



The Nobility of Leadership:

The Life & Struggles of Rohingya Refugees in the USA

By Adem Carroll

Rohingya refugees take part in a soccer tournament in Utica, N.Y., in summer 2015.

The worldwide refugee crisis is becoming increasingly alarming, with nearly 60 million refugees and displaced people globally, the largest number since World War II. Although some groups receive fleeting attention in mainstream media, most do not.

For more than 35 years, the Rohingya Muslim minority of Burma/Myanmar has been persecuted. Over time, their rights to work, vote, marry, have children, travel and receive an education have been increasingly restricted. Moreover, even with positive results from the November 2015 general election, in which Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy finally gained a strong foothold in government, there are no signs that this will end the persecution in any way. Burmese political leaders have at best mini-

mized the crisis; even Suu Kyi herself has not called for the restoration of Rohingya rights, despite international pressure. And harsher voices continue to call for their expulsion. Consequently, tens of thousands of Rohingya will continue to risk their lives trying to flee Burma, and hundreds of thousands will languish in refugee camps in Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia and elsewhere in the region.

During the military dictatorship that controlled Burma until the recent election, most of the over 140,000 Burmese refugees coming to the U.S. have been members of Kachin, Chin and Karen minorities fleeing conflict and oppression. However, like the Burman majority, these ethnic groups have been taught that Rohingya are not Burmese; even the Burmese American Community

Institute classifies them as "Other." Therefore, the approximately 2,500 Rohingya refugees in the U.S. remain largely disconnected. A few have been able to overcome stigma through community service and by creating businesses, such as Burmese grocery stores, that serve the whole diaspora community.

Around the U.S., all the Rohingya I have spoken with have told me that other ethnic groups increasingly distance themselves, especially after the rise of organized Islamophobia in Burma over the past five years. I have attended summertime soccer matches sponsored by the Multi Ethnic Association of Burma in Utica, New York, where thousands of Burmese refugees have found homes. Dressed in colorful saris and jeans, the crowd enjoys traditional food while

young men chase the ball in fields on all sides. Event organizers have told me that in central New York, there are followers of extreme nationalist movements, so organizers tread softly to encourage tolerance in a quiet and gentle way. Each year, a few Rohingya participate in the sports activities.

Rohingya refugees support many local leadership groups in the U.S., but social and political coordination among them can be a major challenge. Some groupings are less inclusive than others, and some rivalries have roots in Burma itself.

Some of these leaders in the U.S. were once student activists in Burma and many grew up in families with some measure of social standing and education. Many spent years as refugees in neighboring Southeast Asian countries. These men and women have used their experiences of pain and heartache living abroad to fuel efforts to help those who are in similar or worse conditions.

The following five stories represent five pillars supporting different communities; five lives of service that embody suffering, resilience and hope in action.

Separation

Now based in California, Maung Maung Hla (who goes by his Muslim name Zubair Ahmed) was born in Paletwa, a town originally in Rakhine State but long ago transferred to Chin State. There were only 16 Rohingya families in the town. When he was young, Ahmed attended school, but after the 1988 popular uprising against the one-party system, his university was closed down for three years.

“Education was destroyed in Burma,” he told me. He received a scholarship in 1993 to study engineering in Turkey. Ahmed has not seen his family since. After he left home, restrictions on the Rohingya increased and his father suggested that if Ahmed wanted to travel or find a job, he should stay away. After his studies, Ahmed received asylum in the United States, married and settled down.

He counts himself very lucky that he was able to attend university; since 1988, many young Rohingya have not been permitted to receive an education. “The more recent

arrivals [to the U.S.] are working minimum wage jobs, and many even have a sort of slave mentality because they have been treated like slaves,” he said. “They need education and a lot of help so they can develop.”

One thing tears at Ahmed’s heart: His father passed away in 2013, and Ahmed is trying to bring his elderly widowed mother to the U.S., since no medical care is available to Rohingya back home. Though she has already been granted a U.S. visa, and has been ready to leave since July 2015, Burmese authorities will not allow her to travel to the capital city or the airport. The family cannot pay a bribe to local soldiers or police to allow them out, because with so few Rohingya in the village, the amount is not worth the risk for the authorities.

