

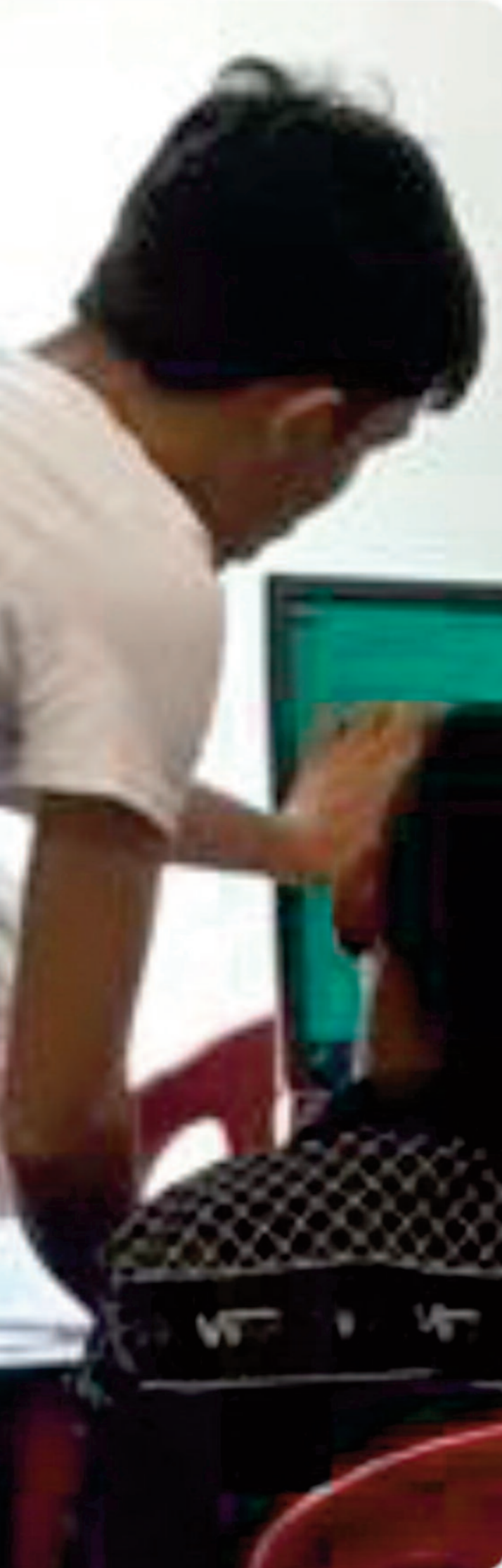
Supporting Refugees in Penang

in the time of COVID19



**Affirming the power of refugee leadership and community networks
Affirming the positives of collaboration**

**A Report from
Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign
and ASPIRE Penang
June 2020**



In Penang, there are

18,660 officially registered refugees (UNHCR figure as at end March 2020)
Around 30% are women.
There are around 5,000 children.
The split is roughly 30:70 between island and mainland.
There are possibly a few thousand more waiting registration.

Around **80%** are **Rohingya**
the rest are other ethnic minorities from Myanmar (including Chin and Burmese-Muslims)
and a small number from other countries.

3,200+ households
and at least **8,000** single refugees (mainly men, inc. unregistered)



When the COVID19 pandemic began to impact on Malaysia early in 2020, it was immediately clear that refugees were **especially vulnerable**. This included being vulnerable to major challenges relating to basic income, as well as to information.

The challenge with regard to information needs included the fact that a significant number of refugees, not least among the Rohingya population in Penang, have limited literacy. This meant that there was an urgency to produce materials in simple, clear graphic style and using verbal (voice file) forms.

The challenge with regard to basic income was simply that when the Malaysian government announced the first Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 17th, **the vast majority of refugees were locked out of any income-earning opportunities**. It was obvious that they and their families were going to be quickly desperately short of money.

Although on March 27 the government announced an economic package to support people and businesses through the time of the MCO, refugees were not included. It was left to the refugee community and other voluntary groups to respond, if the refugee families and individuals were to survive.

This is the story of the response in Penang.

It is a story which affirms the power of refugee leadership and strong networks. It is also a story that affirms the benefits of collaboration, of working together, supporting each other. It is a story that is still going on.

In Penang,

with the hard work of the Penang refugee community,
2,283 families and 742 individuals were reached

directly by Aspire Penang/Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign

*If we add in the wonderful work done by other groups and individuals, as described too in the following pages, we estimate over **3,200 refugee families** were reached and **over 1,500 refugee single persons**.*

A huge thank you to all who have supported the work.

Thank you.

A refugee is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.”
(UNHCR definition)

A refugee is someone who cannot go home without fear of reprisal.



