

## Malaysia's Aid to the Rohingya Community: A Historical Analysis

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Received: 18 July 2025      Accepted: 12 November 2025

### Abstract

The Rohingya ethnic group has been subjected to systemic oppression and human rights violations in Myanmar, which has forced them to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, including Malaysia. This paper aims to explore the role that Malaysia has played in supporting the Rohingya people during the 2000s, and the types of aid that Malaysia offered. Furthermore, this study investigates the domestic and international factors that shaped Malaysia's policy towards the Rohingya refugees. By utilising primary sources such as government reports and non-government data, supplemented by secondary literature, the study reveals Malaysia's multi-faceted approach in supporting the Rohingya. Malaysia has played the role of a host country, facilitated humanitarian missions to Myanmar and Bangladesh, and advocated for the Rohingya people before the international community. The findings show Malaysia's contributions were influenced by a combination of factors that include humanitarian, Islamic solidarity and strategic interests. However, its aid policy has often been conditioned by security and national interests. Even though Malaysia's aid efforts are symbolically and regionally significant, they failed to address the root causes of the Rohingya crisis. Consequently, Malaysia has become a temporary and reluctant host state, offering short term relief rather than long term solution. These findings provide insight into Malaysia's role in the Rohingya refugee crisis while reflecting the overall framework of its foreign policy, which is marked by a delicate balancing act between humanitarian ideals, Islamic solidarity, and national interest. By situating Malaysia's actions within this broader socio-political framework, this study contributes to a more nuanced and integrated understanding of regional refugee diplomacy.

Keywords: Malaysia's Role; Rohingya Crisis; Humanitarian Aid; National Interests; ASEAN

### Introduction

The Rohingya ethnic group is a Muslim community residing in Myanmar's Rakhine (Arakan) region. The community has long suffered systemic oppression from the Myanmar government. This issue is not new and has attracted international attention and visibility over the last few decades. The United Nations (UN) has even referred to the Rohingya as the "most persecuted minority in the world".<sup>1</sup> Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, worsening conditions in Myanmar have forced many Rohingyas to flee, either to other parts of Myanmar or to neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia, in search of safety and better opportunities for themselves and their families.

For decades, Malaysia has been one of the preferred destinations for Rohingya migrants and refugees escaping persecution in Myanmar. These individuals seek refuge for both economic and humanitarian reasons. Although Malaysia has yet to ratify international conventions related to refugees, it remains bound by fundamental human rights principles as a member of the international community. These include the UN Charter on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the UN Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle (2005), and customary international law concerning human rights. Hence, Malaysia has an implicit obligation to provide temporary refuge to Rohingya refugees until a more permanent and sustainable solution is reached. In line with this, Malaysia has positioned itself as a responsible global actor by extending aid to the Rohingya community. This article explores the dynamics of Malaysia's aid provision to the Rohingya, both domestically and internationally, over the past two decades. Specifically, it examines the types of aid Malaysia has provided to the Rohingya, and the interplay between domestic and external factors that have influenced its aid policies.

Although there was extensive research on the Rohingya crisis, not to mention on Malaysia's role, gaps remain in understanding the interplay between domestic and international factors shaping Malaysia's aid policies. Existing studies often focus either Malaysia's humanitarian missions or the domestic challenges of hosting Rohingya refugees. They seldom address the interconnectedness of these dimensions or their broader foreign policy implications. This article seeks to bridge that gap by providing a comprehensive historical and policy-oriented analysis of Malaysia's aid efforts, tracing their evolution over two decades and examining the underlying political, strategic, and humanitarian drivers. This paper aims to analyse whether Malaysia's aid represents a long-term humanitarian commitment or merely a pragmatic response shaped by domestic priorities and regional dynamics. In doing so, the article offers fresh insights into how Malaysia balances its humanitarian image, domestic constraints, and international expectations in responding to the Rohingya crisis.

This article is structured into three main parts. Firstly, an overview of the Rohingya crisis is given to provide a historical context. The types of aid provided by Malaysia is the focus of the second part, while the final section focuses on the key factors shaping Malaysia's attitude and the extent of aid extended to the Rohingya community.

