sity Daud and Nor Azizan, 2016). However, the government has allowed them to stay on temporary basis based on humanitarian principle. This situation contribute to the uncertainty lives for Rohingyas in Malaysia because there are not protected by the government policy.

Living condition in Malaysia. Since both government and UNHCR do not provide any temporary shelter or camps, the Rohingyas and other refugees are spread around peninsular Malaysia. For Rohingyas, they prefer to live in town in order to have easy access for economy reasons. Most Rohingyas settle in Kuala Lumpur and Penang (Aizat and Phaison, 2017).

Rohingyas in Penang. the Penang state is one the largest population of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and the largest population for them are in the Klang Valley areas (Selangor and Kuala Lumpur). About Rohingya refugees who are live in Penang, they prefer to rent flats, squatter area and village by one to three families at one time. The reason is the Rohingya want to reduce the cost since the rental is quite expensive. For example, there are some Rohingya who live in Bukit Jambul flats located inside Penang Island and the rental they should pay is about RM 600.00 until RM 1000.00 per month, regarding the size of flats and its accessibility (Aizat, Kamarulzaman and Andika, 2018). So, there is a normal situation if some Rohingya would prefer to stay at the squatter area like in Bagan Dalam and Bagan Ajam in the area of Penang mainland. Although the environment is not good as compared with other locals in terms of cleanliness and tidiness due to the priority for Rohingyas to reduce the living cost. However, there are some Rohingya people who live in middle- and high-class living place like apartment and condominium because they can afford to pay the rent (Equal Rights Trust, 2014).

Education for Rohingyas's children in Penang Island. Education is one of the major concerns for Rohingyas' children in Malaysia. Basically, the government do not allow them to go to the public school because of their status as refugees (Azizah, 2010). So, the UNHCR initiate to organize the school for refugees in order to provide some basic education like Malay and English Language, Mathematics and Science. However, UNHCR has limited capacity to organize school for refugees since they are spread in many parts of the

country. Hence the reason why some civil society organizations in Malaysia throughout local Islamic Non-governmental Organization (NGO) take responsibility to conduct basic education for Rohingyas' children and other refugees (Letchamanan, 2013). In order to manage the Rohingya children education issue in Penang, there are mainly two groups of local Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) took the initiative in offering alternative education to Rohingya children like the Penang Peace Learning Center in Gelugor and the Rohingya Education Center in Permatang Pauh.

Alternative education for Rohingya Refugees' Children in Penang: The role of REPUSM, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). As part of its philosophy that aims to give benefit for others in need, the REPUSM take some initiatives to help and relieve those Rohingyas' children as their social responsibility. As brief, The Research and Education for Peace (REPUSM) also known as Peace Unit was officially established in July 1995 under the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia. The aim of Peace Unit is to promote conflict resolution throughout the region by peaceful means. In addition, the Peace Unit strives to create awareness and campaign about the peace education since there was lacking among universities in Malaysia to be focus in this field, judging from the course and academic program offered as well as research work undertaken. REPUSM also focuses on the human rights issues like the problem of Rohingya refugees who are already live in Malaysia. REPUSM managed to receive a partially research grant from UNHCR together with university from Thailand to conduct a research about the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. The research involved activities such as data collection, interviews from the field work by various groups like Rohingyas, NGOs, academician and government agencies (Azharudin and Azlinariah, 2012). The result of the research was the organization of seminar who were attended by Rohingyas representatives, NGOs, academician and several government agencies to discuss about the current situation as well as the future for Rohingyas refugees in Malaysia. Besides, the representatives of Peace Unit joined the international conference on human rights to highlight the plight of Rohingya refugees and did some advocacy work (Aizat et. al., 2015). On the other hand, the research report also has been submitted to the UNHCR for future action.

From academia to NGO: The role of REPUSM in providing alternative education for Rohingya refugees' children in Penang island. Although the research period on Rohingyas had already finished, but the REPUSM still strives to sustain in providing assistance for Rohingyas refugees particularly who are living in Penang Island as a part of social responsibility matter as stated by the coordinator of Peace Unit, Prof. Kamarulzaman Askandar (Zam) "...I've always stressed that Peace Studies is prescriptive in nature. We cannot afford doing research and write just for the sake of being an academic only.

The real measure of our work should be on what impact its making to the society. I've always told my students and colleagues to do action research! Make yourself into a Scholar Practitioner! If you know something that can help improve society then it's your moral responsibility to do it, especially if nobody else is doing it. And especially if they are doing it wrongly. Go out and be a Peace Scholar Practitioner, my children, students, and friends. Be a Peacebuilder and Peacemaker. Be one with Peace...". As an academician, the duty is not only to do some researches and publications, but also to do something good for the benefit of the society (Benham, 1996). Thus, regarding to the previous research about the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, the REPUSM had addressed some need for them and its possible to implement, about the education for Rohingyas' children in Penang Island. The reasons to provide some basic education for Rohingyas' children are to help them in improving general knowledge so perhaps, they can survive on their own in the future (Mc. Clintock, 2013). In addition, there is no informal school for Rohingyas' children in the island of Penang and they have to go to the mainland in order to gain some knowledge.