BACKGROUND

In Malaysia, the federal government's policy on refugees since 1975 has been based on the principle that refugees in this country are here only temporarily, are 'in transit', pending resettlement to a third country.

As a result, the Malaysian government has never given any rights or legal status to refugees. Instead, the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has been invited to take responsibility for refugees. This includes the verification and registration of anyone seeking asylum, and the arrangement of resettlement.

But the numbers of places offered by third countries have not kept pace with the numbers of refugees in Malaysia. This has meant that there are many thousands of refugees who have been living in Malaysia for many years, some for longer than twenty years. They do so without any status. This means for example that they have no right to work and therefore have to work 'illegally', without protection, and without redress if they are cheated by employers or agents. (They have to work to survive.)

Children remain without access to mainstream education, meaning a whole generation of children is being allowed to grow up with the majority of them having no education at all.

Access to healthcare is dependent on the refugees being able to afford the foreigner's rates and they may face harassment and/or detention. Many are scared to go to clinics because of this.

As of March 2020, there are some 179,520 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR Malaysia. The vast majority of these are fleeing from Burma/Myanmar, comprising Rohingya, Chin, Burmese Muslim, Karen, Kachin, Shan, Mon and women, men and children from other ethnic minorities. There are also refugees from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Palestine and elsewhere.

These refugees live in limbo land: facing an uncertain present and a hugely uncertain future.

Few have any assets or savings to fall back on; most live hand to mouth, depending on unsecure work and always vulnerable to harassment and extortion.





8 IMPORTANT STEPS TO HAND HYGIENE

Regular handwashing, before and after touching a surface or contact with people is the best way to remove germs. Washing hands prevents illnesses and spread of infections to others.

Follow these 8 effective steps when washing hands.

RESTRICTION OF MOVEMENT ORDER

IMPLEMENTED UNDER THE PREVENTION & CONTROL OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES ACT 1988 & THE POLICE ACT 1967

IN EFFECT FROM MARCH 18 - 31

PROHIBITS:

- The movement of persons & mass gatherings e.g. religious, sports, social & cultural
- All places of worship must close & halt activities including the Muslim Friday prayer
- All business premises except supermarkets, public markets, sundry & convenience shops must close
- The operation of nurseries, government &
- Malaysia's from going overseas
- Those returning from overseas must undergo a medical examination & self-quarantine for 14 days
- Foreign tourists/visitors banned from entering the country
- The operation of non-essential public & private



Information Needs

Once it was clear that Malaysia was not going to escape the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for clear information for refugee and migrant communities became urgent.

In Penang, in early March, we called for a meeting of some of the groups in the Penang Working Group, including some refugee leaders, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) and International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC).

There and then we collectively identified the sort of information needed.

With key input provided by all groups including good specialist advice from MSF, we quickly produced briefing sheets for community leaders and school teachers, and voice files in various languages (including Rohingya and Burmese).

These were then disseminated through our various social media networks, on March 11. We also shared with UNHCR, and with other NGO networks across Malaysia and the region.

We also shared key advice to schools through our Penang Working Group and other networks, on March 15.

This response was testimony to the power of collaboration. The great collective working was and is a product of a long commitment from many groups to working together in Penang.

It was also testament to the strong refugee leadership and networks in Penang, which again is the product of committed work over many years. Not only could these networks get information to significant numbers quickly and effectively, a very important first step in combatting COVID19. They were also immediately at work beginning to identify potential household needs.

With information dissemination processes in place, the updating of information was relatively straightforward. Subsequent information updates were provided in cooperation with UNHCR, other groups and NGOs in Penang and nationwide, as well as from sources like the World Health Organisation (WHO).



Economic Hardship

On 13 March, the Prime Minister of Malaysia announced a nationwide Movement Control Order (MCO), intended to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 through closing down activities where there was free mixing of people. This included most workplaces. The MCO was to be enforced a few days later.

This announcement triggered an immediate awareness that this was likely to cause major economic hardship for thousands of women, children, youth and men in the refugee and migrant communities in Penang.

It was anticipated that the initial two-week announcement was likely to be the forerunner for a much longer lock-down period. This turned out to be the case, with renewals by a further two weeks, until 14 April, and then again, until 12 May, and then again till June 9th (Conditional MCO). Again, each renewal meant extended hardship.

Immediately the first MCO was announced, Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign/ASPIRE Penang and other groups in Penang started planning for the anticipated hardships that refugees would inevitably be facing.

This was made more urgent when the various packages announced by the government to support the more vulnerable did not include refugees or migrants*.

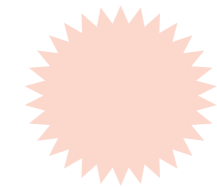
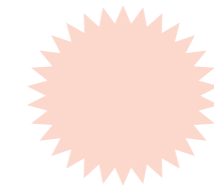
**It can be noted that although this Report focusses on the refugee community, we did also reach out to migrant workers, though less systematically.*



Planning Response /Action

The planning and actions happened on a number of levels, pretty much simultaneously.

