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Between Sympathy and Hostility: Acehnese Attitudes towards Rohingya Refugees

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Article History Abstract

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This research seeks to explore the perspectives of the Acehnese community regarding Rohingya refugees, emphasizing the contrast between compassion and animosity. The study utilizes a content analysis approach, drawing on secondary data from local Acehnese online media and relevant literature concerning refugee matters in Indonesia from 2022 to 2024. The findings reveal two predominant perspectives: sympathy driven by humanitarian compassion and Islamic solidarity, and hostility arising from concerns over socio-economic burdens and anti-immigrant sentiments. Sympathy is reflected in calls for aiding war victims, while hostility is linked to fears of resource competition and cultural tensions. The implications of this research are twofold. First, it highlights the necessity for culturally sensitive interventions to address misconceptions and fears that foster hostility. Second, it emphasizes the importance of public education campaigns and community engagement to strengthen values of compassion and solidarity. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and humanitarian organizations to develop strategies that balance humanitarian assistance with sustainable socio-economic policies, ensuring harmonious coexistence between host communities and refugees.

Keywords: Rohingya Refugees; Aceh; Content Analysis; Boat People; Humanitarian Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

In recent history, the language of crisis has permeated many fields, including political, economic, social, environmental, and moral. This language is present worldwide. The assertions regarding collapse and catastrophe are interconnected with a well-known issue: the crisis within the humanities. This matter is frequently highlighted and subjected to growing scrutiny, indicating that the state of humanity is increasingly fragile. Despite the fact that some observers have attributed this alarming deterioration to the ongoing and impending failure of critical thinking, democracy, and civic responsibility, the humanities are still considered incapable of measuring increasingly dominant values (Carruth 2022; De Chavez 2021).

The current refugee crisis in Southeast Asia is the second largest ever in the region, following the boat people crisis in Indochina in the mid-1970s to mid-1990s (Pugh 2004). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 723,000 people from Rohingya religious and ethnic minorities have been forcibly displaced by organized violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors. These incidents only occurred in Bangladesh in August 2017 (UNHCR 2017). The 'Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea disasters' are other recent disasters that are closely related. According to (UNHCR 2017), approximately 1,800 people from Myanmar and Bangladesh lost their lives at sea between 2013 and 2015 while trying to enter Malaysia or Indonesia by boat. In 2017, Southeast Asia provided shelter to 3.37 million people who were considered "persons of concern." Among them, nearly 1.46 million were refugees, 74,416 were asylum seekers, 1.17 million were stateless, and 665,051 were internally displaced persons (UNHCR 2017). However, the UNHCR only receives official figures on internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Myanmar and the Philippines. In 2017, the

Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) counted an estimated 5,863,894 internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to armed conflict and natural disasters (IDMC 2022). The majority of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states have not ratified either the 1951 Geneva Convention or the 1967 Protocol. The only signatories are Cambodia, the Philippines, and Timor Leste, all of which are close to becoming ASEAN member states. Therefore, most of Southeast Asia is not included in the global refugee system.

The humanitarian crisis faced by Rohingya refugees can be analyzed through the lens of "Human Security" theory, which emphasizes the necessity of safeguarding individuals against a range of threats to their well-being, including environmental degradation, poverty, and violence. (Lee 2021). This idea, originally proposed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1994, recognizes that the protection of individuals' economic, social, and cultural well-being is also an integral part of their security beyond physical protection (Lee 2021; UNHCR 2024). Human security is of utmost importance in the Rohingya crisis as it underscores the need to address the complex challenges faced by refugees, including political instability, ethnic strife, and economic exclusion. A comprehensive framework for addressing the humanitarian crisis facing Rohingya refugees was provided by human security theory. This underlines the importance of implementing a comprehensive strategy that considers the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of the crisis to protect refugees and improve their overall wellbeing. This includes strategies, such as protecting the rights and dignity of refugees, promoting economic opportunities and access to essential services, and addressing the root causes of conflict to restore political stability (Lee 2021).

Much scholarly research has been conducted on the correlation between humanitarian interventions and the impact of foreign news media on foreign governments' political decisions to intervene; this phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "CNN effect." (Balabanova 2010; Robinson 2000) The notion of the 'CNN effect' pertains to the relationship between media and policy-making. It posits that media exert a greater influence during periods of policy ambiguity, particularly when coverage takes a critical approach aimed at eliciting empathy for those in distress. In contrast, the likelihood of media influence diminishes when policies are clearly defined and established (Balabanova 2010; Nurchotimah and Candra 2024; Ran and Liu 2024). It is undeniable that the issue of humanitarian crises has also become the focus of many media outlets, especially those in Indonesia.

According to the ASEAN Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to seek and obtain asylum in another country in accordance with the laws of that country and relevant international treaties (ASEAN 2013). The reference to legal frameworks, or the absence of such frameworks, within member states diminishes the significance of this right. Member states have pursued a unilateral strategy in tackling the challenge of forced migration. This approach is primarily attributed to ASEAN's firm commitment to cooperative standards, which encompass principles such as the respect for state sovereignty, non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, consultation, and the pursuit of consensus (Amer 2009).

At present, it is highly unlikely that ASEAN and the rest of the region will choose to implement a collective regional framework for forced migration in the near future (Petcharamesree 2018). Owing to the significant and growing number of forcibly displaced individuals in Southeast Asian

countries, there has been an increasing amount of research on Southeast Asia from new subjects of forced migration studies (Lakshman and Rajan 2023; McConnachie 2014, 2020). However, to date, no systematic attempts have been made to identify the existing research patterns within the subject. This contribution attempts to fill this research void by presenting a concise summary of the findings from a review of the scholarly literature. This article focuses on identifying the recent advances in forced migration research in Southeast Asia between 2013 and 2024. This research article aims to provide a summary and recommended reading list for forced migration refugees, specifically the Rohingya community in Southeast Asia.