What would account for the failure of the Burmese government to allow a “hated minority” to leave? An article in *Atlantic Magazine* observed in 2015, “According to *The New York Times*, the government of Burma says it will prevent members of the country’s beleaguered Rohingya Muslim population from leaving. ... What’s happening now seems like a lesson in the law of unintended effects of international pressure. ... The international community seems more concerned for the moment about the refugees in boats than the ones suffering on shore, a situation that has resulted in today’s can’t-leave-and-can’t-stay dilemma.”

The impact of family separation is enormous but largely unstudied. Maintaining family unity is supposed to be a key principle of immigration policy. However, according to a 2014 analysis by the Inter-

national Organization for Migration, “there continues to be a dearth of information about children, elderly people who migrate or stay behind, and the resulting changes in family structures and relations due to the absence of one or more parents and other family members.” Scarce data on this aspect of immigrant and refugee life reflect and perpetuate harmful migration policies that ignore the destructive impact on mental health and basic social relations, including traditional extended families.

Ahmed is an energy technician at a California gas company, and has two young daughters. He knows very few Rohingya in California, and his daughters don’t speak his mother tongue. Some of his relatives are refugees in Malaysia.

“Whoever can reach other countries like Malaysia are happy because they can breathe freely and no need to go hungry. But they often don’t know that they can migrate to developed countries through UNHCR [the U.N. refugee agency]. Also some corrupt organizations and individuals discourage them from migrating, with false information about the dangers of living in a Christian country. I always encourage them to migrate for education and so that we can save the people left back home,” he said.

“In the early days of the dictatorship, all ethnic groups suffered equally,” he adds. Despite the strife rampant in Burma — in which the military regime, many nationalists and Buddhists are increasingly targeting Muslims — one of Ahmed’s closest friends is Buddhist. Ahmed said he appreciates the U.S. political system because it is far less corrupt than



Zubair Ahmed with his family and Wai Wai Nu, right, in California.



The Rohingya American Society has frequent meetings in Milwaukee.

Burma's, and the rising Islamophobia since 9/11 doesn't bother him. "There are bad people everywhere," he notes.

Trauma, struggle and community

Hitay Lwin Oo was born in Thandwe, grew up in Thandwe and Gwa Townships in Southern Rakhine State. In 1984, when he was in the ninth grade at Kyeintali High School, mosques from Taunggouk, Gwa and Kyeintali were burnt down or destroyed by government-orchestrated mobs. Some Muslim colleagues from his city were forced to convert to Buddhism.

Lwin Oo enrolled in college in Sittwe in 1986 to study Burmese language and literature, and soon became well-known because of his anti-government views. During the nationwide democratic uprising in 1988, he was one of the student leaders in the democratic movement.

In 1990, surveillance by informers and "intelligence cells" prompted Lwin Oo to leave college and move to Yangon, where he worked as a private high-school tutor "for survival." He told me that he taught 800 to 1,000 students each year between 1994 and 1997, all while planting ideas of opposition to the dictatorship in the minds of select students.

In 1996, some of his colleagues were released from jail and reunited with him, working to set up secret cells throughout the country and distribute tapes of Suu Kyi's speeches. That year, military intel-

ligence General Shwe Win met with Lwin Oo three times, warning him not to go to Suu Kyi's compound and that he was under watch. In November 1997, Lwin Oo was arrested and accused of contact with the Students' Army (an exiled group). He was interrogated and beaten with leather belts until he was unconscious. The interrogator kept demanding, "Why are you kalar [dark-skinned Muslims] messing up our country?" Lwin Oo was kept in an Eastern Yangon jail in a cell holding 200 prisoners with no place to lie down. He said the food quality was unspicable.

But Lwin Oo was lucky. One police officer was a former student and had Lwin Oo's police files secretly burned; other students had family connections with the police chief and military officers, and asked them to take less drastic approaches toward their former teacher. Lwin Oo only remained in jail for 27 days.

A month later, some of his close colleagues were arrested and, under severe torture, described the anti-government cells they had set up. Daw Khin Mar Aye, a well-known politician and mother of prisoner Set Aung Naing, advised Lwin Oo to leave Burma as soon as possible. He fled across the border to Thailand that day.

