



# With You

SPECIAL EDITION

## STANDING WITH REFUGEES THROUGH COVID-19

AGAINST ALL ODDS

## ONE ROHINGYA WOMAN'S QUEST TO EMPOWER REFUGEE WOMEN

CHANGING LIVES

## COMPASSION IN ACTION: MEETING REFUGEES' NEEDS THROUGH FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE



## MESSAGE FROM THE REPRESENTATIVE

Warmest greetings from UNHCR Malaysia!

We are pleased to bring to you the fourth edition of “With You”, our newsletter to connect with our friends who support the work of UNHCR and our partners in Malaysia.

This is a time of tremendous challenge and adversity for us all. The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted immense suffering across the world and brought about the most severe economic crisis in a century.

The pandemic has threatened the social and economic rights of the most vulnerable in society – among them refugees. They are frequently the first to suffer the economic impacts of a lockdown and are often hardest hit when faced with illnesses in the family.

This edition of “With You” brings you news of how UNHCR, working closely with our partners, has been helping refugees during

this time of COVID-19, including in ensuring information about COVID-19 is disseminated quickly and in languages that refugees understand, and in providing aid to the most vulnerable refugees. This edition also highlights how refugee communities themselves have been contributing to Malaysia’s fight against COVID-19 as a way of giving back to the country that is hosting them.

This edition also highlights a critical area of UNHCR’s work, which is to coordinate closely with relevant Government Ministries and the Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC) in ensuring that refugee communities are included in the Government’s national response measures, and to prevent infection from spreading among the communities. We commend the Government of Malaysia for its inclusive policy of making screening and treatment free for all foreigners, including refugees and asylum-seekers.

As a global threat, the COVID-19 response needs to be inclusive, equitable and universal to effectively beat the virus. Any barriers to accessing health care and discrimination create an environment where the ill are not treated, cases go undetected, and the virus spreads. The COVID-19 outbreak clearly demonstrates that we are all connected, regardless of who we are. No one is safe until we are all safe.

Lastly, even amidst the challenges of COVID-19, Malaysians continue to demonstrate that their empathy and ability to care and to help goes beyond the limitations of nationality or legal status. Thank you most sincerely for standing with refugees here in Malaysia and around the world.

Yours sincerely,

**Thomas Albrecht**  
Representative

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During this difficult time,  
commit to kindness  
and support refugees  
in need today.



**Send us your  
feedback!**

We would love to hear from you! Please email us at [donormalaysia@unhcr.org](mailto:donormalaysia@unhcr.org) and share your views.

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# ONE ROHINGYA WOMAN'S QUEST TO EMPOWER REFUGEE WOMEN

Against all odds, and against a deeply patriarchal community which keeps women voiceless and powerless, a Rohingya woman in Malaysia steps up to defend Rohingya women's rights and provide them opportunities for empowerment.

Syaedah, a Rohingya refugee woman, enters the community centre where she works in Kuala Lumpur, greeting groups of Rohingya women already gathered there.

At 24, Syaedah is one of the leaders at the Rohingya Women Development Network (RWDN), a social enterprise aimed at empowering Rohingya women in Malaysia. The opportunity to get involved came about when Syaedah met founder of RWDN Syarifah four years ago. An exceptional leader, Syarifah inspired Syaedah to learn about her rights as a woman in the community, and her place in society.

Syaedah who had never been to school before that, learnt to read and write for the first time. Her confidence grew as she took more trainings at RWDN.

Syaedah comes from a conservative culture, where women are often not given opportunities for education or work. Her family fled persecution in Myanmar when she was only four years old. She grew up in Malaysia, but did not get a chance to attend any of the learning centers available for refugee children in the country. Instead, out of necessity, she was married at the age of 15, and became a mother in the same year. Syaedah now has two daughters, aged nine and one.

"I feel like I lost my childhood because I got married young and could not attend school and college," she said. "Before coming to RWDN, I used to be at home, scared to meet new people. Now I'm confident and not scared to meet people."