The humanitarian crisis involving Rohingya refugees has become one of the biggest challenges in Southeast Asia, especially for Indonesia as the main destination country. Aceh Province, with a long history of humanitarian solidarity and strong Islamic values, has been the focus of international attention in dealing with Rohingya refugees. However, research on the attitudes of Acehnese people towards refugees is often limited to the duality of sympathy and rejection without in-depth exploration of the factors behind them. Recent research often overlooks a broader Islamic perspective, which is essential for gaining a more nuanced understanding of how Islamic values influence the attitudes of local communities. Furthermore, the impact of social media as a primary source of public opinion in the digital era has not been thoroughly examined, despite the significant roles that platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter play in shaping public perceptions. Additionally, prior studies have predominantly relied on secondary data from traditional media, neglecting the first-hand experiences of refugees, which are crucial for comprehending the social and cultural

assimilation challenges they encounter. On the other hand, ASEAN's unilateral regional policy and weak maritime border supervision in Aceh further complicate the dynamics of the relationship between local communities and refugees.

This multidimensional approach is not only academically relevant but also has significant practical implications for policymakers, humanitarian organizations, and local communities. By analysing how Islamic values affect the acceptance or rejection of refugees, this study can offer a more effective culturally-based framework for reducing social tensions. In addition, a study of the role of social media as a primary source of public opinion can uncover more dynamic patterns of perception compared to traditional media, while providing insights into how to leverage these platforms for awareness and solidarity campaigns. In the context of refugee experiences, the research also aims to give voice to those who are often overlooked in academic narratives, in order to understand the challenges and potential solutions from their perspective. Thus, this research aims to fill the literature gap, while providing a solid foundation for the development of policies that balance between human values and the interests of local communities. This study not only contributes to the literature on forced migration and refugees, but also strengthens the understanding of multicultural community relations in regions that are the meeting point between global solidarity and local challenges.

One of the main contributions of this research is the development of a framework to understand the relationship between Islamic values, socio-economic dynamics, and public perception of refugees. This framework can be used to explore how the principles of Islamic justice and solidarity can be applied in a modern context to address the challenges of forced migration (Koçak 2021). For example, educational

programs based on Islamic values can be designed to raise public awareness of the importance of helping fellow Muslims facing crises. Such programs can not only increase people's acceptance of refugees, but also strengthen their collective identity as a community committed to the principles of social justice (Alam 2020; Mustafi 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rohingya refugee crisis is one of Southeast Asia's biggest humanitarian problems, which has attracted global attention in recent decades. This situation not only reflects the complexity of political and ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, but also poses a challenge for neighboring countries, including Indonesia (Ahammad, Ahmed, and Sharmin 2024; Li, Liran, and Meiying 2022; Zahed 2023). Aceh, with its strategic geographical position in the Malacca Strait and strong Islamic values, has become a focal point in efforts to deal with Rohingya refugees. However, the response of the Acehnese people to the Rohingya refugees shows duality, namely sympathy based on humanitarian solidarity and Islamic values, as well as hostility fueled by socio-economic concerns and cultural tensions. This duality describes the complexity of understanding the dynamics of relationships between host communities and refugees, which requires in-depth analysis with a multidimensional approach (Gunawan, Novendra, and Febrila 2024; Mcnevin and Missbach 2018).

The framework of human security theory is an important foundation in understanding the Rohingya crisis. This theory, as proposed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1994, emphasizes the importance of protecting individuals from various threats to their well-being, including violence, poverty, and environmental degradation (Fairouz 2022; Shukri 2021). In the context of the Rohingya crisis, this approach is relevant to highlight

the complex needs of refugees, which involve political, social, and economic dimensions. In addition, the theory underscores the importance of interventions that focus not only on physical protection, but also on the restoration of dignity, rights, and access to economic resources and basic services (Hossain et al. 2021; Swazo et al. 2020).

Although Indonesia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Aceh has demonstrated its humanitarian commitment through the implementation of local customs such as the "Panglima Laot," which requires assistance to anyone in danger at sea. These values have been the basis for the people of Aceh in accepting Rohingya refugees since 2015, despite significant challenges in social and cultural integration. Islamic solidarity is often the main argument underlying the sympathy of the Acehnese people towards the Rohingya refugees (Darnela 2021; Ismail Thaib 2024). As a Muslim-majority region, Aceh has a long history of providing protection to persecuted groups, which reflects strong Islamic values. However, in recent years, there has also been a hostile narrative triggered by concerns about socio-economic pressures, including competition for resources, job opportunities, and pressure on local infrastructure (Sustikarini 2019).

The media has a significant role in shaping public perception of refugees. In Indonesia, social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become the main platforms in shaping public opinion about Rohingya refugees. While some narratives support solidarity and aid, others reinforce xenophobic sentiments, reflecting global patterns in public perception influenced by the media (Irom, Borah, and Gibbons 2022; Wani 2022). This analysis of the role of the media is important to understand the dynamics of public opinion and how the media can be used for awareness and solidarity campaigns.

The absence of an ASEAN regional framework for addressing forced migration exacerbates the challenges faced by Rohingya refugees. The principles of non-intervention and respect for state sovereignty often hinder collective action, leaving member states to adopt unilateral strategies (Petcharamesree 2018; Shukri 2021). Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 in Indonesia provides a legal basis for refugee management, but its implementation is still limited by limited resources and law enforcement mechanisms. Therefore, stronger regional cooperation and alignment of national policies with international human rights standards are needed to address the complexities of forced migration in Southeast Asia (McMillan and Petcharamesree 2021; Sadjad 2021; Syahrin, Qalandy, and Jafizhan 2024).