Although Lwin Oo was free, his colleagues were sentenced to 14 years in prison with hard labor. Still other comrades contracted hepatitis and HIV in jail and then released. Some of them died. Lwin Oo continued his anti-regime work outside the country. However, he chose the

"pen" instead of the "sword," he said, and worked with human rights defenders to file reports to the United Nations between 1999 and 2002. In 2003, he led demonstrations in front of the Burma Embassy in Bangkok, denouncing plots against Suu Kyi's life and calling for U.S. intervention, according to reports in the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* newspapers.

Lwin Oo was arrested in June 2003 by Thai authorities, who planned to deport him to Burma, where he would likely have faced death. He was placed in a prison for political prisoners, where he gave a speech for Radio Free Asia that was picked up by many media outlets. Under pressure, the U.S. Embassy in Thailand and the UNHCR office in Bangkok eventually resettled him in the United States on May 25, 2004.

Lwin Oo's activism for democracy coincided with some of the military dictatorship's harshest policies intended to quash all dissent through force and repression. In the years after the dramatic 2007 Saffron Revolution, over 600 political prisoners were released, death sentences were commuted to life sentences and the nation embarked on a slow and uncertain journey toward a more democratic system.

Along with land confiscations, violence against Muslim minorities increased markedly even as the transition to a more democratic (or at least more capitalistic) system gained momentum. In one incident documented by the Human Rights Watch, a government truck left 18 bodies near a Rohingya camp for internally displaced people outside Sittwe on June 13, 2013. From June to October 2013, over 5,000 Rohingya-owned businesses were burned and destroyed.

By July, President Thein Sein called for Rohingya to be deported. According to the Human Rights Watch, Arakanese community leaders use his words to justify expelling Rohingya from Burma as an appropriate political solution. There were no restrictions on the extremist monks of the 969 Movement and the extreme nationalist Race and Faith Defense League (Ma Ba Tha), who have locally supported military authorities.

Lwin Oo fights not only for democracy, but also the rights of the Rohingya. (He



Hitay Lwin Oo as a young graduate in Burma.

notes that his own family in Thandwe descends from a “native Rakhine tribe” and some of his cousins are still Buddhist). Thandwe’s “population is made up of Burmanized Rakhine, mixed Rakhine-Bama families” and Kaman Muslims, Burma expert Maung Zarni writes. There “have been no religious conflicts or communal conflicts among these residents. In terms of Muslim-Buddhist make-up, it’s about half and half.”

During a period of widespread anti-Muslim attacks in September 2013, police and 969 Movement monks surrounded Lwin Oo’s family home where his 80-year-old mother, Malay, lived with other relatives. Attackers beat his family and burned down the house, along with six other Rohingya homes. Soon after the president toured the area October 1, an additional 120 houses were burned. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, Tomás Ojea Quintana, suggested there were indications of “direct involvement by some sections of the State or implicit collusion and support for such actions.”

Lwin Oo recalls his childhood, when it was possible for different ethnic and religious groups to live together. He believes that local authorities in his village, including some Buddhist elders, are pragmatic and would support coexistence, but the military government and its extremist allies have been responsible for bringing the problem to its current heated state.

In Thandwe, there is now almost no medical care and travel is restricted. Lwin Oo’s mother has fled with his older brother to the capital city, Naypyidaw, where it is safer. His brother was an official with the Ministry of Agriculture and his wife was a teacher at a government school. Both were fired after their homes were burned because they are seen as Rohingya, Lwin Oo says. The family survives mainly on money that Lwin Oo sends them.

When Lwin Oo first arrived in Utica, New York, he learned English by speaking it on the job as a waiter in a sushi restaurant. Of the 6,000 Burmese refugees in the city, there are only 25 Rohingya families, including a few recent arrivals. He opened a grocery store in 2009, Golden Burma, which serves the entire community. As he says, “everyone eats.”

His business allows him to continue his civil rights and social justice activism, and he has working relationships with well-known nongovernmental organizations like United to End Genocide. He was the general secretary for the NY Upstate Democratic Burmese Community from 2004 to 2008, then organized Burmese Muslim activists around the world to set up the Burmese Muslim Association (BMA). For several months he worked in Thailand to help Rohingya boat people directly.

Lwin Oo has three girls in school and one boy training to become a Marine. Lwin Oo hopes he can go to Burma when it is safe and he is permitted. But the Burma he once knew so well and fought for has changed. “The opposition parties I worked with accepted the Rohingya once. But Buddhist nationalist idea has overwhelmed all of them during this time of transition.”