## **Literature Review**

The Rohingya crisis stems from Myanmar's refusal to recognise the Rohingya as citizens under the 1982 Citizenship Act, which grants citizenship only to those who can trace their ancestry to 1823.<sup>2</sup> While the Rohingya claim indigenous status, this is contested by the Myanmar government, despite scholarly support for their historical presence.<sup>3</sup> The lack of citizenship has led to severe persecution, human rights violations, and forced displacement. Some scholars argue that these actions constitute state-sponsored atrocities, with some even classifying them as genocide.<sup>4</sup>

There are extensive studies conducted on the Rohingya and Malaysia's role towards them, particularly in the context of Malaysia as a host country and a humanitarian actor. Refugees in Malaysia face significant challenges, including legal uncertainties and social marginalisation, while the government struggles with managing their presence.<sup>5</sup> Some researchers emphasise the need for NGOs to play a larger role in improving public perceptions and facilitating integration.<sup>6</sup> These challenges are exacerbated by Malaysia not ratifying the 1951 Refugee Convention, which keeps them in a state of legal insecurity. Malaysia's participation in humanitarian missions in Rakhine State and Bangladesh has also been explored, with scholars highlighting logistical challenges and political constraints.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the mass media has played a role in shaping public discourse, influencing Malaysia's policy decisions on the issue.<sup>8</sup> Scholars also highlight the need for stronger international

and regional diplomatic efforts, particularly through ASEAN, to address the crisis. Malaysia and Indonesia, as Muslim-majority states, are expected to play a more significant role in advocating for Rohingya rights.<sup>9</sup>

However, existing literature presents differing views on Malaysia's motivations. Some literatures emphasise Islamic solidarity,<sup>10</sup> while others point to pragmatic considerations such as national security and strategic interests.<sup>11</sup> This study seeks to reconcile these perspectives by providing a more integrated framework, examining Malaysia's aid policies within a broader socio-political context.

Recent scholarship has expanded discussion on Malaysia's response to the Rohingya by examining various aspects of refugee life and state policy. Studies on education highlight the uneven quality of learning opportunities, exposing systemic resource shortages, weak institutional recognition, and cultural or gender-specific barriers, notably affecting Rohingya girls.<sup>12</sup> Research on public attitudes also reveals that anti-Rohingya sentiment has greatly intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, most particularly through the #SayNoToRohingya campaign, which reflected societal anxieties and influenced the state's reluctance to regularise refugee status.<sup>13</sup>

Other works have explored the roles of religion and security in shaping Malaysia's approach. Islamic institutions such as JAKIM and state religious departments have Islamic values to give moral weight and public acceptance of refugee aid despite the absence of formal recognition.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, studies of maritime enforcement reveal how the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) balanced restrictive practices like push-backs with humanitarian gestures such as distributing food and medical aid, showing how solidarity was consistently filtered through securitisation concerns.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, community-level research demonstrates how Rohingya refugees developed informal leadership and networks to fill gaps left by weak institutional support, illustrating a form of resilience that complements state and NGO initiatives.<sup>16</sup>

Although existing scholarship has deepened understanding of the Rohingya in Malaysia, most studies remain fragmented, focusing on discrete issues such as law, humanitarian aid, culture, or politics. These works diverge in interpretation; some highlight Islamic solidarity as the primary force behind aid, while others place more emphasis on security issues, pragmatic governance, or foreign policy considerations. What remains lacking is a comprehensive synthesis that situates Malaysia's refugee response within its broader socio-political and diplomatic framework. This article addresses that gap by examining whether Malaysia's engagement genuinely mitigates the Rohingya crisis or instead entrenches its role as a reluctant, temporary host. By adopting a historical and integrative lens, it contributes a more holistic understanding of Malaysia's evolving humanitarian diplomacy and refugee governance.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilising historical research methods to examine Malaysia's aid to the Rohingya community.

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include government documents, official statements, parliamentary debates, policy papers, and reports from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as MERCY Malaysia, and international bodies including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Secondary sources comprised scholarly articles, academic books, newspaper articles, and journalistic reports to provide historical and contextual depth.

No interviews were carried out for this research, and this decision is justified on two grounds. Firstly, the study prioritises policy-level and structural aspects of Malaysia's assistance, rather than individual narratives. Secondly, there is an abundance of documentary resources that already reflect both government and non-government viewpoints. Accordingly, the study relied on comprehensive document analysis, which included reviewing, comparing, and synthesising various sources to uncover patterns, recurring themes, contradictions, and historical changes in Malaysia's aid strategy.

The findings were categorised into three main themes: (1) the types of assistance provided by Malaysia, encompassing both material (such as humanitarian missions, healthcare services, and education initiatives) and non-material aid (such as diplomatic lobbying and advocacy for the Rohingya at regional and international forums); (2) the domestic and international factors shaping Malaysia's aid policies, including humanitarian considerations, Islamic solidarity, strategic interest, national security concerns, and public perception. It also explores Malaysia's use of political and diplomatic advocacy within ASEAN, the OIC, and the UN as part of its broader policy strategy; and (3) the evolution of Malaysia's policy towards the Rohingya over the past two decades, from its initial humanitarian stance to increasing restrictions in response to growing security concerns, economic pressures, and shifts in public sentiment.