The integration of Rohingya refugees into Acehnese society faces major challenges, including limited access to education, jobs, and health services, as well as widespread discrimination. Cultural and religious differences, although both are based on Islam, are often an obstacle in creating social cohesion. Research shows the importance of intercultural dialogue and community engagement to reduce tensions and promote harmonious coexistence (Karim and Hussain 2019; Prodi 2023). Empowering local communities through education campaigns and inclusive policies can play an important role in addressing misconceptions and encouraging acceptance (Siddiqi 2022).

Aceh's historical and geographical context is a key element in understanding the attitudes of local communities towards Rohingya refugees. Aceh's strategic position on international shipping lanes makes it a major gateway for sea migration, especially for Rohingya groups fleeing Myanmar (Ismail Thaib 2024). Since the 15th century, Aceh has been known as the center of the

spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, which has had a great influence in shaping the identity of its people. Strong Islamic values in Aceh include the principles of social justice, solidarity, and concern for fellow Muslims, which are often the basis of sympathy for Rohingya refugees (Azis 2023).

However, modern dynamics show that solidarity alone is not enough to overcome the complexity of forced migration in the era of globalization. The tension between sympathy and hostility reflects the reality that local communities face economic, social, and political challenges that complicate their response to refugees (Kamruzzaman, Siddiqi, and Ahmed 2024; Rebelo, Fernández, and Achotegui 2018). These tensions are exacerbated by the perception that Rohingya refugees bring additional pressure on limited local resources. In this context, the role of countries and international organizations is crucial to bridge the gap between the humanitarian needs of refugees and the capacity of local communities to receive them (Campbell, Ahmed, and Winkler 2024; Kamruzzaman et al. 2024).

At the national level, Indonesia's policy toward refugees reflects a broader dilemma between commitment to international human rights principles and domestic priorities for socio-economic stability. Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 provides a framework for dealing with refugees, but its implementation is limited to basic aspects such as the provision of temporary shelter and basic necessities (Dewansyah and Nafisah 2021; Tobing 2021). Meanwhile, more holistic support, including education, job training, and social integration programs, is still minimal. This creates a situation where refugees are often trapped in legal and social limbo, without adequate access to contribute to the communities in which they live temporarily

(Bonoli and Otmani 2023; Misty Das and Chan 2013).

The literature on forced migration also highlights the importance of understanding the first-hand experiences of refugees to inform more inclusive policies. Ethnographic research, for example, can provide rich insights into the challenges refugees face in the integration process, ranging from language barriers to cultural discrimination (Daniel et al. 2020; Fong et al. 2024; Le Louvier and Innocenti 2022). In Aceh, this kind of research can help identify the specific needs of Rohingya refugees and how they can adapt to the local context. In addition, these insights can be used to develop programs that not only support refugees, but also strengthen their relationships with local communities (Ismail Thaib 2024; Khairi 2019).

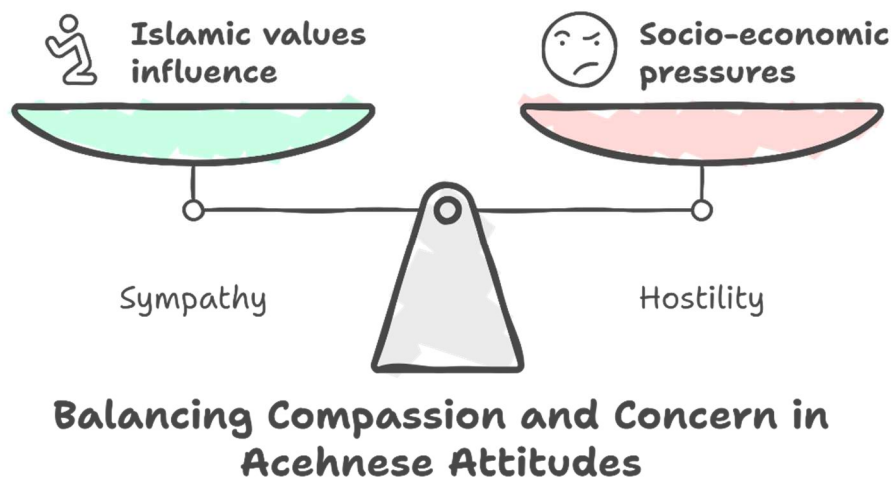
The management of Rohingya refugees in Aceh also shows how local policies can play a significant role in contexts limited by national and international policies. The existence of "Panglima Laot" as a customary institution in Aceh that regulates the law of the sea is a unique example of how traditional law can be applied to face modern challenges such as forced migration (Ismail Thaib 2024; Maula 2024). In the case of Rohingya refugees, Panglima Laot ensured that refugees found at sea received emergency assistance without discrimination. This principle is in line with Islamic values that emphasize the importance of helping those in difficulty. However, challenges arise when short-term assistance must be translated into long-term support that includes social and economic integration (Akar and Erdoğan 2019; Mitu et al. 2022).

In Aceh, Rohingya refugees often face discrimination, both explicit and implicit. Language barriers, cultural differences, and negative perceptions of refugees as an "economic burden" are the main factors that hinder harmonious relations between

refugees and local communities. In addition, the legal uncertainty that refugees face worsens their situation, as they do not have access to formal work or education for their children (Habib 2021; Sudheer and Banerjee 2021).

refugees and the challenges they face. A well-designed media campaign can help turn negative narratives about refugees into stories that highlight their potential to contribute to society (Netto et al. 2022). In Aceh, such campaigns can leverage the

Figure 1. Balancing Compassion and Concern in Acehnese Attitudes



Source: Authors' conceptualization

To address these challenges, community-based approaches have proven effective in a variety of international contexts. Programs that involve local communities in the planning and implementation of refugee assistance can help create a sense of shared ownership and reduce social tensions. For example, on-the-job training programs involving refugees and local communities can provide economic benefits for both parties while promoting positive social interactions. In the context of Aceh, this kind of approach can be adjusted to Islamic values that are the basis of people's lives (Bahri et al. 2021; Mahoney and Siyambalapitiya 2017; Miller et al. 2021).