- 1 The identification of needs in the refugee community, which was carried out by our strong refugee community network established over many years of work.
- 2 The consolidation of how the process of collaboration between groups including members of the Penang Working Group could best be achieved.
- 3 The lobby of federal and state authorities and agencies, asking that they make at least some allocation to ensure refugee and migrant communities survive the lockdown, and avoid starvation.
- 4 Fund raising to allow support to be delivered by us and others.





1

Identifying Needs through the Community

Coordinated by our two refugee community workers, the first initiative of Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign/ASPIRE Penang was to ask refugee leaders in different locations within our network across Penang to identify those families in their areas who were most at risk and would be the most urgently in need of assistance.

Together we made a chart by location which estimated total families and then those most at risk.

This quickly formed the basis for distribution of assistance throughout the extended MCO/CMCO periods.

The huge advantage of refugee networks and leaders is simply that they know their communities and know how to approach them.

Subsequent events showed how effective and comprehensive their efforts have been.

Choice of assistance

At the same time, there was discussion both with the community leaders and with persons in the community about the sort of assistance to be provided.

Where food parcels are the 'traditional' form of assistance, it was realised that the organisation of sorting and distributing food parcels was more complicated for our refugee network, especially in the light of movement restrictions.

People in the community were also indicating cash was preferable, simply because it gave families and individuals more autonomy. It was also sometimes the case that food parcels contained items that the families either already had or did not use.

So for us, most of our distribution has been a cash assistance (sadly, minimal) although there were times when we helped or organised food parcel distribution.



2 Proactive Coordination

The immediate awareness of the challenge of supporting some 20,000 persons (women, children, teenagers, men) through COVID19 times, made it imperative that whatever resources were likely to be available should be common knowledge (shared amongst groups) and every effort made to avoid duplication.

No one was going to be able to do it on their own.

Early on, the Penang Working Group shared the potential hardships likely to develop because of MCO, and we asked all those who were ready to respond to pool responses and locations, so that as a coordinated a response as possible could be achieved. Emails were circulated to different groups with a list of locations, numbers of families in each of these locations, who had been reached and when, and plans to visit locations were shared. An invitation was extended for anyone providing assistance to similarly share information.

We also from an early stage notified UNHCR of what we were doing in Penang. An email was sent on March 23 which outlined four possible national scenarios which might impact the capacity of refugee households and individuals to cope with the lockdown. The email indicated our planning and hopes in Penang.

Regular communication followed, and UNHCR set up a WhatsApp Coordinating Group in Penang on April 11, as it did for all states. This was a very positive move.

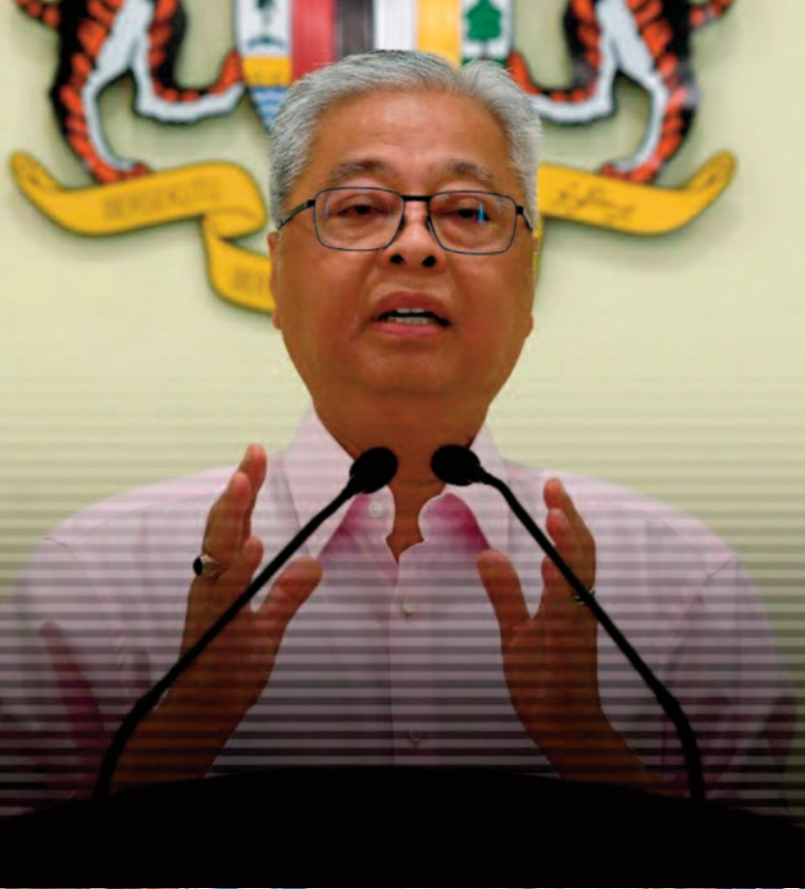
In Penang, this group has included Medecins Sans Frontieres, Malaysia Relief Agency, Global Development Association, Caremongers Penang, Mercy Malaysia, Tzu Chi, ourselves and others.