### Tracing the History of the Rohingya Conflict

The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority residing on the west coast of Myanmar (formerly Burma), primarily in Rakhine State (historically known as Arakan). Their origins remain a highly contested issue, with differing narratives from the Rohingya and the Rakhine and Bamar communities.

The Rohingya assert that their lineage dates to mercenaries and traders who settled in Arakan as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century, even before the arrival of Islam in the region. Over time, they developed a distinct culture, language, and identity, particularly under the rule of the Mrauk U Dynasty (15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century), which they claim had significant Muslim influence.<sup>17</sup> However, the dynasty's collapse and the subsequent conquest of Arakan by the Burmese Empire in 1785 marked the end of Muslim political prominence. The Rohingya remained in the region and later became British subjects when Arakan was annexed by the British in 1826. During World War II, the British allegedly promised them an independent state in return for their support against the Japanese, but this promise was never fulfilled.<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, the Rakhine and Bamar people reject these claims. They argue that Islam was weakly established in Arakan, and that the Mrauk U Dynasty was predominantly Buddhist. They also assert that the Rohingya are Bengali migrants, or "Chittagonians," who arrived in 1826 under British colonial rule,<sup>19</sup> and had subsequently leveraged British patronage and their wartime loyalty to strengthen their position in Myanmar.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars generally agree that the Rohingya are a diverse ethnic group, consisting native Muslim Rakhines from earlier centuries and Muslim Bengalis who migrated during the British colonial period (1826–1948). With porous borders between Myanmar and Bengal, combined with employment opportunities, Muslim migrants arrived in great numbers to Rakhine. This rapid demographic shift in a predominantly Buddhist region caused growing tension and mistrust, which escalated after Myanmar's independence in 1948. These tensions culminated in an armed insurgency led by the Rohingya "Mujahids" against the newly formed government.<sup>21</sup>

The 1962 military coup deepened political instability and introduced an authoritarian regime bent on consolidating power through aggressive policies against the Rohingyas. In 1977, new citizenship laws reclassified the Rohingya as foreigners, making it increasingly difficult for those without documentation. The regime did not acknowledge the term "Rohingya," labelling them

instead as kalar or “Bengali,” a derogatory term that reinforced their portrayal as illegal migrants from Bangladesh.<sup>22</sup>

The plight of the Rohingya worsened with Myanmar military’s first large-scale “ethnic cleansing” campaign, known as Naga Min or Operation King Dragon, in 1978. This operation forced over 200,000 Rohingya to flee across the Naf River into Chittagong, Bangladesh. The situation further deteriorated in 1982 when a revision of the Citizenship Law formally excluded the Rohingya from citizenship unless they could prove ancestry dating back to 1823. The Rohingya have since been subjected to state-sanctioned oppression, including mass-scale human rights violations, forced displacement, and extreme violence. Documented atrocities include rape, murder, arbitrary detention, psychological and physical torture, and inhumane treatment in custody.<sup>23</sup>

From the 1980s to the 2000s, Myanmar’s military government reinforced nationalism through Theravada Buddhism to consolidate its power, further justifying the systemic oppression of the Rohingya. Inter-ethnic clashes between Buddhists and Muslims, combined with state sanctioned communal persecution in Rakhine State, led to repeated waves of Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia in 1991, 1992, 2012, 2015, 2016, and 2017.

### **The Rohingya in Malaysia: An Overview**

The history of Rohingya migration highlights Malaysia as a primary destination due to its geographical proximity, political stability, employment opportunities within a growing economy, and shared Islamic faith.<sup>24</sup> The latter has played a crucial role in encouraging Muslim migration to other Muslim-majority nations, as seen in cases like Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>25</sup>

Rohingya migration to Malaysia dates to the 1970s, coinciding with the influx of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia, both of which were experiencing internal conflicts. Between the 1970s and 1990s, Rohingya migrants were largely perceived as economic migrants seeking better opportunities, driven by both push factors in Myanmar and pull factors in Malaysia. Although most entered the country illegally via Thailand, they managed to integrate into local communities, often learning the Malay language and intermarrying with locals.<sup>26</sup> Their presence, being relatively small at the time, was not perceived as a significant threat despite their undocumented status, and their assimilation was largely seamless.