A community-based approach can also be supported by digital technology to increase its effectiveness. In the age of social media, digital platforms can be used to disseminate accurate information about

values of Islamic solidarity to build wider community support (Bahri and Ridha 2024; Cahyani and Bahri 2022; Zikri 2017).

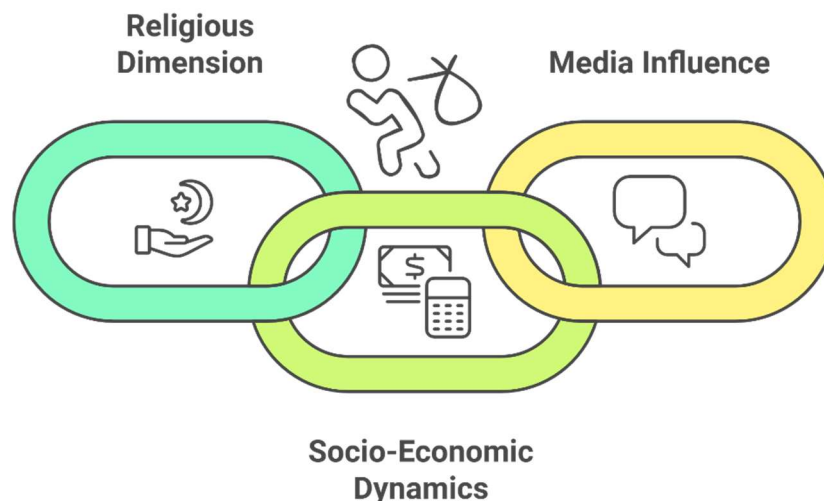
In addition, research on the Rohingya refugee experience in Aceh shows the importance of listening to their own voices. Refugees' perspectives are often overlooked in discussions about migration policy, when their insights can provide valuable information about the challenges they face and their unmet needs. In the context of Aceh, Rohingya refugees have reported various challenges, including lack of access to health services, discrimination in finding work, and difficulties in understanding the local language and culture. Documenting these experiences is not only important for social justice but also for designing more effective policies (Mukkamala, Kauffman, and Henriksen 2023; Ross 2018).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework in this study combines human security theory with Islamic values as a multidimensional approach to understanding the attitude of the Acehese people towards Rohingya refugees. The theory of human security, as developed by UNDP, highlights the protection of individuals from threats to well-being, including violence, poverty, and environmental degradation (Ismail Thaib 2024). This perspective is relevant to identify the complex needs of Rohingya refugees, covering political, social, and economic dimensions. In the context of Aceh, Islamic values, such as social justice and solidarity, serve as an important cornerstone of the humanitarian response, but they also face the challenge of negative narratives influenced by the media and socio-economic tensions (Crabtree 2010; Farzana, Pero, and Othman 2020; Sudrajat, Jati, and Gupta 2024).

dynamics, including the perception of threats to local resources; and (3) the role of the media in shaping public opinion through solidarity or xenophobic narratives. By combining human security approaches and Islamic perspectives, this study seeks to offer culture-based solutions that can strengthen local communities' acceptance of refugees (Cowling, Anderson, and Ferguson 2019; Deslandes and Anderson 2019; Selsky 2024). In addition, the use of digital technology and social media as tools for awareness campaigns is also considered in this framework, in order to reverse negative narratives and increase community involvement in inclusive refugee treatment (Latonero and Kift 2018; Norris 2017; Safa'A, Krasnova, and Hoffmeier 2018).

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors' conceptualization

This conceptual model describes the reciprocal relationship between three main elements: (1) the religious dimension, which influences the community's sympathy and solidarity with refugees; (2) socio-economic

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach, namely, content analysis, to examine the contents of papers, Facebook,

X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, scientific publications, and data based on a literature review of humanitarian crises. The research strategy used is phenomenology because it deals with social phenomena (Creswell 2003; Weyant 2022). The information utilized in this study was obtained from secondary sources, encompassing electronic documents such as journal articles pertinent to immigrants, humanitarian emergencies, the sociology of Indonesian society, and other associated data. This literature review emphasizes scholarly contributions within the domain of forced migration studies, specifically targeting research that discusses refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced individuals, and stateless populations. Additionally, this research encompasses analyses of human trafficking, a prevalent issue in Southeast Asia (Ahsan Ullah 2016; Renshaw 2016; Ullah and Hossain 2011) and often involves components of coercion (Szablewska 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A report from (UNHCR 2024) the worldwide Forced Displacement Emergency established that the population of forcibly displaced individuals reached a new peak of 70.8 million people. This number has steadily increased since 2011. Amidst the increasing number of forcibly displaced people globally, the study of forced migration is becoming an increasingly popular field of research, influenced by many disciplinary and multidisciplinary viewpoints. Although the study of refugees and forced migration became distinct research subjects only in the 1980s, research in the humanities and social sciences has been conducted for a much longer time to understand the complex characteristics and needs of forcibly displaced groups. Nevertheless, as highlighted by (Abbasi-Shavazi and Kraly 2018; Hein 2015; Jurasz 2016), a striking

difference between early research on forced population movements, such as that conducted after the Second World War, and research conducted from the 1970s onwards is the explicit manner in which researchers began to observe and critique the actions of states and intergovernmental organizations.