This was accompanied by an effort to devise a shared Google Form which all assistance providers could share, detailing what assistance had been provided. A further form allowed anyone to refer persons in need, and designated area coordinators would then pick these up and attend to them. Caremongers Penang were key in doing this and this system was able especially to help coordinate assistance efforts in the south of Penang island.

At best, these initiatives provided an immediate way of checking if others had reached certain locations or people, as well as a way of sharing proactive planning.

UNHCR also linked the work in Penang to its regular information updates on national initiatives, circulated to its various partners.





3 *Notifying Authorities*

At the same time, the Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign/ASPIRE Penang were concerned from the beginning to notify the authorities that the situation following the MCO was of major concern.

We argued (together with many other groups in Malaysia) that it was not sustainable to expect the refugee community and/or the voluntary sector to carry major responsibility for the survival of refugee and migrant communities in Malaysia in the time of COVID19.

We were one voice urging the federal government to make the necessary provisions, to extend the packages of support announced for Malaysian citizens, so that no one in Malaysia would be left behind, and no one allowed to starve.

We argued that the exclusion of refugees and migrant workers from the government response to the COVID-19 situation risked causing a major humanitarian crisis.

We pointed out that most of the persons and households in these groups were left suddenly without any access to income (workplaces closed down) and had little in way of reserve, with many of them already in debt. We wondered why the government chose to leave them out of official programmes, meaning that it was up to refugee and migrant communities either to look after themselves (with minimum resources to do that) or rely on civil society and other groups for support.

We still maintain that it is not realistic to expect these voluntary groups to properly sustain so many people over any extended period of time.



Note:

The federal government have paid a minimum of RM1,600 to all Malaysian families and RM800 for Malaysian single persons to sustain them through the MCO period. This has been supplemented by food assistance and other help.

If we apply this to just to refugee households and single people in Penang (not including migrant workers) then at a minimum we would be talking about RM1,600 x 3000 and RM800 x 8000, making a total of RM11,200,000 (over ELEVEN MILLION Ringgit).

Of course none of us have been able to afford anything like this.

We include this observation just to note how differently we treat refugees and migrants and how apparently unconcerned about our thinking and expectation on what we expect refugees and migrants to survive.