It was then that Syaedah realized that more Rohingya girls and women should be empowered.

"In my culture, many women do not go to school, work, or get involved in community development," Syaedah explained. "I am lucky because my husband is supportive of my work. Every husband, father and brother should encourage their mother, sister, and wife to stand up for her rights."

Her community initially did not like her working because she was a wife and mother.



As Syaedah proved herself, the community gradually came around to the idea.

"I decided to work at RWDN so that I could empower other women. I have worked here for three years now," said Syaedah. "This job is very important to me. It has changed my life and the lives of many others."

Her main responsibilities include arranging trainings for the women, and coordinating projects with members.

Syaedah is passionate about training young girls and women on child marriage and domestic violence. She gained expertise in women and child rights, particularly on the problems related to child marriage through courses provided by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC).

***"I feel like I lost my childhood because I got married young and could not attend school and college," she said. "Before coming to RWDN, I used to be at home, scared to meet new people. Now I'm confident and not scared to meet people."***

"A Rohingya girl loses her opportunity to attend school when she gets married young. If the husband dies or divorces her, she is not confident to be independent," said Syaedah.

"I thought it was normal to marry so young, but as I turned 20, I realised it is not right. A 15-year-old girl is not physically and mentally ready for marriage, therefore she does not understand about family and children," she said.

"I don't want my daughters to be child brides. I will make sure they finish school and I will not marry them off before they are ready. This is why I work so hard to educate my community about child marriage."

During the COVID-19 Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia, activities at the RWDN centre were halted. But Syaedah kept going.

When she learnt that many in her community did not have food, Syaedah quickly mobilized support for food aid to be distributed to nearby refugee communities. She also made herself available for trips to medical facilities, to accompany Rohingya refugees who were not able to converse in the local Malay language.

"People need help but are too scared to seek it even though there is no reason to be afraid. If my presence can give them the strength and assurance that they need in order to get themselves screened and treated, then I don't have a reason not to do it," she explained.

Although the country is now past the most restrictive period of the MCO, Syaedah said RWDN has not yet resumed full operations as it is hard to practice social distancing in their modest-sized centre. Unable to regularly meet her community, Syaedah utilised social media platforms to continue sharing information with her community on COVID-19 and other areas where they might need support.

She hopes to start training again soon.

"I'm looking forward to training more girls on child marriage and domestic violence. My hope is for all Rohingya girls to know their rights and be able to stand up for themselves," Syaedah said with a smile.

# REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA MAKING DURING THE TIME OF COVID-19

*By producing PPEs, distributing food assistance, or keeping their communities informed, these refugees living in Malaysia are finding ways to play a part in fighting the coronavirus pandemic.*



## IN A TIME OF COVID-19, A REFUGEE TAILOR IN KUALA LUMPUR GIVES BACK TO THE CITY

**“When people who don’t know us have helped us for no reason, why shouldn’t we respond in the same way?”**

This was 27 year old Afghan refugee, Sajad’s reply when asked why he decided to sew Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for medical front liners who are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. To Sajad, this was his way of using his skills to give back to Malaysia.

Sajad has been a refugee all his life.

“My parents left Afghanistan for Iran to avoid persecution. I was born in Iran, raised there, and got married there,” he said. “Most of my family members were in the tailoring industry there so I decided to learn it and support my family this way.”

Fearing persecution in Iran, Sajad and his family fled to Malaysia in 2015.

After a period of adjustment, Sajad enrolled in a training run by UNHCR, to help refugees find opportunities for self-reliance. This eventually

led him to join a tailoring programme run by an NGO.

“This NGO asked me to work with them, sewing things like clothes and bags. I was happy working there. I earned an allowance, and I could support my family,” said Sajad.

When the Movement Control Order (MCO) commenced in Malaysia in mid-March 2020, Sajad found himself idle at home and eager to contribute.