The simultaneous rise in the number of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe, the United States, and Canada, coupled with the intensification of protracted refugee crises spanning from Southeast Asia to Central America, has garnered heightened academic and political scrutiny. As a result, several new research institutions dedicated to the examination of forced migration have been founded, alongside a notable increase in financial support for this area of study (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). In their famous research paper, "Conceptualising Forced Migration," (Mayer 2023; Turton and House 2003) emphasized the need to distinguish forced migrants from other groups because of the problems they face: how can we effectively respond to strangers in distress. However, warn against categorizing individuals into categories based on their level of choice available to them (Turton and House 2003).

This classification may unjustly marginalize individuals and overlook the methods by which they assert their voting rights under challenging circumstances. The authors of this study characterize forced migrants as those compelled to abandon their residences due to a range of factors, including conflict, persecution, torture, violations of human rights, poverty, and natural disasters. However, it is important to note that the conceptualization and categorization of forced migration are highly complex and influenced by political factors. Moreover, the authors strongly believe that the distinction between voluntary and forced migrations remains significant. This remains an important factor in distinguishing between asylum and

immigration policies, and the individuals involved. Migration, in its broadest sense, encompasses a range of circumstances that include both forced and free choice. The concepts of choice and compulsion sometimes intersect, but compelling considerations play a decisive role when it comes to refugees and displaced individuals (UNESCO 2008).

Immigrant Inflow

Indonesia has been one of the top destinations for Rohingya refugees since they began fleeing violence and persecution in Myanmar in the 1990s, with a significant increase since 2012, when sectarian violence in Rakhine State reached its peak. The humanitarian crisis peaked in 2017 when more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees fled Myanmar, mostly to Bangladesh, but others tried to reach Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, by sea. Indonesia's strategic location along the migration route in the Bay of Bengal and the Strait of Malacca makes it an important stopover, especially for refugees who use small boats to seek refuge.

In Aceh, local communities exemplify a humanitarian ethos rooted in Islamic principles, which is evident in their willingness to accept Rohingya refugees. Since 2015, vessels carrying Rohingya individuals have begun to arrive on Aceh's shores. The period from 2020 to 2023 saw a resurgence in the influx of Rohingya refugees, with hundreds being welcomed by the Acehnese populace annually. Despite Indonesia's non-ratification of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the nation demonstrates a commitment to humanitarian ideals. The primary framework for refugee management, including that of Rohingya refugees, is outlined in Presidential Regulation Number 125 of 2016. This regulation underscores the importance of addressing refugee needs through humanitarian principles, which

encompass the provision of temporary accommodation, essential supplies, and basic legal protections, facilitated through collaboration with international organizations such as UNHCR and IOM. Refugees and unauthorized immigration have become a prevalent problem in recent years. Tens of millions of people are forced to migrate from their home countries in search of better living conditions due to circumstances such as civil conflict, severe destitution, and natural disasters (UNHCR 2021). The main influx of refugees comes from the Middle East and Africa, regions plagued by civil wars, and internal conflicts such as those in Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia. According to (Amnesty International 2019), the number of individuals who fled these countries since the start of the Syrian War in 2011 is projected to exceed 25 million. They fled the severe situation in their home countries to defend their lives and made their way towards Europe and nearby countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Nigeria, Sudan, and Eritrea are the main countries of origin for refugees in Africa, largely because of civil conflict, ethnic unrest, and human rights violations (McConnachie 2020). Over the last five years, around two million Nigerians have undergone forced displacement. These refugees and those in search of safety encounter considerable risks as they traverse deserts and the Mediterranean Sea en route to Europe. As reported by Nielsen (2020), the Mediterranean Sea records at least 1,800 drowning deaths annually. In addition, extreme climate change phenomena, including droughts and floods, have further exacerbated the situation, leading to extensive displacement in numerous areas.

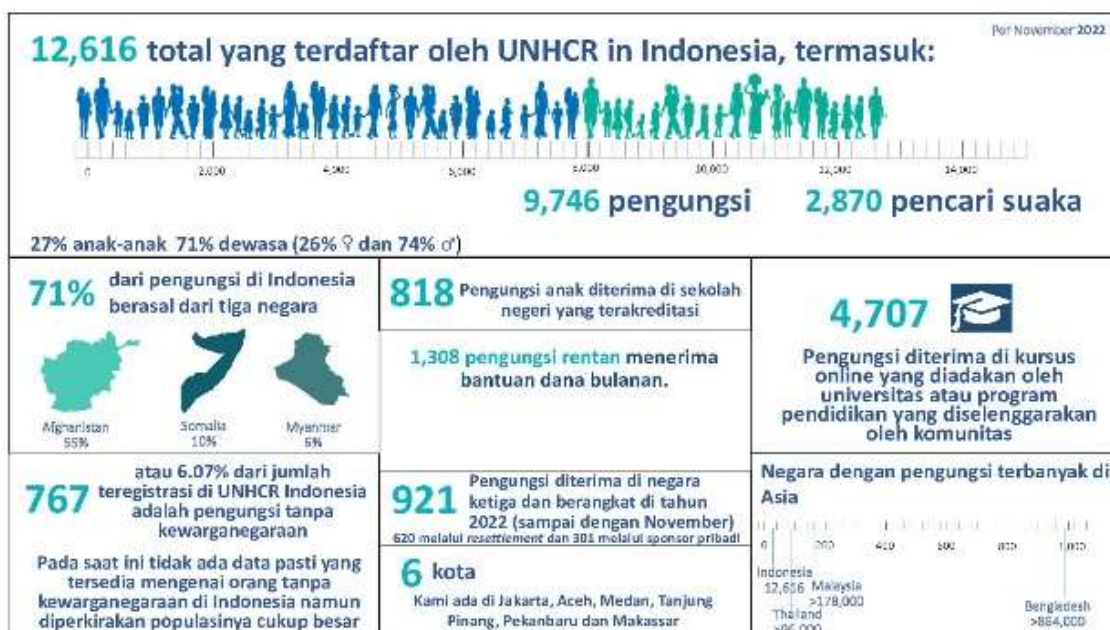
Every year, a large number of Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Filipinos across South and East Asia are forced to leave their homes because of natural disasters. They were forced to migrate to

