

In Jakarta, refugees find new home

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From changing their religion to being an informal worker, refugees in Jakarta have gone through a melange of experiences in their quest to adapt to Indonesian culture while desperately waiting for their resettlement to arrive.

During his five-year wait in Indonesia, a transit nation for refugees waiting to be resettled in a third country, Samiullah Nouri from Afghanistan has lived in several areas across Greater Jakarta and met many people.

But the person he would always remember was an Indonesian woman in Puncak, Bogor, West Java, who helped him earn money to survive.

"She offered me a job in her bakery. I was taught how to make cake and bread," said the 32-year-old, who earned Rp 1 million (US\$74.5) a month doing a job he never had in his conflict-stricken home country.

Puncak is known for hosting visitors from Middle Eastern countries and even has an area called Little Arab.

"But when [the bakery owner] died last year, I lost [my job] and had to go back to the streets," he said, adding that he had been diagnosed with a liver disease.

Samiullah now lives next to the Jakarta Immigration Detention Center in Kalideres, West Jakarta, along with several other refugees who were denied entry to the center due to overcapacity.

The center, which was designed to house violators of Indonesia's immigration laws, has been crowded with refugee and asylum seekers because the city does not have sufficient shelters and community housing for them.

Another refugee from Afghanistan, Noor Ali Eftekhari, 24, converted to Christianity last year after living in Indonesia for around four years. He learned the religion from an Indonesian Christian who greatly helped him.

Noor was formerly a Shia Muslim, a branch widely shunned in Sunni-majority Indonesia.

"He's my brother; not a real brother of course, but he feels like one," he said, referring to the man who had helped him.

The refugees, most of whom come from Middle Eastern coun-

Despite no legal certainties, refugees adapt to Jakarta

Indonesia encourages refugees to go home

tries, have quickly adapted to the cultural differences in Jakarta, a melting pot of people from all over the country.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) encourages refugees to assimilate with the local culture and improve their skills so they could remain productive amid the shrinking chances of getting accepted in a third country.

The Indonesian government has been lauded by civil society groups for issuing Presidential Regulation No. 125/2016 on the management of refugees and asylum seekers. The regulation details protocols on how to treat refugees escaping life-threatening events in their homeland, ensuring that none are turned away from Indonesian shores.

The archipelago, however, is not a signatory of the United Nations' 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, meaning that it cannot be a destination country for refugees.

More than 6,000 refugees currently reside in Greater Jakarta, according to the UNHCR.

Agung Sampurno, spokesman for the Directorate General of Immigration, said while attempting to provide assistance as best as it could, the assimilation of refugees into Indonesian society was not among the office's main concerns.

"They come from different countries with different backgrounds. Who can guarantee that no harm can be done?" Agung said.

He added that President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's recent visit to several South and Central Asian countries, such as Bangladesh and Afghanistan, two countries from which most refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia come from, was part of a diplomatic effort to solve the refugee issue in the archipelago.

"They do not want to return because they feel threatened, but we must let them know that the situation in their countries of origin is continuously changing and getting safer," Agung said.