From REPUSM to NGO, Kelab Bina Damai (Peacebuilding Club): Alternative learning center for Rohingya refugees' children in Penang island. In order to smooth the operation in helping Rohingya refugees' children in Penang island, REPUSM was organized an NGO so called Kelab Bina Damai (Peacebuilding Club). The establishment of the NGO was based on the initiative of the final year project of some undergraduate students who took strategy and skills for conflict resolution course under the supervision of Prof. Zam and guidance from Peace unit in March 2013. The project aimed to create the support and awareness campaign for Rohingya refugees who were forced to move out from their place of origin due to persecution. Eventually, after some discussion, collaboration and improvement from students, lecturer, REPUSM staff and Rohingyas community, the NGO had opened its alternative learning center officially started in May 19, 2013 known as Rohingya Learning Center (RLC) temporarily at Gelugor, Penang. Nowadays, the new place for RLC located at Minden, nearby USM and Gelugor in Penang Island.

Profile of RLC students. A survey had been conducted to 51 students of the Rohingya Learning Center (RLC) in Minden from the total of 94 students. Students already completed the questionnaire that been distributed with the help of teachers at the schools. At first the questionnaire was prepared in Malay language because students do not really understand the English language. So, they were prefer being asked in Malay and some Rohingya teachers also gave help to students to understand the question by using Malay or Rohingya language. The questionnaire was divides into two parts, the background of students and challenges for them to have access for education. From the total of students, male were about 54 persons and female were about 40 persons. Majority of them were born in Myanmar (74 persons) and the rest were born in Malaysia (19 persons) and Bangladesh (2 persons). They are some age's range of students between 4

and 15 years and majority of them are in the age from 7 until 11 years old (72 persons). About 67 persons already registered with the UNCHR in Kuala Lumpur and 27 persons are not. But, only 61 of students have possess UNHCR card and 33 students do not have it. Most of them were living in flats and village house with small size because their parents cannot afford to pay the high rental. About 90 students were stay with parents and the rest were stay with other relatives like siblings. The father of students usually works in informal sector like construction workers, plumber, carpenter, painter, cleaner and grass cutter. Meanwhile, there were some of their mother which also have some works as cleaner, shop assistant and tailor to increase the family income. Basically, the income that earned by them is about RM50.00 per day. Because of the limited income of the parents, students only have their meal twice a day and one of it have been served at the schools.

Managing RLC: Challenge and way forward. The RLC and all the Rohingyas students have been registered under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok after the visiting of their delegation to this school. In order to run the school smoothly, Kelab Bina Damai has made collaboration with Rohingya community in Penang under its organization named Rohingya Society Malaysia (RSM) in terms of children's participation to the school and relating activities. The roles of RLC are not only for the sake of education, but also known as hub for welfare activity and another humanitarian assistance. For example, the school can be utilized as place for funding and goods contribution, health screening and treatment, gathering activities, volunteerism activities from NGOs and locals. Since the establishment on the new location, several NGOs and locals have come to this school and contribute something like medical assistance, cleaning and painting the school. Besides, there were some people donated the school accessories like tables, chairs, whiteboards and teaching materials. It is a hope that the school will still be receiving those assistance and donation from the NGOs and public. Nevertheless, the challenge for RLC is to make it sustainable is main concern due to facilitate the cost of the school operation. For instance, the school needs about RM 5000.00 per month based on the cost of rental, teachers allowance, water and electricity, food and snacks for students, teaching materials and learning activities. Therefore, Kelab Bina Damai strives to obtain the funding from various people, groups and institutions who are willing to do some contribution for the school. The initiative taken by Kelab Bina Damai to set up the RLC is not only to show the social responsibility of REPUSM to help those Rohingyas' children, but also to increase the sense of community responsibility towards the Rohingyas' life as refugees in Malaysia. Then, based on the awareness, the local communities should take some action to support the rights of Rohingyas to have a better life in Myanmar and it will be possible to achieve if everybody in the country come together in doing it.

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IV. CONCLUSION

The existence of refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented and stateless peoples do not pose a threat to the economy, social, and security issues of Malaysia contrary to the perception of ordinary citizens. To date, the numbers of Rohingya refugees remained to be manageable when compared to the hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria, Iraq and other Middle East countries that have arrived there since 2015. These Rohingya refugees also do not pose any financial burden to the government given that upon arrival, they are put under the responsibility of the communities themselves and have become self-reliant. It remains to be seen what the government will do in order to manage this group and maybe find some solution on how to best handle them. At the same time, while the waiting time for any decision making comes from the government, there are, however, thousands of Rohingya children who are not able to access basic education at the formal level. At best, these children are sent to NGO-operated informal schools or alternative learning centers. In the medium term, these children would need secondary level education and opportunities for tertiary level education. Providing the Rohingya refugee children the access to education will be a life changing step for them and their families. And while, these children may fall under the non-citizen category in Malaysia, the reality is that the Malaysian government does have the obligation to provide education to all children in Malaysia, including non-citizens. This issue does not only concern the upholding of a basic right to education of children, but more especially it challenges the state response to ensuring human security not only of Malaysian citizens but also those of non-citizens who are existing in the country. The welfare of these non-citizens in terms of security, health, education, livelihoods and other basic needs cannot be wholly neglected by a society that strives to be a developed nation. It is therefore to the best interest of Malaysia that Rohingya children and other refugee children should be provided with the right to education and can become part of the country's strength.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My thanks and grateful goes to Centre for Research and Innovation, Universiti Kuala Lumpur (CORI), UniKL MIMET and UniKL MITEC due to their generosity in supporting my research activity and publication.

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