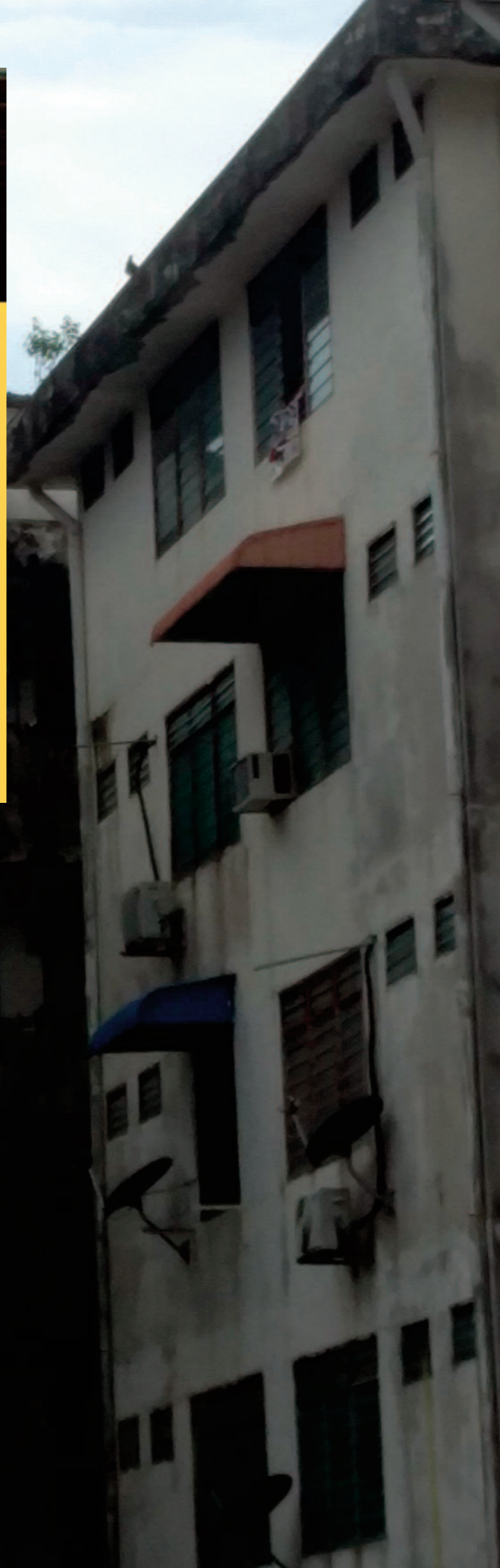
STOP THE SPREAD
SPREAD KINDNESS INSTEAD

COVID-19 AID FOR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

RM80 - TWO WEEKS WORTH OF
NECESSITIES FOR A HOUSEHOLD

CIMB BANK ACC-8007517729
PERSATUAN KOMUNITI BERDIKARI

KINDLY EMAIL THE BANK-IN RECORD TO
PENANGSTOPTRAFFICKING@GMAIL.COM



4

Raising Money

Almost immediately after the announcement of the MCO, people were contacting us to offer donations. At the same time groups nationally were quick to start fund-raising initiatives. This formed the beginning of our own response: donations from existing supporters supplemented by some allocation from other fund raising-groups like FFM Grocery Delivery (Emergency Relief) allowed us to start planning outreach to communities.

When it became clear that federal or other official agencies were not going to offer support to migrant and refugee communities, and that there was not enough capacity in other groups working in Penang to adequately meet the needs of all refugee households, the Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign/ASPIRE Penang launched a fund-raising on April 2nd.

The response was immediate and very encouraging. Within two weeks we had raised some RM32,000 from an e-flyer which added to money raised through our regular supporters. We had raised over RM50,000 by April 14.

Meantime we had been keeping the Penang State government informed of what we doing and alerting them to the possible challenges that refugees and migrants might well face over extended MCO periods.

The response from the State government was sympathetic. On April 5 there was indication that RM100,000 may be allocated to support our efforts, and at a press conference on April 14, the Chief Minister confirmed this support.

This was extremely welcome and allowed us to really plan a comprehensive outreach across Penang. With MCO restricting movements of our refugee team, we concentrated our own efforts on the mainland and meantime worked closely with groups active on the island, including Caremongers Penang and members of the Penang Working Group.



Outreach by April 14

On April 14, we were able to report that we were working with UNHCR and their main partner Malaysian Relief Agency; Medecins Sans Frontieres who had kept their clinic open and were supporting a number of families in need; Global Development Association and Caremongering Penang who were both particularly active on the island; Persatuan Jaringan Global Islam Masa Depan (JREC) and other refugee learning centre operators who were supporting families of their pupils and more; smaller groups donating food parcels; and later Mercy Malaysia, Tzu Chi and others.

The collective effort of all these groups, including ourselves through our refugee workers and networks, would have meant that over 2,500 households and more than 1,000 individuals would have been reached by the third week of April.

It was an impressive effort but there was still much work to be done. Most families and individuals had been reached with either a cash hand-out of between RM50 and RM100 or a food pack again costing anywhere between RM30 and RM100. This met very immediate needs, but as MCOs were extended, most families needed to be re-visited, and those families and individuals not yet reached needed to be identified.





More Groups active

As time went on, more groups joined in providing assistance to refugees and migrants. One result was that it became more challenging to coordinate delivery, since many of these groups found it easier to 'do their own thing'.

But at least the resources available to those in need had grown, and it is hopefully true to say that very few refugee households were left to starve in this time of MCOs.

This is thanks to the wonderful efforts of so many refugee and migrant leaders, and of the many wonderful supportive organisations, volunteers, donors, and individuals.

This includes the very welcome and appreciated support from the Penang State Government.

Linking

Meantime we kept in touch with what was happening elsewhere in Malaysia, and were also able to respond to referrals for Penang coming from such groups as Sahabat Wanita, Tenagnita and Asylum Access.

Some of the active Groups

Amongst the various groups active in providing assistance in Penang have been:

Malaysia Relief Agency, who covered Kepala Batas, Tasik Glugor, Sungai Dua, and Bukit Mertajam on the mainland and Gelugor and Bukit Jambul on the island); **Medecins Sans Frontieres** and **Tzu Chi**, both of whom have been supporting individual families with particular needs; **Global Development Association** and **Caremongers Penang**, who have been particularly active on the island and also provided foodpacks to Seberang Jaya, Bagan Dalam, Bukit Mertajam, Penaga, Jalan Baru and Bukit Tengah, Simpang Empat, Bagan Ajam, Permatang Pauh, Kampung Benggali, and the Perai area on the mainland; **Tabung Bantuan Kemanusiaan Rohingya**, active especially in the Perai area; **Mercy Malaysia**; **Parti Sosialis Malaysia**; **Penang Office of Human Development (POHD)**; and many local organisations (including youth groups and faith-based groups) providing help in their own way.