He received a call from a social enterprise asking whether he would be interested to sew PPEs for medical front liners, and Sajad immediately jumped at the opportunity to help.

At that time, he didn’t even ask about the stipend or work hours. He was just excited at the prospect of finally being able to do something. Sajad quickly engaged 20 other skilled tailors

from the Afghan refugee community, and the group started sewing medical PPE items including jumpsuits, gowns, head covers, shoe covers, and masks.

“My job here is to supervise other tailors,” said Sajad. “I also make sure everyone follows the hygiene Standard Operating Procedures (SOP).”

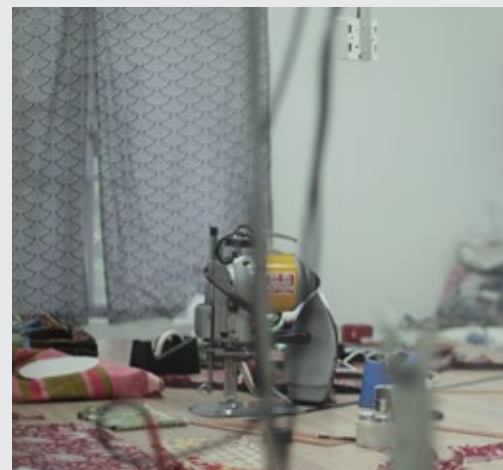
This means scheduling work in shifts so as not to crowd their workspace, and donning face masks and head covers.

Working long hours with no days off, in just over two months, the tailors produced over 30,000 pieces of medical PPEs which were distributed to government clinics conducting COVID-19 screenings.

Sajad’s commitment to helping during the pandemic does not end there.

After returning home from his tailoring work, he sits down in front of the computer with a few other Afghan refugee youths and scours the Internet for information on COVID-19 and translates the information into Dari language that is commonly understood by the Afghan community. The translated information and videos are then distributed to the Afghan community via social messaging platforms such as Whatsapp and Telegram.

“My parents are here with me in Malaysia and they are elderly, which means they are in the vulnerable to the virus. They don’t understand English very much, and I know of many others who don’t as well. If I want to protect them, I need to also protect others by sharing knowledge on the Coronavirus, so they can protect themselves,” said Sajad.



# A DIFFERENCE



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Sajad does not mind the hard work volunteering to provide information for his community, on top of the long hours sewing PPEs.

“To be honest, even though I am getting paid to sew PPEs, I would do it for free because I want to give back to society, to Malaysians,” said Sajad.

*Working long hours with no days off, in just over two months, the tailors produced over 30,000 pieces of medical PPEs which were distributed to government clinics conducting COVID-19 screenings. Sajad's commitment to helping during the pandemic does not end there.*

He reflected on all the acts of kindness his family and community have received from Malaysians.

“I believe that refugees can contribute to the society as we all live together in Malaysia,” Sajad said with a smile on his face.

“This is one of the ways that refugees can give back.”



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## DOING HER PART: REFUGEE HEADTEACHER FINDS WAYS TO HELP HER COMMUNITY AMIDST A PANDEMIC

When Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO) was enforced in March 2020, like the rest of the country, Sam, a refugee woman from Myanmar, confined herself to her home.

Sam is a headteacher at a learning centre in Kuala Lumpur for refugee children of the Myanmar Kachin ethnic group. She received desperate phone calls from parents of her students and other members of her community. Many spoke fearfully of decreasing food supply and depleted savings.

“I did not want to wait helplessly, I needed to find a way to help,” said Sam.

Sam has been a refugee in Malaysia for over 10 years. In that time, her role has expanded beyond a teacher. Sam supports her community, including managing networks of Malaysians keen to help refugees.

Donors contacted Sam directly during the MCO, offering food aid for refugees. Sam swiftly worked together with her community to identify needy refugees and distribu-

ting food packs to over 2,000 refugees around Klang Valley. Working with a local church, Sam fundraised over RM18,000 as rent assistance to those in need, benefiting over 80 refugee families.