ensure their survival (IDMC 2022). Owing to unstable geopolitical circumstances and increasing catastrophic events, it is projected that there will be a surge in refugee inflows in the coming decade (UNHCR 2021). Resolution of the major humanitarian crises driving this sense of urgency is critical for eliminating the ongoing threat to the lives of millions. Southeast Asia has emerged as a prominent region of origin for refugees and asylum seekers in various countries. In 2021, the UNHCR recorded the migration of more than 126,000 refugees to the ASEAN region. A significant and sustained increase in this numerical value is expected in the coming years. A significant wave of migration comes from the Rohingya ethnic group in Myanmar, as they seek to escape persecution and prejudice in their home countries. According to estimates, around 900,000 Rohingya currently live in neighboring countries, including Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia, as refugees, without official recognition (McConnachie 2020). They have crossed the sea, land, and jungle to seek refuge. In

addition to Myanmar, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan is driving the surge of migrants to Southeast Asia.

In 2021, around 56,000 people from Afghanistan migrated to the region, with Indonesia being the top destination, according to (UNHCR 2022). Strict immigration policies enforced in ASEAN nations often result in refugees being left in precarious situations without defined legal status. The Philippines, along with other Pacific Island nations, confronts yearly threats from severe climate change, impacting hundreds of thousands of individuals. The occurrence of tropical storms and the rise in sea levels can lead to significant displacement. In search of survival, numerous Filipinos resort to unauthorized methods of migration to nearby ASEAN countries, including Malaysia and Indonesia (IDMC 2022). Given the aforementioned crisis situations, it is imperative for ASEAN countries to collaborate in addressing refugee and asylum issues. To protect refugees' right to life, it is imperative to implement more

Figure 3. Distribution of Immigrants registered with UNHCR Indonesia



Source: (UNHCR Indonesia 2022)

compassionate policies and accelerate their relocation and integration.

Based on reported data, (UNHCR Indonesia 2022) the number of refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR Indonesia is 12,616, consisting of 27% children and 71% adults. Of these, 71% of refugees in Indonesia come from three countries: Afghanistan (55%), Somalia (10%), and Myanmar (6%), spread across six cities in Indonesia (Jakarta, Aceh, Medan, Tanjung Pinang, Pekanbaru, and Makassar). To date, the UNHCR Indonesia is unable to ascertain the available data on stateless persons in Indonesia, and it is estimated that the population is quite large.

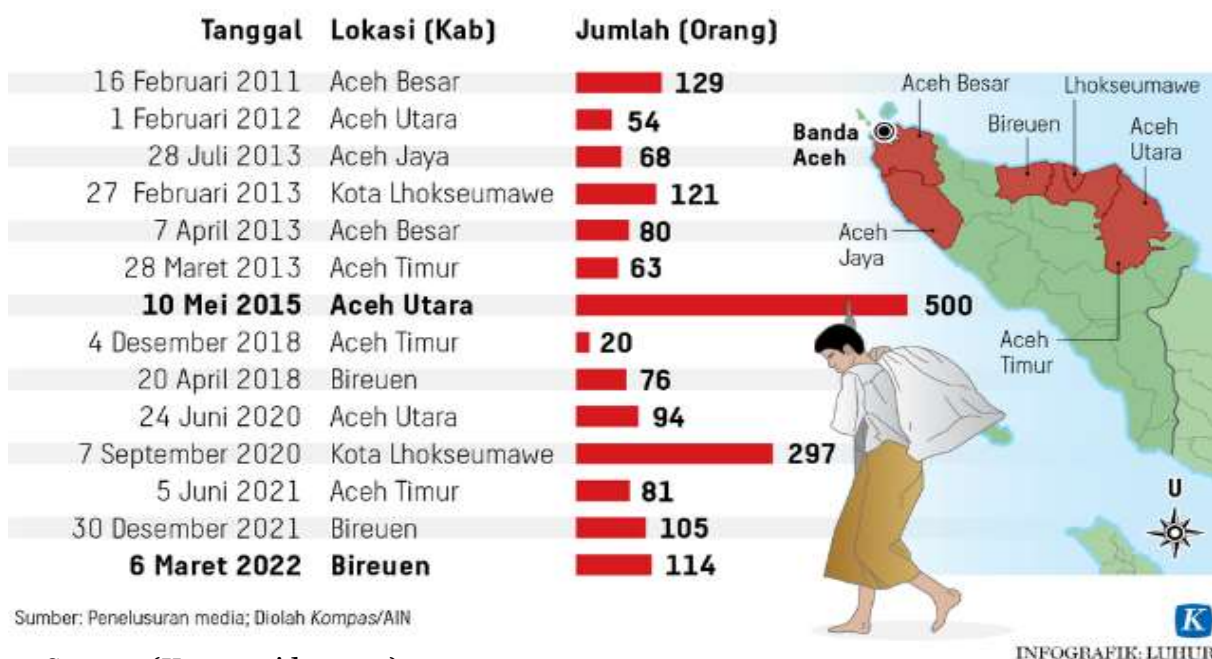
Dilemma: Local communities and refugees Immigrants

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees offers a clear definition of a refugee as a person who, due to a legitimate fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a specific social group, or political beliefs, is

outside their country of origin and does not seek protection from that country. Prior studies suggest that the resources and geopolitical dynamics of Rakhine may be associated with the persecution and displacement of the Rohingya population (Debnath, Chatterjee, and Afzal 2022; Ty 2019). When refugees leave their country of origin or residence, they leave behind in their livelihoods, homes, possessions, and relatives. These refugees cannot receive protection from their country of origin, because they are forced to leave their homeland. Therefore, the global community is responsible for protecting and assisting these communities (UNHCR Indonesia 2022).