I first met Lwin Oo in October 2015 when he told his story as part of a lawsuit I helped organize against President Sein and several of his ministers, a legal action co-sponsored by Burma Task Force USA. Some lawyers believe that the principle of universal jurisdiction allows war crimes against humanity to be tried in courts around the world, though many governments object to this theory. Lwin Oo is named plaintiff in a class action filed in the U.S. representing torture survivors.

He later told me: “International pressure is still urgently needed to change the

desperate Burmese human rights situation. Meanwhile for us refugees, education is the key for the next generations to repair our own community and build unity. We all need rights — not just money.”

Fighting for freedom

Wai Wai Nu was 17 when she was arrested in Burma and 24 when she was released in 2012. When I first met her in October 2013 at a U.N. human rights meeting, the Rohingya activist and lawyer was willing to speak publicly about her long ordeal, despite the clouds of pain that still passed across her face as she spoke.

Nu’s father, U Kyaw Min, was a former state education official in Buthidaung in northern Rakhine State. He was elected as member of parliament in 1990, but military rulers ignored the results. After that, the family moved to Yangon to avoid a campaign of harassment against Rohingya. Min joined the Committee Representing the People’s Parliament, a group of disenfranchised MP-elects from the 1990 vote led by Suu Kyi.

In 2005, two months after Min was taken from his home and held incommunicado — no one would say where — Nu and her entire family were arrested.

“We thought that since we didn’t do any crime, that maybe it was because I took English at the American Center. But we were not affiliated with politics, just a simple family. Until the verdict, we thought that only my dad would remain imprisoned since we didn’t do anything wrong,” she said. “We had a trial without a lawyer, and when they sentenced us all [Nu, her sister, brother and mother] to 17 years and my dad to 47 years, it was a shock!



Hitay Lwin Oo’s grocery store in Utica, N.Y.

“The situation of Insein Prison was very bad. We were kept in a very, very small space. We slept on the floor and were not allowed to have furniture sent to us by family. Because we were ‘political’ prisoners, we got a cell [less than 4 feet] while the regular prisoners got even less. You had to bribe the guards to get anything, and the poorer prisoners had a very bad situation while drug sellers got favors. You had to fight for water to wash with. The food was in small amounts, the rice was bad and the vegetable soup was like water. How can prisoners survive on this, especially those with no family visits? Many of the prisoners were young women my age, mostly prostitutes.”

Nu gestured while describing her life inside prison, the experience of living within the cruel walls of a holding cell where she came of age still fresh in her mind.

“The medical staff misused the supplies, which were only for rich prisoners,” she said. “My sister got hepatitis B in prison, and the doctors kept telling her she was lying. She got very sick and the prison doctor told that she felt pain just because she was human. After her back swelled up, another political prisoner who was released was able to get attention to her situation. Even after that, the prison forced my relatives to raise \$20,000 to pay for an operation and would not let this be done at a hospital outside the prison.”

At times, Nu’s family members were separated from each other; for about two years, they didn’t know whether her father was alive or dead. Eventually they were allowed to exchange censored letters, in which they could not complain and instead had to pretend that everything was fine.

After the family’s eventual release, Min remained outspoken about the increasing persecution of Rohingya. Despite harsh legal restrictions on travel, education and marriage, Rohingya had the right to vote in every election since Burma’s independence in 1948. But their voting rights were abolished in 2015, along with their white card citizenship papers.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Min said that one of his earliest memories is of accompanying his mother to vote in Buthidaung in the 1956 election. He says the current disenfranchisement is clearly illegal discrimination: “There were only two other places where this happened — in South Africa and Hitler’s Germany.”

“The Rohingya used to lead dignified, respectful lives. They were not always stateless. My parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were citizens,” Nu said in an interview with Reuters. “...How is it that our fathers were in the government service and able to run in and win elections but that is no longer possible during our time?”

“I was never political before, but this experience caused me to find my political beliefs,” Nu told me. “Even though my father was afraid for me at first, I have now founded an organization [Women Peace Network-Arakan (WPNA)] to promote women’s rights, peace and justice.”