“Malaysians have very big hearts. Even though there are also Malaysians in need, they still extend help to refugees,” Sam said, touched by the support.

This inspired Sam to rally several community members skilled in tailoring to sew PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) for medical frontliners. They produced hundreds of head covers using medical fabric donated by a private medical university. The community also cooked food for those in quarantine.

“Refugees want to help Malaysian society, like we have done during the MCO. If there are other chances for us to help, we are ready all the time,” said Sam.

“We do it as a way to say thank you to Malaysians who have helped us for many years, it's a small way to show that we are grateful for everything.”



© UNHCR/Patricia Krivanek

## WHEN EDUCATION IS A CHANCE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

When the Movement Control Order (MCO) commenced in Malaysia, 20 year-old Hasan Al-Akraa immediately mobilised a network of volunteers and supporters to provide aid to Malaysians and refugees in need.

Hasan and his family came to Malaysia in 2011, fleeing armed conflict in Syria. Growing up in Malaysia, Hasan soon became aware of communities less privileged than him which eventually led him to establish the Al-Hasan Volunteer Network.

Working with NGOs, Hasan mobilized over 500 volunteers to deliver aid to more than 1,000 refugee and Malaysian families in need. Hasan also mobilized refugee cooks from Syria, Palestine, Yemen, and Iraq

to cook for Malaysian medical frontliners.

“The cooks used their own funds to prepare food for the medical staff, as a way of showing gratitude and appreciation to the medical workers,” said Hasan.

Hasan is currently pursuing a degree in Education at a private university. Only less than half of all refugee youths in Malaysia have access to basic education. Hasan knows how lucky he is to have made it all the way to university.

“Alhamdulillah, UNHCR helped me obtain a scholarship to study in a university,” said Hasan.

For Hasan, education opens up a world of hope to rebuild his life and future.

“When it is safe, I wish to go back and rebuild my country,” he said. “But I will always remember Malaysia as the country that raised me to be the person that I am today.”

# COMPASSION IN ACTION: MEETING REFUGEES' NEEDS THROUGH FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

As many struggle with the loss of income and security due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the nation-wide Movement Control Order (MCO), communities with little savings and safety nets, like refugees, have been hit the hardest.



Responding to the emergency and urgent needs of refugees, UNHCR mobilised RM3 million to COVID-19 response, funded by a donor country.

This COVID-19 aid has provided various essential support including one-off financial assistance for approximately 5,700 families since April this year, benefitting more than 20,400 most vulnerable refugees.

“We recognize that the nation-wide MCO has been particularly difficult on refugee families. With many having worked in the informal sector, they have lost an income. Others have lost sources of humanitarian support and therefore many are not able to provide for their families,” said Stephanie Rinville, UNHCR Senior Programme Officer.

“To help refugees with special needs, UNHCR provides financial assistance under exceptional circumstances to these vulnerable individuals, for a limited time to help them get back on their feet.

Through individual assessments made on a case by case basis, UNHCR determines if a person requires financial assistance, medical

assistance, or other kinds of support, or a combination of these.”

UNHCR engaged its NGO partner of 14 years, the Buddhist Tzu-Chi Foundation, to assist in the Agency’s efforts to provide financial assistance to vulnerable refugees. The Buddhist Tzu-Chi Foundation (Tzu-Chi Foundation) in Kuala Lumpur currently provides services to refugees through education, healthcare, and livelihoods support including providing short-term financial assistance on behalf of UNHCR.

*“To help refugees with special needs, UNHCR provides financial assistance under exceptional circumstances to these vulnerable individuals, for a limited time to help them get back on their feet.*”

“Even before the MCO, it was already tough for refugees to provide for themselves and their family. The MCO made it

even more difficult,” said Cash Based Intervention Project Lead at Tzu-Chi Foundation, Tio Tit Siang.

