

NETWORK MEMBER: SUAKA



## Building a Network to Support Indonesia's Hidden Refugees

**SUAKA, the Indonesian Civil Society Network for Refugee Rights Protection,** assists asylum seekers with legal advice and education during their resettlement claims in Indonesia. It also advocates for the country to sign the 1951 UN Convention on Refugee Rights, and is building a network of students, academics, volunteers and organizations to work for the country's largely forgotten refugees.

**Founded 2012**

**[suaka.or.id](http://suaka.or.id)**



A refugee reads one of SUAKA's Self-Help Kits that help during the status determination process. Picture courtesy SUAKA.

As the global refugee crisis has lapped around the shores of the Mediterranean, across the Mexican-US border, and stranded thousands in Central Europe, the focus has largely been on the impact of those seeking asylum in the developing world.

The media pays lip service to the millions being hosted in countries that border a crisis - like Turkey, Lebanon and around Africa's Great Lakes - but forgotten refugees are also suffering in ill-equipped nations like Indonesia. Around 10,000 Iranians, Iraqis, Afghans and Eritreans, as well as Rohingya from Myanmar, are in Indonesia - some who were attempting to reach Australia, others seeking refuge in towns like Cisarua in West Java, which has a large refugee population.

Legally, Indonesia is ill-equipped to deal with the

influx. It is not a signatory to the *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, nor its 1967 protocol. The constitution does guarantee the right to seek asylum, but in practice the Indonesian authorities refer to *Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration*, which defines an asylum seeker or refugee simply as an 'illegal migrant'. Asylum seekers and refugees may be detained for up to ten years without due process of law.

"Protection concerns in Indonesia include the lack of domestic legal protections, immigration detention, inadequacy of support services, problems with the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process, and the very limited availability of resettlement placements," says Febi Yonesta of SUAKA, the Indonesian Civil Society Network for Refugee Rights Protection. "Waiting lists for RSD

and support services are extremely long - without rights to work asylum seekers and refugees are unable to support themselves and their families.”

Febi adds: “Particularly vulnerable groups of asylum seekers and refugees are those who have suffered from torture and trauma, those with mental health problems and/or disabilities, women, children and unaccompanied minors in immigration detention centres, pregnant women, and single women and adolescent girls who are at risk of sexual exploitation by smugglers or others.”

The refugee issue was largely under the radar in Indonesia – with the exception of an over-stretched UNHCR resettlement office – until SUAKA was founded in 2012, initially with just seven volunteers. It attracted media attention and organizational support in 2013 when it sought to find shelter for 18 Rohingya refugees - 11 of them children - who were being ejected from the former mosque they had been living in. The turnaround in their situation was all down to SUAKA’s tiny team.

“When we found them they were in a very poor condition - without no form of social support, the only place they had to stay for a while was a place of worship until they were later abandoned,” says Febi. “As with other refugees, they were jobless and had little access to basic rights. SUAKA helped them find a place to stay, undertook community empowerment to help them earn a living, did fundraising to help their finances, and provided legal assistance with their case at UNHCR. Finally, they got their refugee status on the World Refugee Day in June 2014.”

The plight of the 18 Rohingya attracted public attention to the refugee issue and several individuals, students and academics, and organizations such as the Jakarta Legal Aid Foundation (LBH Jakarta) and Human Rights Working Group (HRWG) became organizational members along with around 40 volunteers.

SUAKA, which remains entirely volunteer-run with little funding, now works on three tracks

to assist refugees in Indonesia. It is pushing the government to ratify the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and advocating to the relevant government ministries to develop and apply policies that protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. To that end it has been producing research on refugee rights issues in Indonesia, on housing rights, immigration detention, women and girls at risk, children and education. “This research and analysis has been developed to show the government the reality of refugee lives,” says Febi. “So that with effective advocacy we can raise the profile of refugee rights in Indonesia and encourage the government to enact rights-based policies to protect them.”

Its second area of work is in providing legal aid and legal empowerment to refugees confronting Indonesia’s resettlement system. Febi: “We work to provide legal advice and consultations, assist in the preparation of written statements, or full representation where possible with our volunteer legal advisors. We also conduct information sessions to asylum seekers and refugees, to empower them with the information they need to navigate the RSD process.” In 2014 SUAKA provided direct legal assistance to 50 asylum seekers and helped many more through its Self-Help Kits and information on how to prepare for RSD interviews.



Rohingya refugees in East Aceh and Kuala Langsa camp in Banda Aceh. Photo courtesy FPRM.

The third branch of its work involves changing public perceptions and understanding around refugee issues using through events, information and sharing of research and stories. Febi: “It is important for us to educate people, including the refugees themselves, as well as the wider public, that refugee rights are human rights.”

So far it has secured a Government commitment to ratify the 1951 convention by putting it on the National Action Plan for Human Rights for 2015-2020. Suaka is also preparing to hold a National Roundtable with the National Human Rights

Commission and multiple Government and non-government stakeholders to talk about the plight of children held in immigration detention. It has also forged links with three Indonesian Universities to promote the teaching of refugee rights as part of their international law courses and several students have become SUAKA volunteers.

Says Febi: “By engaging students, who will go on to become lawyers and perhaps even policy makers and beyond, we are building the pool of young people who will promote the rights of refugees in the future.”

## Key Lessons

- 1 You need a passionate and committed team to work together and share the workload.
- 2 You have to take in the big picture and analyse the context of how politics and society impacts on this issue, and then turn the analysis into a strategic plan and break it down to the programs you'll run.
- 3 Always analyse your own work and activities by examining the current situation, your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT), your stakeholders, etc. before moving to develop program activities.
- 4 While you should establish internal systems to run all of your programs, don't get stuck on processes; flexibility is the key to learning from your analysis and reflection.
- 5 You will expand the impact of your work through empowering people - both the beneficiaries of your work and the people who will support you, such as volunteers.
- 6 Work to inform local society and feed them with the right information to build wider momentum for your work.
- 7 Gather together the people and organizations who have the same concerns on cross-cutting issues and work together, making it all a participatory process. Always ask for help and advice from people who have been in similar situations.