After her release, Nu became a human rights activist, serving as a committee member and trainer at a variety of organizations including the Culture Impact Study Club at the American Center in Yangon and the Parthenon Club of the Yangon School of Political Science. In March 2013, Nu and a group of Rohingya women founded WPNA, a nongovernmental organization that aims to improve conditions in not only Arakan State, but also Burma as a whole. Nu is its director and oversees its advocacy and women empowerment sectors.

Nu has received fellowships and travels frequently to the U.S. to speak to congressional and U.N. leaders. On June 23, 2015, President Barack Obama invited her to the White House iftar, where she sat at the president’s table, one chair away from him.

“Oh my God, it was so special,” she said, laughing incredulously. “There I was, from the most persecuted group in Burma, meeting a man from a persecuted group who’s now the most powerful person in the world. ... But how is it a success story if we’re facing extinction? We’re facing ethnic cleansing, people dying in the sea. What does democracy mean then?”

Service to the community

Shaukhat Kyaw Soe Aung, also known as Mohamed Shaukhat Kyaw Jilani, was born in Sittwe, Rakhine State. During the 1988 uprisings, he had already completed high school and participated in the demonstrations as a student leader. After martial law was imposed, he fled to Bangladesh but returned in 1989. The military government allowed various political parties to exist in the period leading to the 1990 election, and Jilani was a member of the National Democratic Party for Human Rights. However, the military began to harass and arrest Rohingya, knowing they would not support the leadership, Jilani said, so he crossed to Thailand to moni-



Wai Wai Nu at an OIC Reception with Nicole Bjerler of Amnesty International.



Shaukhat/Jilani at a January 3 celebration event at the Rohingya American Society in Milwaukee.

tor the situation from there, and then to Malaysia, where he became one of a large number of Rohingya in Kuala Lumpur who had fled during the 1988 crackdown. They struggled to survive because the Malaysian government saw them as illegal immigrants, not refugees. Jilani received his identification papers from the UNHCR in 1992 and became an interpreter for the agency. Later, he became secretary and executive member of the Organization of Displaced Rohingya Muslims in Malaysia (ODRM), which worked to relocate refugees into homes.

In 1999, Jilani married a woman from his hometown and the couple came to Hartland, Wisconsin, on February 1, 2001, as refugees. Two years later, they moved to Milwaukee. Eager to support his family as well as serve his community, Jilani worked as a waiter, forklift driver and then a case manager with Catholic Charities. Currently, he and his wife are volunteer leaders at associations like the Rohingya American Society (formerly known as Burmese Rohingya American Friendship Association) and the local Rohingya Center. On January 3, 2016, they hosted a program for the Commemoration of Rohingya National Day.

Of the 4,500 Burmese refugees in the Milwaukee area, there are over 250 Rohingya families and 35 Burmese Muslim families of other ethnic backgrounds. This is one of the largest Rohingya communi-

ties in the U.S. The Rohingya American Society provides health care, social services, legal immigration assistance and even Quran classes. Jilani expects more arrivals and observes that, “Resettlement offices help, employment-oriented classes are good but many more refugees should study English. In Milwaukee, newcomers lack education and are doing packaging and other unskilled labor, and housekeeping; but our community needs skilled workers too, to survive.”

Though Jilani emphasizes that various ethnic groups enjoy the same rights and therefore avoid conflicts in the U.S., he regrets that other Burmese refugees in his city still do not really accept the Rohingya or offer help. Like all the other leaders interviewed for this article, Jilani describes how inter-ethnic solidarity among refugees collapsed in light of Burma’s Islamophobic campaigns that began in 2012.

“The situation is clearly worse,” he told me. “Student groups used to work together for democracy regardless of ethnicity. Even Aung San Suu Kyi — I worked to release her from detention — but now she is silent and leaders from her political party speak against the Rohingya.”

Many adult refugees have a reactionary mindset, he observes, but only time will tell whether their children will carry this forward

or go another route entirely, possibly even rejecting their Burmese heritage altogether.

Meanwhile, Jilani and his wife are interpreters, he can help with some legal advice and his wife leads women’s groups. They have two daughters and a son; his oldest daughter is on the honor role in the 10th grade with a 4.0 GPA and wants to be a doctor, the kind of profession her people desperately need.

