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## *From Despair to Activism: An Afghan Refugee in Indonesia*



Ahmad Basir Zafari. Photo: Maqshosh.

*Spending years in legal limbo and with a suicide rate ten times the global average, refugees in the Indonesian archipelago are organising to improve their lot. Ahmad Soheil Ahmadi spoke to leading activist and Afghan asylum seeker Ahmad Basir Zafari about his odyssey and about recent developments.*

**ASA: Where are you from and what conditions caused you to run away?**

I am Ahmad Basir Zafari, a refugee from Afghanistan currently languishing in limbo in Indonesia. I am a refugee activist, volunteer translator for the community, volunteer interpreter for the community, volunteer, English, language and science teacher at refugee learning centres in Jakarta, former communication manager and social media manager for one of the refugee learning centres in Indonesia, and volunteer project officer at a local organization that works for the protection of minority rights, which is quite sensitive here. We work for refugees and human rights here in Indonesia and globally. Finally, I am spokesman and board member for [RCI](#), which stands for Refugee Community in Indonesia, which recently initiated the refugee school petition.

Ever since I was young, when I barely knew my identity, I have suffered the misfortune of statelessness. When I was eight years old my family had to leave Afghanistan. We migrated to Pakistan due to the security threats our family faced in Afghanistan. After the targeting of Hazaras in Pakistan, our family inevitably chose to seek a safer place to live. That is how we ended up in Indonesia.

I and my family members were nearly killed in several bomb blasts which took place in the most crowded areas of Quetta in Pakistan. The first incident was in the vegetable market on Khorani Road during the evening rush hour of February 16, 2013, in which at least 110 people were killed and 100 injured, including women and children. This was the second attack on the Hazara community in a month, after a bomb blast in Quetta on February 10. That one killed 130 and injured at least 270 people.

The second time I was nearly killed was in an explosion at the Al-Talib mosque on June 13, 2013. In this horrific incident, at least 33 Hazaras were killed, including nine women and four children. 70 people were seriously injured. The situation worsened every day and prevented normal life. Therefore our family sought asylum in Indonesia in 2014 in the hope of finding our lost smiles and for the sake of saving our lives.

***ASA: Can you describe your journey and any good or bad details that stick out?***

The life of a new refugee and their journey is never good. As someone who has been a refugee from a very young age, I never wish anybody to be forced to leave their own country and seek refuge and asylum elsewhere. As a refugee on the move for more than half of my life, who is currently stuck in Indonesia due to unfriendly, anti-refugee policies of destination countries, my whole life has been traumatic up till now. I remember leaving our home country Afghanistan and then also leaving Pakistan. Especially for me as a child, both of those times were very difficult. To be separated from my childhood friends, school, normal life, and formal education, this journey took all the plans and dreams of an

ambitious child away from him and left him in absolute despair, in a dark tunnel with no light at the end of it. I remember running through the dense jungles in Malaysia, sleeping on mats and bitten by mosquitoes. I remember swimming in the darkness of the night into the sea to reach the boat. We traveled hundreds, perhaps thousands of kilometres across water on boats with hungry stomachs. I remember how dehydrated I was. Once we reached Indonesia I was so happy that we were finally safe, but I didn't know what was awaiting me. In my adolescent mind, I thought that now there was no killing and war, I could live in peace like any other normal kid, anywhere else in the world. I thought I could smile again, but all of this turned out to be just my imagination. It was hope for a better tomorrow that was keeping me alive, but maybe this hope was just an hallucination, since nothing has moved in eight years of despair as a refugee in Indonesia.

***ASA: In these past ten years, how have you survived in Indonesia?***

Refugees in Indonesia are deprived of some basic rights, such as the right to work, the right to a formal education, and the right to own property. Around 14,000 refugees of 45 different nationalities have fled to Indonesia in the hope of a normal life. Yet the only durable solution for these refugees is resettlement to a third country. The resettlement quota has decreased drastically every year. This means the life of a refugee here has become a bitter struggle.

Let me give you some examples of how life and survival for refugees in Indonesia has become a great struggle. We have unfortunately lost 13 refugees by suicide as a result of increased tension and mental health issues in the last five years. Five of these suicides occurred in the past year. The ages of these suicides range from 20 to 40 years old. An example is a man who came to Indonesia in 2013 at 28 years of age. At that time he was unmarried. Now, he is 37 years old and still not married. How is life for him? Just imagine. Another person who came as a refugee to Indonesia at roughly the same time, left his home when his child was one or two years old. Now, his child is 11 years old and has never seen his dad in all those years. These kinds of long-distance relationships often end in divorce because of the prolonged limbo that refugees end up in. Many of these refugees have been away from their wives for eight years on average. Life is bound to become a mental struggle in this situation. About 5,000 of the refugees in Indonesia are living independently on their own budget, and for an average of six or eight years. This budget comes either from their own savings or is lent to them by relatives living outside Indonesia. It's not much money and can barely support their livelihoods.