Once UNHCR receives requests for financial assistance, the team at Tzu-Chi Foundation conducts assessments to verify which applicants are eligible for financial assistance, and then disburses cash assistance appropriately.

Due to heightened emergency needs during the MCO, two hundred Tzu-Chi Foundation volunteers were mobilised to distribute cash assistance to vulnerable refugees.

“A team of two to three volunteers would meet the refugees in need and many witnessed firsthand the impact that financial assistance has had on the lives of refugees,” said Tio.

“During a financial assistance distribution, one family had run out of milk powder for their children after the father had lost his job. Immediately after receiving the financial aid, he went to a nearby supermarket to buy milk powder for his children. It was really hard to witness that.”

Distributing cash assistance during the MCO was rife with challenges. Restrictions on movement meant more complicated processes of obtaining permission to travel from authorities. Sometimes, this meant the teams were unable to reach refugees in areas that were inaccessible.

The teams also met with resistance from local communities living close to refugees.

“Many locals could not understand why refugees were getting aid and they were not,” said Tio. “Our volunteers had to answer a lot of questions from local residents on why we were helping refugees.”

“It’s not always easy to do this, but it is necessary,” added Tio. “It gives refugees a sense of hope that at least someone cares for them during their tough times.”



## FAQS: HOW WE'RE STANDING WITH REFUGEES THROUGH COVID-19

### Did UNHCR close its office during the Movement Control Order?

The UNHCR operations has remained open. In compliance with the MCO, we closed our premises to visitors and non-essential staff. We also asked refugees to not approach UNHCR without an appointment to avoid large groups of people gathering.

But we continued our registration, refugee status determination, and resettlement work for highly vulnerable refugees, prioritizing those with acute protection needs. We also continued making interventions with law enforcement officials for Immigration-related matters, and monitoring arrests related to the breach of the MCO.

Our teams have also continued responding to those with critical non-COVID-19 health, protection, and assistance needs.

### Have you been working with the Government on the COVID-19 response?

Yes, we have. As we have done since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, UNHCR has coordinated closely with the Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC), Ministries including the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Federal Territories, the Royal Malaysian Police and other related agencies in order to ensure that all refugee and asylum-seeking communities are included in the Government's national public health response measures, and to prevent infection from spreading among the communities.

### What are the measures taken by UNHCR to help keep refugee communities safe and healthy?



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UNHCR worked hard to ensure that updated information is distributed to refugees quickly in languages they understand. This includes information on treatment and testing, and about any Government movement orders. We also set up the Refugee-Malaysia.org information portal to help refugees in this regard.

UNHCR also established Hotlines in Burmese, Chin, Rohingya, Persian, Tamil, Urdu, Arabic, and Somali languages, for refugees who were not be able to access the national crisis Hotlines.

We made available UNHCR interpreters to provide translation services at public hospitals for refugees.

### What kind of financial assistance did you provide to refugees during this period?

Working with NGOs, civil society groups, and private sectors, we provided food rations, hygiene items, or cash assistance for as many vulnerable individuals as we

can to bridge this difficult time. This was done primarily through our partners, Tzu-Chi Foundation, Islamic Medical Association of Malaysia's Response and Relief Team (IMARET), Malaysian Relief Agency (MRA) and MERCY Malaysia.

Responding to the emergency needs of refugees, UNHCR mobilised RM3.5 million to a COVID-19 response, funded by a donor country. This aid has provided essential assistance including one-off financial assistance for approximately 5,700 families since April this year, benefitting more than 20,400 most vulnerable refugees.

UNHCR also coordinated responses with dozens of other NGOs across Malaysia who have been distributing food rations, hygiene items cash assistance, and other support to tens of thousands of refugees across Malaysia. As at August 2020, we recorded over 38,000 instances of aid distributed by numerous NGOs, in 100 districts across Peninsular Malaysia.