When he escaped Burma, Jilani had left his family behind. Police came to his family home in Sittwe to ask questions throughout 1990s. Then there was a period of calm until 2012, when genocidal policies worsened and mob attacks began. Relatives’ homes were burned and the large grocery store they owned in the municipal market was destroyed.

Since then, Jilani’s relatives have been living in an Internal Displacement Camp, a miserable ghetto not far from their old neighborhood. They can sometimes leave the camp to shop for food if they bribe officials, but must return after two or three hours. No one can work or mix with their former neighbors, and some have been beaten for supplementing their meager rations through fishing. Some in the camp do not have food, so others make arrangements with neighboring farmers or receive remittances from relatives abroad.



Dil Muhammad Rahman, Hasinah Izhar and their children share a meal together. Activist Mariam Mehter raised money for their family to help them through their hardship after a *New York Times* article was published detailing their journey to Malaysia.

Jilani is one of those who can send money to his family.

In December 2015, the UNHCR reported that its staff was able to assist only 40,000 of over 800,000 stateless people in Burma, but their assistance has been essential for the survival of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Jilani says there are over 60 camps in Rakhine State, and all but a few are for homeless Rohingya. The UNHCR states that “the situation for most IDPs deteriorated in 2014, particularly health coverage and NFI distributions. The premises and warehouses of the United Nations and most international NGOs were attacked and ransacked in early 2014.” This came in the wake of government-orchestrated violence against NGOs assisting Rohingya and the expulsion of Doctors Without Borders for most of the year. With ongoing floods and storms, camp residents have become vulnerable to malaria and tuberculosis, unable to escape either profound misery or the military guards.

On January 9, 2016, *New York Times* reporter Nicholas Kristoff wrote of Rohingya children dying in these “concentration camps” from treatable diseases like tetanus, and of U.N. dysfunction and ineffectiveness when confronted by the Burmese government’s genocidal policies. He writes that Suu Kyi appears ready to preside over such policies, and challenges those who see only economic development as a priority. “When kids are dying in concentration camps, after being confined there because of their ethnicity, that’s not just one more problem of global poverty. It’s a crime against

humanity, and addressing it is the responsibility of all humanity,” Kristoff writes.

Family, solidarity and compassion

Some non-Rohingya Burmese have also found ways to help. Mariam Mehter decided to celebrate her birthday in 2015 with Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.

Mehter’s parents are from Burma and came to the United States in the 1970s. Her father studied at New York University, then married his second cousin and moved to Syracuse, New York, where they had five children. Some relatives have remained in Yangon. The family embodies Burmese diversity: some are originally from India and others are ethnically Burmese. Her parents’ families are Burmese Muslims, but have not suffered much discrimination. This may be partly because the family is well known in Yangon; they own a watch factory, and the children were always pressed to focus on their studies and became known in the neighborhood as role models. Mehter’s father and two of his brothers were on the national field hockey team and featured on magazine covers. They were leaders at their school, Methodist English High School. In fact, in January 2013, Mehter traveled with her uncle to a high-school reunion and found that Suu Kyi was there being feted as a famous alumnus. Mehter noted that not only was the “nephew of the dictator” in attendance, but also others who had been

jailed for their beliefs, yet everyone got along together like members of an elite club.

Mehter grew up in Syracuse before large numbers of Burmese refugees began to arrive 15 years ago. At the time, there were no Burmese food stores or identifiable Southeast Asian neighborhoods. After attending university in Syracuse, she became a stockbroker and worked in Boston. After a few years, she moved with her family to Virginia.

On a summer day in 2013, at the annual conference of the Islamic Society of North America, I noticed that people with the same last name — Mehter — were coming one by one to our Burma Task Force table to sign petitions calling for the protection of Rohingya. I soon learned that the family members were not content just to sign petitions, but were also organizing small fundraisers for the Rohingya in Virginia and New York City to benefit the Zakat Foundation’s refugee assistance and other activities, enough to provide 500 families with food packages for a month.

In summer of 2015, Mehter started a LaunchGood campaign to assist Dil Muhammad Rahman and Hasinah Izhar’s family, who were featured in a *New York Times* article in July describing their terrible ordeal in Burma and their poverty as refugees now in Malaysia. The article also describes how they had to tragically leave behind one of their children in Burma and details the cruelty of traffickers and the horror of over-packed refugee boats.

