**A REFUGEE’S JOURNEY TO A NEW COUNTRY**

**One humid night in summer, at the beginning of September in 2012, I was suddenly awakened by a commotion, loud voices and cries of “Help! Help!” Immediately I jumped up from my bed and rushed to the window to look outside my wooden two-storey house. I was horrified to see flames from a quickly spreading fire a kilometer away lighting up the darkened sky at the southern side of the village.**

**The whole night was like hell. Wearing only my pajamas, I stepped outside to see villagers – including the elderly, women carrying babies and toddlers, and children - wailing and running around in panic. The raging fire had devoured their homes: they had lost everything and they had nowhere to go, not even proper water supply or a change of clothes.**

**Nothing changed throughout the whole night. When the morning broke, I saw the military and the local Rakhines were carrying heavy guns and were well equipped with weapons. They were deliberately shooting Rohingya people, burning and bulldozing the rest of the houses in the villages. All the Rohingya villagers were kept in the paddy field under gunpoint and nobody was allowed to go out of the area. This lasted for the next two weeks. Not even the injured were allowed to leave. In such isolation, people quickly suffered very seriously with basic needs. The people were consuming the only dried rations that they had been able to carry with them. As many as two dozen people died from their injuries where they lay because of the lack of medical access. After about two weeks when the military finally left the area, the villagers then fled in every direction.**

**I was hiding in the nearby forest for almost three weeks, at a time when no one could be seen by the military or the local Rakhines because they would be killed. I was in fear of my life. I couldn’t see any way I could safely remain in Myanmar so, in search of a safer place, I decided to flee to Bangladesh as it was the only land I could reach at that time. After a few days of travel with some other fellow villagers, I reached there. I had left with only the clothes that I was wearing. Luckily I managed to find an old friend who was my primary school classmate. He provided me shelter in his makeshift lodging which was outside the designated and heavily overcrowded refugee camp. His place faced a constant threat of demolition by the local Bangladesh authorities. I too was facing constant fear of arrest and also of local attack because of the lack of any documentation and protection. As I couldn’t move freely, I was also facing many difficulties with basic necessities.**

**While I was in Myanmar my country of origin , I was not like other human beings. The Burmese Military government had taken away citizenship rights from the Rohingya in 1981, and so I had no status in the country where I was born and raised up. Both of my parents lived for generations enjoying full legal status as citizens, the same as other persons in Myanmar. They worked for the government and contributed fully to the nation. But then the ,military enacted the Citizenship law and everything changed for the Rohingya. Now people like me could not travel without seeking permission. I couldn’t get married if and when I wanted to and whom I wish to, without permission from the authorities. I couldn’t pursue my sttdies because my right to education did not exist. I couldn’t own or conduct any business like other people in Myanmar because as a Rohingya I had no rights and there were severe restrictions placed on my life in every sphere of activity. We were ‘non-citizens’. And in addition we were constantly under the threat of life and confiscation of property.**

**I was thinking about alternatives for a better future. Many people admonished me not to come to Malaysia because the journey to get there is so dangerous and the life in Malaysia is also unsafe. I was also hearing many stories of horrors, disappearances of untold numbers at sea, abuses and exploitation by the traffickers but I didn’t take it into any consideration as I didn’t have any hope and future in Bangladesh. I only have the option of ”do or die”. I asked help from my relatives to lend me some money to arrange an agent so that I can reach another new place with the hope of a better future and so I could support the wellbeing of my family. The traffickers in Bangladesh mostly target the Rohingya people who have fled the communal violence and the unbearable situation in Myanmar, because we have little choices. The traffickers become very rich.**

**During springtime when the waters are calmer before the monsoon rain, is the prime smuggling season. My friend had managed to find an agent for me from the refugee camp in Bangladesh. A few days later, one dark midnight, the smugglers took me to a small fishing village with some 70 other people. We boarded a small fishing boat, and after about two hours of journey, we approached a larger vessel and we all were transferred into it. Most of the people in the vessel were from Myanmar with some from Bangladesh.**

**On the vessel, I saw a lots of other people including pregnant women and small children. For nearly two weeks, we remained at sea as the vessel was collecting more passengers. The vessel was old, leaky and was also not big enough for so many people. Finally when the traffickers recruited enough people, about a thousand, the journey proceeded to Thailand**

**The hygiene conditions on the boat were very scary. There was only one toilet and people had to lineup to attend it. There were ten traffickers - five from Myanmar and another five from Thailand - on the boat. All were armed with guns and each one had a sword as well. Nobody was allowed to do any movement, only the traffickers could. The traffickers would beat anyone trying to walk anywhere on the boat. People couldn’t sit and sleep well for the whole journey. Food was very insufficient. In a day only a plate of rice in a plastic with a small water bottle were provided to a person. Due to the lack of movement and not enough food, day by day people were getting weaker physically and mentally. There were not any medical aids and when someone got sick he couldn’t get any medicine. As a result, five passengers passed away on the journey and the dead bodies were just thrown into the sea.**

**Fortunately, after ten days I arrived in a place at night in Thailand but I didn’t know the exact location. Upon arrival in Thailand, the traffickers divided people into groups. Each group contained fifty people. Different groups were taken to different places in the jungle, by walking. After about three hours of walking through the jungle, my group arrived in an open area inside the jungle. There were some makeshift coverings and under them were several people lying around, including babies and also some other of the traffickers’ people. Some were really in critical condition suffering beriberi and other diseases. The situation in the jungle was also the same as the situation on the boat in terms of food and hygiene and treatment. The worst thing in the traffickers’ camps was that the traffickers were beating the victims by using a hammer to those who couldn’t settle the ransoms set for their release. The traffickers had made people phone parents or relatives in Malaysia or any other placxe, to demand the money for release. Not everyone can pay it.**

**I was under the arrest of traffickers for eight days until my relatives from Malaysia paid the ransom. I witnessed myself on every day basis that at least three to four people died in the traffickers camps because of their mistreatment. When someone passed away, the dead body was taken away by the traffickers.**

**Finally, when my relatives paid the ransom for me to the counterpart agent in Malaysia then the traffickers’ agent brought me to the Malaysian border sometimes by walking and most of the time by riding car. I crossed the border into the Malaysian side at night by climbing a ladder and jumped into Malaysia with some thirty other people.**

**Upon my arrival in Malaysia, the agent handed me over to my relative. Then I started to look for a job on a daily basis. Most of the time I was rejected because I have no status here either. After one and half months, I did get job at a carwash. Many times I had to run away when I heard the authorities were going to conduct a raid. I was always in fear of arrest, extortion and detention by the authorities – a daily occurrence in the refugee community here. We have no protection because we have no status. When people talked about detention in Malaysia, I was crying and couldn’t sleep at night because of the fears of getting detained any time. I was wondering what sort of hope or future was in front of me in Malaysia, when my status was the same as it had been In Myanmar.**