Accurately estimating the Rohingya population in Malaysia remains challenging due to their undocumented status under Malaysian law. However, rough estimates can be derived from various reputable sources. As shown in Table 1, Malaysia has continued to serve as a key destination and “hotspot” for Rohingya refugees, with their numbers steadily increasing over despite the country’s strict immigration laws and policies. The first significant influx occurred between 1991 and 1992, following a mass exodus of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh. This was triggered by a military junta operation aimed at expelling so-called “foreigners” and targeting Rohingya insurgents. By December 1993, approximately 5,100 Rohingya had been registered with UNHCR in Malaysia.<sup>27</sup>

Table 1: Estimated Rohingya Population in Malaysia

Year	Total	Source
1993	5100	UNHCR; The Equal Rights Trust
1999	5100	US Committee for Refugees (USCR)
2004	10,000 – 15,000	Tan Pok Suan
2009	16,662	UNHCR
2010	20,000 – 25,000	The Equal Rights Trust
2013	28,120	Letchamanan
Sept 2017	62,153	Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat
March 2023	107,430	Mixed Migration Centre

Sources: Data extracted from Tan, 2006, p. 112; Hema Letchamanan, 2013. “Myanmar’s Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia: Education and the Way Forward,” *Journal of International and Comparative Education* 2, no. 2, p. 89; The Equal Rights Trust. 2010. *Trapped in a Circle of Flight: Stateless Rohingya in Malaysia*. London: The Equal Rights Trust; UNHCR Malaysia (2023); Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat, Bil 57. 13 November 2017; Mixed Migration Centre, *Rohingya in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand: Refugee Protection, Human Smuggling and Trafficking*, 2023, p. 4.

Ongoing security threats in Myanmar continued to force the Rohingya to flee. By the end of 2005, around 11,000 Rohingya refugees had registered for temporary protection with UNHCR assistance in Kuala Lumpur. Between 2012 and 2017, renewed violence and riots in Rakhine State drove the numbers even higher. By April 2013, UNHCR had registered 28,120 Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, though the refugee community estimated that the unregistered population was similarly large.<sup>28</sup> Between 2012 and 2015 alone, an estimated 112,500 Rohingya risked their lives to reach Malaysia. By 2020, Malaysia was hosting approximately 150,000 UNHCR-registered Rohingya refugees—the largest number in ASEAN and the fourth highest globally,<sup>29</sup> with more than 46,000 of them below the age of 18.<sup>30</sup> As of June 2023, UNHCR recorded a total of 105,760 registered Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia.

### Malaysia’s Aid to the Rohingya Ethnic Group

Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. As a result, Malaysia lacks a formal legal, policy, and administrative framework specifically addressing refugee protection. As a result, the Rohingya and other asylum seekers in Malaysia are classified as “illegal immigrants” and are treated under the same laws as undocumented migrants. However, Malaysia is still held accountable by international agreements, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN’s Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle, which compels it to provide assistance to Rohingya refugees. Additionally, the non-refoulement principle also binds Malaysia under international law to not return Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, where they are at a risk of persecution, torture, inhumane treatment, and other severe human rights violations.<sup>31</sup>

The systemic persecution and discrimination faced by the Rohingya minority have left them highly vulnerable, requiring urgent international attention. Over the past two decades, Malaysia has played an active role as a responsible global actor by extending humanitarian assistance to the

Rohingya. This includes hosting a significant number of Rohingya refugees, dispatching humanitarian missions abroad, and advocating for their rights and protection on international platforms.

### ***Malaysia as a Refugee Hosting Country***

The arrival of Rohingya refugees since 1992 has placed Malaysia in a challenging position. While Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, it remains bound by other legal and human rights obligations that complicate any outright rejection of refugees. As a host country, Malaysia allows Rohingya refugees to stay temporarily, provided they register with the UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur. However, unregistered and undocumented Rohingya are classified as illegal immigrants and face the risk of being detained in immigration centres and forcibly deported.<sup>32</sup> At the moment, Malaysia is host to the highest number of Rohingya refugees in Southeast Asia and the second highest number worldwide, behind Bangladesh.<sup>33</sup>

Malaysia's policy has been to provide temporary shelter until the refugees can either return to Myanmar or be resettled in a third country. Unlike Bangladesh, where Rohingya refugees are housed in UNHCR-run camps, Malaysia has no designated refugee settlements. Instead, Rohingya communities are spread throughout the country's urban centres, with large populations in the Klang Valley, Johor, Malacca, and Penang. They live in cramped flats and work in restaurants or factories to get by.<sup>34</sup> To give the Rohingya some legal status, in 2006 the government implemented the Temporary Residence Permit (IMM13), that would have allowed them to work legally, send their children to government schools, and receive public services. However, the initiative was cancelled after 17 days due to corruption allegations, leaving Rohingya refugees in a legal limbo.<sup>35</sup>