Many of the refugee learning centres continued to support the families of the children attending their Centre.

In the background UNHCR has always been lending a supporting hand, including helping consolidate coordination and passing on information and referrals as appropriate..



There has been an onslaught of hate speech directed at Rohingya refugees by groups of fundamentalist Malays. This has increased dramatically in the last few days, spurred by increasingly biased reporting in the media painting a picture of the Covid-19 infection being caused by foreigners.

Aside bombarding the comments sections of news articles and Facebook pages with ugly, deeply xenophobic, and hateful comments against the Rohingya people, they have also started several petitions.

The below is one of them. Can you go to the Petition, and mark it as Inappropriate/Hate Speech, please?



SECURE.AVAAZ.ORG

Say no to rohinnya

Gov malaysia tidak perlu tunduk pada desakan NGo sepat...

Challenges

Lack of resources

The huge challenge, and a continuing one, is simply that we have not had enough resources to properly support refugee households and single persons.

Whilst collectively we hopefully have been able to get the majority of people through the time of Covid19 so far, just, we are aware that some needs have not been met adequately.

This particularly relates to **the needs of women** and also **the needs of those families with young babies**. Providing adequate necessary sanitary provisions and the special needs of having young babies was too often outside our financial capabilities. Being able in the future to address this may be one takeaway topic for discussion.

We need to emphasise that needs still exist. People and families still face major challenges relating to lack of income and how to provide food, medicines and pay the rent.

Again we ask the federal government to make necessary provision to ensure no one is left behind in Malaysia and everyone is able to have sufficient resources to survive with dignity through this pandemic.

Xenophobia

Xenophobia raised its ugly head during this time. A concerted social media campaign of hate was based on the usual lies, distortions and prejudice. Few if any of the present government did anything to condemn it. Some lent their explicit or tacit support.

The lies included the claim that all refugees are paid RM35 a day by UNHCR; obviously false but still being propagated! And of course the xenophobes peddled the accusation that refugees are in Malaysia simply to steal jobs and cultures, with no reference to the atrocities and genocide from which refugees are fleeing.

It is a sad fact that xenophobic propaganda seems to generate significant support, in Malaysia as in the rest of the world. For those of us who find it degrading and dehumanising, we can only try to fight the lies with facts, to encourage a better understanding of the world we live in and the reasons why people may up in countries not their own, and to encourage a vision which unites rather than divides, and is based on love rather than hate.

Exaggerations

One consequence of the lack of resources is that some people in the community understandably started looking for any avenue through which they could get help. This led sometimes to 'duplicate requests' and to situations where people either denied receiving help or exaggerated the urgency of their situation in order to maximise their perceived chances of getting more.

All this is understandable in a situation where the help being given by those offering assistance was/is not much more than minimal.

Competition

One slightly distracting feature was the way that some individuals entered into the arena of providing assistance not from a collaborative but from a competitive mindset. Some apparently want(ed) to be THE champion, which apparently meant that the denigration of others providing assistance was part of the agenda. Of course social media is an easy vehicle for spreading distortions and misinformation about what help is being given by whom to who.

These are probably and sadly all just inevitable parts of the landscape: most of us just get on with what we are doing in the best way we can.

Examples of distribution by location/families/allocation

No	Location	Families	Singles	Visits	Total Spent (RM)
1	Kepala Batas inc. Kampung Aman	90	0	One (other groups active)	4500
2	Penaga+ Kuala Kota Muda	86	63	Twice	6875
3	Tasik Glugor	34	3	9/4	1850
4	Kampung Benggali	81	50	Three times	8450
5	Bagan Jermal /Sg Puyu/ Mak Mandin	34	14	Twice	4750
6	Ujang Batu	68	44	Multiple	7550
7	Kampung Perlis	60	32	Multiple	7425
8	Bagan Dalam	119	61	Multiple	14400
9	Pacific Megamall area	62	2	Twice	3100
10	Seberang Jaya	150	0	Twice (others active)	6500
11	Perai area	192	10	Twice (many others active)	11150
12	Jalan Baru area	373	0	Once (others active)	6300
13	Alma Taman Permata	113	24	Once	6250
14	Taman Alma Ria	0	150	Once	2375
15	Macang Bubok	39	14	Once (others active)	2300
16	Bukit Mertajam	177	30	multiple	10375
17	Bukit Tengah area	170	0	multiple	5254
18	Bandar Putra Batam	7	40	once	1400
19	Nibong Tebal (Sungai Aceh)	18	10	once	2300
20	Taman Jawi Jaya	28	9	once	2090
21	Island: Timur Laut	175	0	multiple	14580
22	Island: Assorted referrals	20	30	most twice	2695

PSHTC/ASPIRE Penang concentrated on the mainland (Seberang Perai). For the island, we have offered financial support to those groups who have been assisting refugee and migrant households, as indicated in (21) above. These cover locations in Timur Laut and Barat Daya.



