

## **PRESENTATION BY YASMEEN FATIMAH, MEMBER OF BURMESE ROHINGYA COMMUNITY IN SYDNEY, AT NSW LAUNCH OF REFUGEE WEEK 2009**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am Yasmeen Fatimah representing the Burmese Rohingya community in Australia. I am very honoured and pleased to be here today celebrating a very meaningful day, especially for refugees and for people who are involved in helping refugees around the world. I would like to express my thanks to the Refugee Council of Australia for inviting me here and giving me an opportunity to share my experience as a refugee. Later I will tell you about the physical and emotional journey that I had endure to find freedom from fear and finally to find a place that I can call my home. Australia now is where I feel I belong.

Before I tell you about my journey I will be pleased to inform you about Rohingya people. Who are the Rohingya people? Where do they come from? Rohingyas are from Arakan State of Burma, bordering Bangladesh. Rohingyas are a Muslim minority, numbering approximately 1.5 million, facing continued persecution and the ethnic cleansing policy of the military regime in Burma. Also about 1.5 million Rohingyas have been living in exile in many countries all over the world. The Rohingyas in Burma continue to suffer from many restrictions and human rights violations. The Rohingyas' freedom of movement is severely restricted and right to education is harshly deprived. The Rohingyas have effectively been denied Burmese citizenship by the current SPDC military regime, although the previous democratically elected governments had recognised them as the citizens of Burma. They are also subjected to various forms of extortion and arbitrary taxation, land confiscation, forced eviction and house destruction and restrictions on marriage. Rohingyas continue to be used as forced labourers on roads and at military security camps.

That was a very brief introduction about Rohingya people. Now let's go back to my experience as a refugee. Being a refugee is the last thing that I would wish on anyone. It is a horrible and vulnerable life. Being a refugee means that you are not certain about your next day, even about the next hour of your life. That is what I have experienced.

I started my journey with my family – my parents and sibling – when I was just around 5 years old. We were with a group of people forced to leave our beloved village during the night. We walked barefoot to catch a boat which took us to the Bangladesh-Burma border. As a child I didn't understand what was happening. I couldn't understand why the journey was so hard. All I did understand was that I was hungry. When I said 'Mum I am hungry', I didn't realise that my mum and also other mothers were feeding the children all that they could and were going without themselves. I do remember that, on the way, one baby died because of sickness. It was a terrible moment. A baby was just sucking their mum's skinny thumbs instead of milk. It was a very challenging time for me as such a young child.

With all the hurdles and hardship we faced, we eventually made it to Bangladesh, where we 'lived' in a hut which was made from the leaves of a coconut tree. What I mean by live is that we just survived. We came to realise that we were in a worse place. Before, in Burma, we were being tortured by the military. Here we were being tortured by local people. Due to our vulnerable situation, the local people abused us. They took advantage of us, knowing that our parents would do any job, no matter how hard, just to feed their kids once a day. huuuuuh....I just want to forget this black time of my life. We stayed on the Bangladesh-Burma border for 7 years in a horrible and disgusting situation. We had no choice but to patient and put up with this vulnerable situation. I stayed there until I was around 12 years old. I did not get the chance to live like a child. My childhood was taken away. As the eldest in my family, I had to be the head of the family, as my father left us in search of a better and safer place for us.

My dad left us and went to Thailand then to Malaysia. Then afterwards, my mother, my siblings and I fled from Bangladesh to Malaysia by boat. Finally we ended up living on an island where the ship stopped. It was Borneo. The local people were very nice; they rescued us and helped us. We lived near the sea where we don't know anyone. It was a different language for us. We couldn't speak the language and found it hard to do anything. Finally, with the help of local people, we got to contact my father.

We were stranded in Malaysia for nearly 7 years. I grew up there, becoming a teenager. While it was a beautiful place, it was very hard for us because we were regarded as illegal immigrants and were worried every second of our lives. We were constantly afraid of Malaysian immigration. If my mum went to the market to buy food, we at home were worried that she might have been caught by immigration on her way. We were afraid that we would not see our mum anymore. She couldn't speak Malay. With the 'luck' that we had, we were never caught by the police. But we lived in very poor conditions. If we were sick, we couldn't afford to go to the doctor. We couldn't go to school. We could do nothing. It was just like a jail.

I still remember when my youngest sister saw her friend going to school. She grabbed my skirt and said to me: 'Kakak, I want to go to school.' My sister called me "kakak" which means sister in Malay. My tears just came out silently. I knew it is impossible for her to go to school. I just hugged her and told her that one day she would be able to go to school. Uhhhh, I experienced a lot of hard times in Malaysia – too many things to tell you now. But one moment I cannot forget is when my mother got thyroid problems and needed to have surgery .It was not possible for her to go hospital. They asked 3000 ringgit, which was a huge amount for us, enough money for us to survive for six months. Because of the money problem, my mum couldn't have her treatment there. She eventually had it here in Australia. Huhhh.

While were in Malaysia, my dad made it to Australia. Seven years after we first landed in Malaysia, he sponsored us to come here. It was the most wonderful moment in my life. Our family met our father again. I felt that I belonged somewhere now. I now had a country. Thank you, Australia. From the first day I arrived in Australia, I was happy. My siblings and I had the opportunity to go to school and pursued their study. Finally my little sister's dream to go to school came true.

This is my journey to find a place of safety, a place where I can belong. I started my journey when I was 5 and I reached Australia when I was 20 . It took me nearly 15 years to find a safer place, a better place for me. If I reflect again, I am happy now, but what about the millions of other refugees? I feel very sad for them. It is a privilege for me to be here in Australia. I am just so lucky to be here. The truth is that being a refugee is the most horrible thing in the world. I wish there were no more refugees in this world. I wish everyone on this planet could have their own country.

I would like to take opportunity to request the Australian Government and other governments of the world to do more to help refugees and to care for them with sincerity. I request that the Australian government increase its intake of refugees, especially the most vulnerable refugees including women at risk in the appalling camps in Bangladesh.

As for me now, I am doing my final year in a Bachelor of Science degree and hoping to get into pharmacy or education. My goal is to work towards a better life and, like everyone else, to have a happy family. I am also hoping I will be able to help my community in a leadership role and also be a role model among the multicultural community.

That is my story. I hope you enjoy your celebration of Refugee Week and thank you for listening.