Another example is how recorded and unrecorded domestic violence is increasing every day. We witness increased family break-ups as a result of domestic violence. UNHCR figures show that 28 per cent of all refugees are children. Here there are around 4,000 kids who are deprived of a formal education. The teachers in the learning centres are untrained and are only equipping the children with English up to intermediate level, and some very basic skills. Although the Indonesian government has allowed some refugee children to join classes in state primary and middle schools recently, it's not a great solution because refugee children are challenged by the language barrier. Many refugees were initially kept in detention centres scattered in different cities across Indonesia, including Jakarta and its surrounding areas. Now the majority of refugees are living alongside the public in Jakarta and the surrounding areas. These amount to around 7,000 people. Other major populations live elsewhere, including Penang. About 56 per cent of these refugees are from Afghanistan, 10 per cent from Somalia, six per cent from Iraq, five per cent from Myanmar, four per cent from Sudan, and the rest from other countries.

***ASA: What support has the Indonesian government given refugees?***

Indonesia is not a party to the 1951 refugee convention, nor its 1967 protocol, so the country has no obligation to help refugees in any form. The country has though implemented a comprehensive refugee law which came into effect in 2016. This law provides access and temporary protection for refugees until longer-term solutions can be found for them by UNHCR. But nonetheless the government has no responsibility to help the refugees in Indonesia.

***ASA: What can refugees do under Indonesian law?***

Basically nothing. All they can do is wait for their cases to be submitted to a third country by UNHCR, where they could be resettled. Indonesian law does not offer refugees any fundamental human rights, such as the right to work. For example, we cannot drive here, or have a driving licence or bank account. Refugees cannot do anything significant in Indonesia.

***ASA: How does the UNHCR help refugees in Indonesia?***

The UNHCR works closely with the Indonesian government to provide protection for refugees here. But unfortunately this effort does not begin to address the challenges faced by refugees. Seeking a durable solution, such as resettlement opportunities for the 14,000 refugees here is an issue for the UNHCR. The very limited and insufficient resettlement quota that exists is unfairly distributed among the refugees. For example, we saw many persons of concern coming to Indonesia in 2016, 2017, and 2018, who have now been

resettled. But on the other hand we have refugees who came to Indonesia in 2012 to 2015, and even in 2010, who have not had resettlement opportunities.

UNHCR statistics say that in 2019 663 refugees here found resettlement. In 2020, that figure went down to only 391 people. The processing of refugee status determination is incredibly slow. There are people waiting to get an interview to determine their status, from asylum seekers to refugees, for three to four years. Based on UNHCR statistics from January 2020, there are about 10,300 refugees and 3,350 asylum seekers who are awaiting interview. Unfortunately, the necessary attention has not been given to refugees in Indonesia.

***ASA: Why did you raise a petition, and what do you want to do with it?***

After refugee activists came together, once RCI (Refugee Community in Indonesia) was established and refugees became more connected, we realised that there were catastrophic conditions for refugees in every corner of Indonesia. We discovered that the refugees had lost hope and that their situations get worse every day. Indonesian refugees are completely forgotten. We have observed that refugees and asylum seekers here are motivated to raise their voices. These are the voices of refugees who are in indefinite limbo and going through great uncertainty. Refugees who needed immediate assistance and attention were forgotten. So we decided to organise a petition in which we described all the things refugees have to cope with on a daily basis, in order to draw the international community's attention to our situation. We hope that our demands and requests will be taken seriously.

***ASA: Did the refugees, and the media, support your petition?***

Fortunately, refugee activists from all over Indonesia gave the green light to the initiative, and helped us write the original petition as well as translate and edit the drafts. Refugee representatives, learning centre board members, and regional representatives under the direction of RCI played a vital role in supporting the petition. They were among the first ones whose signatures were digitally printed on the letter. As for the media, we don't know how promising the response will be as we have not been in touch with the media yet, but we hope to get a good media response.

***ASA: What message do you have for our readers?***

My message for my community in Indonesia is [to stay hopeful] that we know that the situation is getting worse every day and we know that there are challenges and problems. We know that there is barely a light that can be seen at the end of the tunnel, but we should struggle to get out of this situation.

As for third countries, destination countries, we would like to ask them to open their doors and let us in, because we are also humans, we are also families, and we would be useful for their societies. Many refugees living in Indonesia are young, and their youth is wasted. But if they are properly resettled to a third country I know that the energy they have and the motivation they have can play a vital role in those societies.

*This interview originally appeared on [Maqshosh](#).*

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