## UNHCR - M'SIAN GOVT JOINT COVID-19 OUTREACH

When the Movement Control Order was implemented in the country, UNHCR and its NGO partners joined law enforcement personnel and district health officers to reach out to refugee communities across the country regarding COVID-19 prevention and screening. Providing information to some 179,000 refugees across Malaysia is a challenge, especially at a time of a health emergency.

"Since the start of the outbreak,

UNHCR has been coordinating closely with the Ministry of Health and the Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC) in order to ensure that all refugee communities are included in the Government's national response measures, and to prevent infection from spreading among the communities," said UNHCR public health officer, Dr Susheela Balasundaram.

Joint teams made up of UNHCR and district health officers,

together with UNHCR's NGO partners IMARET, Muslim Relief Agency, and MERCY Malaysia, reached out to refugees across the country. The teams provided information on COVID-19, arranged for testing if refugees present symptoms of infection, and advised refugee communities to comply with the Government's Movement Control Order.

Since the early stages of the outbreak in the country, the Malaysian Government had taken the important decision to provide free testing and treatment for any foreigners with COVID-19 symptoms.

"We commend the Government of Malaysia for its inclusive policy of making screening and treatment free for all foreigners, including refugees and asylum-seekers," said Dr Balasundaram.

"Inclusive and non-discriminatory policies will only strengthen the country's response. The COVID-19 outbreak clearly demonstrates that we are all connected, regardless of who we are. It is in everyone's interest that all people, especially the most vulnerable – including refugees, asylum-seekers and the stateless – have access to health services."

A total of  
**178,140**  
registered  
refugees  
as at end August

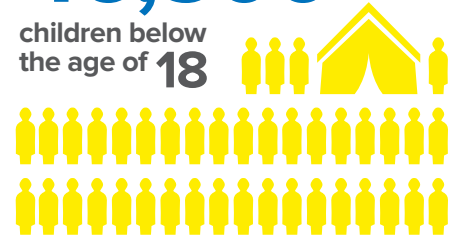


By country of origin

Country	Total persons
Myanmar	153,430
Pakistan	6,650
Yemen	3,650
Syria	3,260
Somalia	3,240
Afghanistan	2,690
Sri Lanka	1,760
Iraq	1,230
Palestine	760
Other countries	1,470

**46,500**

children below  
the age of **18**

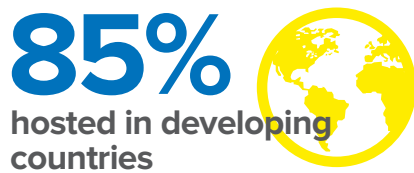
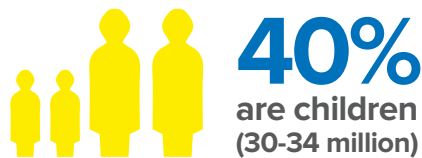


**68%** of refugees  
are men,  
while

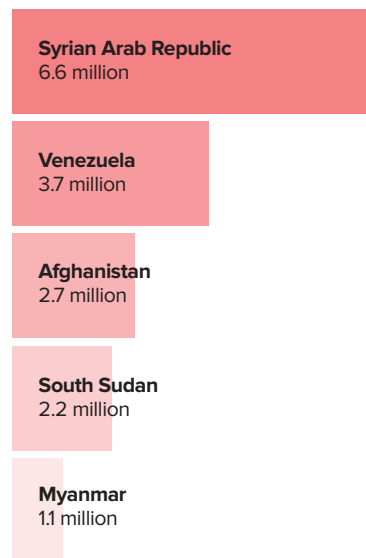


GLOBAL STATISTICS

**79.5** million forcibly  
displaced worldwide  
at the end of 2019 as  
a result of persecution,  
conflict, violence,  
human rights violations  
or events seriously  
disturbing public order.



**68%** originated  
from just five countries



**3.6** million refugees  
hosted in Turkey