Summary of distribution

Our total fund-raising in connection to COVID19 assistance for Penang stood at RM198,297.03 as at 7th June. This included the support from the Penang State Government.

Our total expenditure on actual assistance directly provided to refugee households and individuals stood at RM196,564.25 on the same date.

This reached some 2,283 refugee families in many different locations in Penang, and some 742 single persons. The table opposite gives **examples of the locations** we covered, complete with numbers of families and individual refugees reached, and the amount spent. Most locations were visited at least twice by us. Some of these locations have also been the focus of assistance from other groups, as mentioned in an earlier page.

In addition to the list opposite we can add that we have reached refugees in Permatang Pauh; Jalan Samagagah; Sungai Dua; Bagan Ajam; Kampung Jawa; Taman Nagasari; Simpang Empat; and Permatang Tok Jaya. This all through our refugee networks.

Incidentally the Perai area listed in the table covers Kampung Manis, Taman Inderawasih, Kampung Main Road and Medan Senangin. Many groups have been active here as well as us.

This is true too for the Bukit Mertajam area: a wide location where our listing includes refugees reached in Kampung Paya Berapit, Tanah Liat, Megat Harun, Taman Ciku, Kampung Kebun Sireh, Desa Damai, and Kampung Aston.

In all locations, we have lists which recipients sign, and we have subsequent documentation keeping the necessary details of who we have reached, when we visited and what assistance was provided. In many locations we have photographs of the persons receiving assistance.

All of this was possible only because of the excellence of the leadership and networks within and across the communities.

We only hope that we do never have to do this again, but the signs are not so good. There are plenty of predictions of a second Covid19 wave, and that anyway a 'new normal' may include an increased antagonism towards migrants and refugees which will make their lives even more difficult than they already are.

Whatever it is, the work will go on.....





Looking ahead

Immediate need - how to sustain?

The first thing to say is that there are still immediate needs for many thousands of refugees in Penang.

As we have emphasised, the limited resources available to refugees and to voluntary organisations supporting them means that families and individuals have received support which has been very basic and very immediate.

There is no such thing as the level of guaranteed income of the sort made available to Malaysian families by the federal government. We have been providing cash help of either RM100, RM50 or RM25 (depending on size of family, repeating this in locations where we can). Others have been providing food packs the value of which normally is between RM28 to RM60.

Clearly, this quickly runs out and families are in need again.

We have been re-visiting areas, but unless the federal or state government steps in to help, we and other groups providing assistance face a very uncertain future in terms of being able to provide on-going immediate support to families and individuals. We need extra finance, but are not sure where it is coming from.

Many of the other groups are already 'winding down' or have stopped.

Testing for COVID19 and Rental

As well as the special needs faced by women and by families with babies and very young children, two further immediate needs emerging from the community are:

a) **Cost of testing for COVID19.** As the conditions for the MCO and CMCO are relaxed and some workplaces begin to open up, it is now the case that some refugees are being asked for a Covid19 test by would-be employers or agents. This seems to be arbitrary, but for many refugees the cost of the test, around RM350 minimum, is beyond their immediate reach.

b) **Rental:** Inevitably, the consequences of the lack of income available to households has affected the ability of many households to pay their rent. This is adding to the insecurity of refugee families and many are being threatened with eviction.

Information App

Getting appropriate information quickly to women, men, youth and children in the refugee community is important. We had already been partnering Heriot Watt University from the UK in developing a general information app with and for refugees in Penang. This was extended to an app that specifically addresses information related to COVID19 and its impact. It is a work in progress. You could look for it in Google/Apple stores, under the name RefugeeHelpVirus.





LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD

Employment/Income

If the (C)MCO is relaxed and businesses can get back to work, it remains to be seen how quickly and how many refugees (and migrants) will be re-absorbed into the workplaces.

We can anticipate that many especially smaller businesses will either need to down-size or cease trading altogether.

For others, it is uncertain if the situation will return to 'as previously' or whether a new hiring policy will be implemented.

At the same time, as mentioned on the previous page, refugees are already being asked by employers or agents to get a test for COVID19. Of course the refugee has to bear the cost: their lack of status in Malaysia means no agency recognises their right to claim the cost back. This cost can be at least RM350 or more (there are inevitably scams being run) and at this time is a cost many refugees simply cannot afford. It makes sense for the federal agencies to organise a testing process that makes sure all who need a test can afford one. Part of our battle against the pandemic.

In other words, the future remains highly precarious for refugee families and individuals (as for migrant workers) and there may well be extended need for some months to come.