Mehter had wanted to simply send funds through reporters or local charities, but the reporters could not receive funds and the local charities did not guarantee that the family would receive the entire amount. Therefore, she journeyed to Malaysia to visit Nur, a friend from Boston now living in Kuala Lumpur. Together they traveled to Penang to meet the family, along with reporters and a translator.

Rahman’s constant efforts to work are stymied because he doesn’t have an official U.N. refugee card. Although he’s submitted multiple requests for one, distribution is limited and the process tedious. He has been arrested three times since the *Times* story ran, just for being in public without a card. In one incident, police only

released him after he paid a bribe of 100 Ringgit (\$24).

After the overwhelming success of her LaunchGood campaign, Mehter brought to Malaysia the first of three installments: \$3,500 of the \$11,862 total raised. This will help the family pay off their debts and have around \$800 remaining. She is seeking a trusted nonprofit that can deliver the next installments.

“We arrived at the dilapidated shack shared by multiple families with some gifts for the three kids, including a duck on wheels for the little daughter,” Mehter recalled. “While the kids assembled a new puzzle of the world in the kitchen area, we huddled with Dil Muhamad and Hasinah around the only piece of furniture, a mattress on the floor of a small room.”

When Nur learned that the Rahman family eats only rice, sometimes with oil, for each meal, and has meat just once a month, she determined that they would return that afternoon to eat with the family. Considering that food is cheap in Penang — a bag of rice and meat costs about 50 cents — they brought biryani to eat with the family and some of their refugee neighbors on their open concrete “yard” area.

The family remains in deep distress. But this is only one family’s story of heartache and sacrifice. As we have already described, countless other families have their own stories and are also in need of support.

In one rather uplifting story, Mehter met one young boy “who fled from a refugee camp without his parents to escape via an unstable boat over the course of one horrifying month. But he has managed to climb to the top of his class in the Malaysian camp and remains motivated.”

How to Help?

These interviews speak of heroes and heroines hidden in plain sight. Faced with relentless and hateful oppression, leaders have risen in many prominent Rohingya families, making use of their skills and education for the greater good. Despite family separation and other difficulties, older leaders have built up and maintained organizations for

mutual support, and a few younger leaders have followed in their footsteps.

Supporting projects like Mehter’s or creating one’s own project overseas is only part of the solution. Rohingya leaders in the U.S. can direct donors and volunteers to Rohingya refugees in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Utica New York; Nashua, New Hampshire; Fort Wayne Indiana; or Chicago, Illinois. Each activist I’ve interviewed has spoken of the urgent need for education. Rohingya and refugee organizations can provide translators to facilitate connections. Community members can also make small donations to support talented leaders.

For example, Mohiuddin Yusof, president of the World Rohingya Organization, leads an itinerant and humble existence out of a small basement office in Jackson Heights, New York, and travels frequently to Buffalo, Indiana, Toronto and Malaysia to connect with other community members. Others visit Congress and the United Nations, like Dr. Wakur Uddin of Arakan Rohingya Union, a professor and Rohingya leader based in Pennsylvania. There are also independent bloggers and other professionals (Rohingya Blogger and Rohingya Vision) who serve their struggling communities and raise the visibility of the Rohingya, as well as crucial allies at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Open Society Foundations, U.S. Campaign for Burma

and Burma Task Force USA. But funds are lacking; the U.S. Campaign closed its doors in late 2015 because financial support began to dry up after it began to focus more on the rights of the Rohingya Muslims.

For Rohingya (and Syrian and other refugees), the Muslim American community can help refugee centers provide English-language courses and other volunteer-run training. The community has many skills to share and is a vital asset.

True leadership is service. True leadership is the face of the speaker who weeps for his people, not himself. Service is the young activist who does not forget the women who remain in prison. These stories and photographs give personal faces to the pain of the Rohingya. Help is needed. We can include refugees, not only in hopes and prayers, but also in weekly expenses and political vision. But compassion is not about creating objects for charity or pity; the original meaning of the word is “feeling what the other is feeling.” To forget compassion and neglect human solidarity would truly be to live in “a state of loss.”

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Recently arrived Rohingya refugees protest at the United Nations in October 2015, calling for justice for their people.