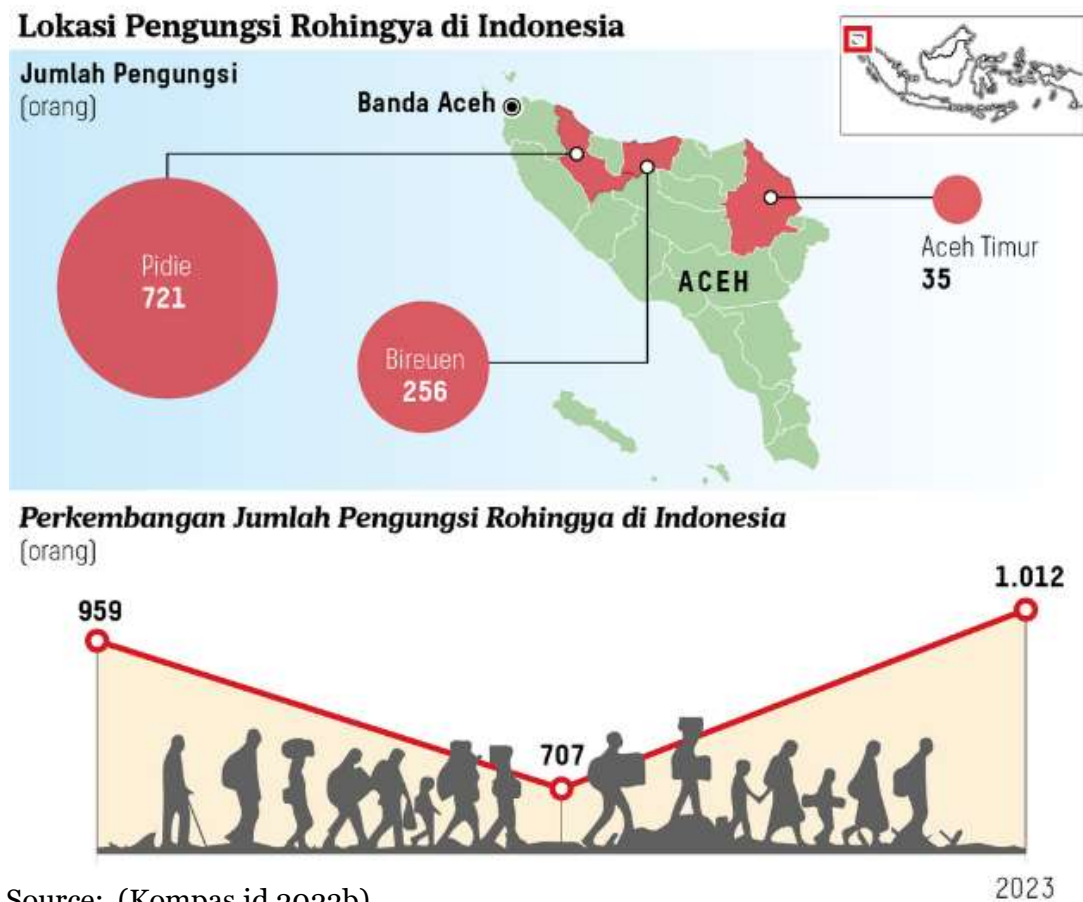
In 2018, Rohingya refugees from Myanmar began to cross Aceh's sea territory. Over the past five years, an estimated large number of Rohingya individuals have arrived in Aceh by sea and entered the region as illegal immigrants. To escape oppressive conditions and violent situations in Myanmar, they were forced to cross the Strait of Malacca using unsafe and inadequate small boats (UNHCR Indonesia

Figure 4. Shelter locations and number of Rohingya refugees



Source: (Kompas.id 2023a)

Figure 5. Number of Rohingya Refugees



Source: (Kompas.id 2023b)

2022). From mid-November 2023, the total number of Rohingya refugees who arrived in Aceh reached 1,543.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), information was obtained on December 10, 2023. Nine boats arrived in Aceh on their way to their destination country. Currently, illegal immigrants are accommodated in temporary shelters and spread across various regions of Aceh. A total of 544 Rohingya refugees are currently accommodated in a temporary shelter located in a building formerly used as the Lhokseumawe immigration office. Thus far, there have been two shelters in the Pidie Regency. These two shelters are located at the Mina Raya Foundation complex and in Kulam Village, Batee District, and offer protection to 755 people. Meanwhile, at the

CT 1 Pier of the Sabang Regional Business Agency (BPKS), Sabang City, there are 139 people, and at the Balee Meuseuraya Aceh (BMA) Building, Banda Aceh City, there are 135 people. Both locations are located in the city of Aceh. There were two shelter locations in the Pidie Regency.

These shelters are located in the Mina Raya Foundation complex and in Kulam Village, Batee District, with 755 people taking refuge there. Meanwhile, at the CT 1 Pier of the Sabang Area Business Agency (BPKS) in Sabang City, there are 139 people, and at the Balee Meuseuraya Aceh (BMA) Building in Banda Aceh City, there are 135 people. Both locations were in the city of Banda Aceh. There are 140 elderly Rohingya refugees who have settled in the Mina Raya Foundation complex in the Pidie District.

This number does not include immigrants who have arrived in Aceh since last November. With this development, the number of Rohingya refugees in Aceh now stands at 1,683 (UNHCR 2023, 2024).