Leave No One Behind

Malaysia is a signatory to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which stress the commitment to 'leave no one behind'. As many have argued over the years, including Khazanah, recognising refugees and giving them status in this country is a win-win situation. It will bring immediate economic benefits to this country; it will protect women, men and children who at the moment have no protection at all; and by doing so, will importantly contribute to Malaysia's battle against human trafficking and modern day slavery.

We will continue to add our voice to the lobby for positive change, based on a coherent national approach to human rights and labour migration as set out in the report by the Migrant Workers Right to Redress Coalition: **Towards a Comprehensive Policy on Labour Migration for Malaysia**. And we look forward to the speedy implementation of the recommendations of the Independent Committee on the Management of Foreign Workers, whose report was submitted to Cabinet some time ago.

Xenophobia and raids

There is considerable worry that the present government, specifically the Ministry of Home Affairs, will continue to target refugee and migrant communities.

The recent highly publicised raids have been completely counter-productive, making persons in these communities fearful and even more unlikely to present themselves for testing where the need arises. They also create a situation in the heavily overcrowded detention camps where Covid19 can flourish: there are already signs this is happening.

So how can the raids be justified on the basis that it is 'to control the spread of Covid19'?

Further, there has been little or no government condemnation of the vitriol and hatred that has been expressed recently by certain quarters against refugees and migrants in Malaysia; this is equally worrying.

Investing in refugee community structures and initiatives

The experience of COVID19 and the response as described in this report at least in Penang reminds us all of the power of community-based, community-driven actions which deliver for the community with the community by the community.

There are so many opportunities going forward for supporting community structures and community leadership, supporting initiatives which drive forward opportunities for women, teenagers, children and men in these communities. This is something so often found in statements by institutions, funding agencies and NGOs, but too often remains words on the page.

PSHTC/ASPIRE Penang continue to argue for a transformation in attitude and approach which commits to supporting refugee leadership and refugee-run initiatives.

The following two pages set out some of our programmes and ambitions. Our programmes and motivation are based on our **Core Principles**. We are very happy to respond to further enquiries and possibilities for future work together.

WHO WE ARE



The PENANG STOP HUMAN TRAFFICKING CAMPAIGN works holistically, linking human trafficking immediately to modern day slavery, and to the huge vulnerability of many groups to being trafficked or enslaved.

These groups importantly include refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers – women, men and children – who have little or no protection in Malaysia.

So we do two main things.

We collaborate with others to raise awareness about human trafficking, as well as bring specific information, experience and recommendations about human trafficking and modern day slavery to the attention of authorities and to policy makers and influencers.

And at the same time, a key part of the work of the Campaign is long-term work with refugee communities, and other vulnerable communities and stakeholders in Penang.

This work has been consolidated under ASPIRE Penang (see opposite).

All this is in the context of our Core Principles, which stress refugee empowerment and the need to challenge many existing assumptions and practices which consolidate marginalisation and dependency.

The Core Principles also emphasise the benefit of working collaboratively and respectfully with all others committed to the same goals. We try to make sure this is a part of our DNA, and to oppose fractures and divisions and people using vulnerable communities and associated issues to further their own private organisational or individual agendas.

Check out our website:
www.penangstoptrafficking.com



Aspire Penang

ASPIRE Penang consolidates the work that was started by the Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign with refugee communities in Penang. The work is community-based and community-involving, and is based on the principles of refugee empowerment and self-determination.

Key to the work are our two refugee community workers, three refugee teachers, a refugee football coach, refugee facilitators for our various classes, and an always-developing network of community leaders, parents and supporters.

The initiatives include the kindergarten Good Start Learning Centre, a unique refugee-run school catering to up to 75 children aged 4-6, giving opportunity to those who otherwise would have no access to pre-school learning.

ASPIRE Penang also supports computer classes and language classes for teenagers and adults; a football project run by teenage youth and a refugee coach; the development of digital information apps with and for the refugee community in Penang; community engagement, trainings and discussions on issues such as child marriage, employment, arrest and detention, and education; and community documentation to be used in advocacy.

Through our patient, consistent and long-term commitment, a network of some 30 refugee community leaders have come together across Penang as the Penang Refugee Network. Their voices and ideas have been heard at forums regionally, nationally and locally. These include at meetings of the Penang Working Group, which brings together NGOs, service providers, UNHCR and refugees in Penang to share and strategise on the key issues facing the community.

Check out our website for more information:
www.aspirepenang.org



The PENANG WORKING GROUP

gives meaning to the idea of collaboration and mutual sharing and support. Representatives from refugee communities sit together with persons from the various NGOs working on refugee issues in Penang, and with persons from UNHCR. Issues are shared, questions raised, and solutions proposed for common consideration and action.