Their presence is often unexpected and creates a humanitarian crisis, as passengers are weak, sick, suffer from dehydration, and, in some cases, even die en route. The Indonesian government has granted amnesty to some Rohingya individuals in Aceh, granting them temporary residence permits, protection, and refugee status. However, many individuals are left without a secure legal position and are exposed to potential abuse by criminal organizations involved in human trafficking (JRS 2022). Rohingya refugees generally reside in temporary accommodations that offer minimal essential services. They frequently encounter ongoing obstacles, including restricted job prospects, inadequate educational opportunities for their offspring, and widespread discrimination. Furthermore, the challenges associated with integrating socially and culturally into Acehese society are significant and warrant attention. This situation has the capacity to create enduring social issues (McConnachie 2020). Immediate assistance is still needed to ensure the fulfilment of basic rights for Rohingya refugees in Aceh, along with the urgent need for collaboration among neighbouring countries to prevent the influx of migrants through illegal routes.

(RRI.co.id 2024) Between December 8, 2023, and January 5, 2024, police officers documented a total of 21 instances when communities and students in Aceh expressed their opposition to Rohingya migrants entering the region. These acts of rejection were triggered by various community concerns regarding the unaddressed influx of Rohingya refugees in

Aceh. Since January 5, 2024, there have been 21 acts of rejection by the community and students against Rohingya refugees. Human trafficking syndicates disrupted the influx of Rohingya refugees. This is evidenced by the handling of 24 cases of Trafficking in Persons (TPPO) involving Rohingya refugees. In addition, the police arrested 45 people affiliated with the TPPO Syndicate (Polda Aceh 2024). It is crucial to recognize the illegal transportation activities linked to the influx of Rohingya refugees via the maritime route of Aceh, as these could lead to social issues that may jeopardize public safety in the future. Furthermore, Indonesia has yet to formally accede to or ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention, which means there is no legal obligation to provide aid or support to Rohingya refugees. The current situation encompasses not only the plight of Rohingya refugees but also significant concerns such as human smuggling. Many of these individuals originate from the Cox Bazar Camp in Bangladesh, highlighting a deficiency in oversight and security within the camps, which enables individuals to escape in order to evade confinement. (Polda Aceh 2024; RRI.co.id 2024).

Weaknesses in Aceh's Maritime Border Defence

It is important to ensure the safety of Rohingya refugees to avoid strife with the local population and maintain the stability of the country's security situation (Polda Aceh 2024; RRI.co.id 2024). Aceh has 1,760 km of coastline bordering the Strait of Malacca and Indian Ocean. This geographical position is vulnerable to exploitation by illegal immigrants, especially Rohingya refugees, to enter the Indonesian territory. However, maritime border security measures are still inadequate. The lack of security in Aceh's waters has opened the door for hundreds of Rohingya refugees to enter Aceh over the

past five years. There are only three Navy posts located on the waterways in the Aceh region: Sabang Base, Sinabang Base, and Lhokseumawe Base. Consequently, other locations are vulnerable to infiltration by small refugee boats.

Additionally, there is a glaring absence of available and operational marine patrols. To avoid discovery and arrest by authorities, illegal immigrants, especially Rohingya refugees, can access Aceh's seas and thus enter the mainland. Hence, adequate patrol posts or activities for national defence, especially at the Aceh border (Ramdhan 2022). Researchers from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) have found that measures taken to ensure marine security and immigration checkpoints in Aceh are inadequate. The number of security officers is insufficient, and there are shortcomings in contemporary equipment, such as patrol boats, surveillance aircraft, and radar/detection systems. In addition, Aceh's extensive coastline served as a gateway for illegal immigration (Ramdhan 2022). It is imperative for central and local governments to urgently upgrade Aceh's border defense and security infrastructure to thwart the influx of illegal migrants by the sea.

Research on the management of Rohingya refugees in Aceh Province indicates that the Indonesian government has made significant progress in this area. The Aceh Customary Law of the Sea (Panglima Laot) mandates that all seafarers in the region are obligated to assist anyone in peril at sea. Additionally, while some countries expressed concerns regarding the arrival of refugees, the people of Aceh have consistently offered a welcoming environment. The Muslim community in Aceh demonstrates a high level of unity, with 98 percent of the population identifying as Muslim (Hamdi et al. 2023). However, our research shows that the

Acehnese people show great hostility towards Rohingya refugees. This rejection is due to the perception that the Rohingya community violates Islamic law in Aceh and fuels unrest among the local population, especially in January when the Aceh Police busted a Rohingya infiltration operation in the province (Polda Aceh 2024; RRI.co.id 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

Over the past five years, the flow of refugees and illegal immigrants to Indonesia, particularly through Aceh, has increased significantly. Various situations, including violence, severe poverty, natural disasters, and global climate change, have led to large-scale displacement of refugees to various regions of the world, including Southeast Asia. Widespread humanitarian crises in countries such as Myanmar, Afghanistan, (Kompas.id 2023b) and Syria have prompted large numbers of individuals to flee for their lives. They are willing to cross vast waters and dangerous landscapes to reach countries deemed safe, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, in the ASEAN region. However, the absence of strict border control measures, especially in Aceh's sea at the Strait of Malacca, has led to the invasion of illegal migrants and criminal organizations involved in human trafficking. From 2018 to 2022, Aceh has experienced at least 64 instances of thousands of unauthorized refugee arrivals. These refugees were mostly ethnic Rohingya Muslims living in Myanmar.

The weaknesses in Aceh's border defense system are closely associated with insufficient financial resources, outdated technology, and a lack of skilled personnel. This issue is further complicated by inadequate oversight in the management of refugees and the lack of a systematic approach for their relocation or repatriation to their countries of origin or alternative destinations. Consequently, it is essential

for the Indonesian government to prioritize enhancements in border security, ensuring adequate funding for patrol operations, and the introduction of advanced monitoring technologies. Moreover, it is crucial to establish regulations and policies that govern the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in accordance with human rights standards. Strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation is also vital in addressing illegal immigration and human trafficking while safeguarding the rights of vulnerable refugees.

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