To support the government and the UNHCR in the welfare of the refugees, Malaysia has allowed local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to operate and assist the Rohingya community. One notable organisation, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), began operations in Malaysia in 2015 in response to the growing refugee crisis. MSF established a permanent clinic in Butterworth, Penang, in 2018, where an estimated 900 to 1,000 patients receive treatment monthly. Additionally, mobile clinics operate weekly in partnership with the local NGO, A Call to Serve (ACTS), providing medical care to Rohingya refugees and other undocumented migrants, including those in immigration detention centres.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the medical and healthcare initiatives undertaken by the NGOs, Malaysian Islamic institutions also provided religious governance to Rohingya refugees through support for marriage registration, religious education, dakwah, and funeral management, thus showing how Islamic governance structures in the likes of JAKIM and the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) have become an alternative pathway to legitimacy and community support in the absence of a formal refugee recognition system.<sup>37</sup> For instance, JAIS issued guidelines to allow marriages for Rohingya couples with UNHCR cards, and mosques under its jurisdiction have facilitated burials for undocumented Rohingya. This reflects a distinctive Malaysian approach to humanitarianism, one that combines state reluctance to legalise refugee status with religious institutions that nonetheless provide moral recognition and limited protection.<sup>38</sup>

The Malaysian government has also allowed education for Rohingya children through privately run schools and educational programmes. While Malaysia has not signed any refugee-related convention or protocols, it ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1995, which upholds the civil, political, economic, social, health, and cultural rights of all minors under 18. Similarly, Malaysia ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2010 and has been a member of the Human Rights Council from 1993 to 2020.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia compounds Malaysia's obligation to

promote and protect human rights.<sup>40</sup> These commitments create a complex situation for Malaysia. While the government has expressed reluctance to formally recognise the rights and welfare of adult Rohingya refugees, it is nonetheless compelled to uphold the rights and well-being of Rohingya children under international and domestic legal frameworks.<sup>41</sup> This dual stance reflects the ongoing tension between Malaysia's humanitarian obligations and its restrictive policies on refugee recognition.

The ambivalent position was equally evident in parliamentary proceedings. During the Dewan Rakyat session on November 13, 2017, Minister from the Prime Minister's Department, Dato' Seri Dr. Shahidan bin Kassim, stated that the Malaysian government continued humanitarian aid and temporary shelter to the Rohingya did not, under Malaysian law, constitute recognition of their refugee status.<sup>42</sup> This position was consistently reiterated in subsequent parliamentary debates from 2017 to 2020, where Members of Parliament across the political divide bipartisanly acknowledged the country's limited capacity, yet called for continuous humanitarian assistance to safeguard not only Malaysia's long-standing reputation as champion of the global *ummah* but also Islamic solidarity, particularly through ASEAN channels. On September 8, 2020, Datin Mastura Mohd Yazid, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Special Functions), reminded the Dewan Negara in a session that the government could not offer permanent settlement, and instead the government pursued third-country resettlement or safe return. She emphasised the need for Malaysia to carefully strike a balance between humanitarian obligations and national security concerns, and between domestic legal frameworks and the rights of Malaysian citizens.<sup>43</sup> When taken as a whole, these apparently contradictory yet counter-intuitive rhetoric and stances demonstrate Malaysia's twin-pronged strategy, which is ethically and politically sensitive on one hand, but legally limiting, on the other, influenced by the interlocking forces of religious solidarity, regional diplomacy, and internal politics.

The duality is perhaps most visible in the education of Rohingya children, which has been largely informal as they are denied access to the formal education system. Under Malaysian immigration laws, refugees, including the Rohingya, are classified as illegal immigrants, preventing them from enrolling in government public schools.<sup>44</sup> In response, various organisations, including the UNHCR, NGOs, and local religious-based groups, have stepped in to provide alternative education through learning centres, community-based schools, and religious institutions (madrasahs). By 2017, the number of such centres grown from around 120 to nearly 148 nationwide, primarily located in the Klang Valley, Johor, and Penang.<sup>45</sup> These centres typically operated in small, flat-style houses with limited space, accommodating between 60 and 100 students per location. Many UNHCR-supported centres provide essential resources such as textbooks, teacher training, and salaries for teaching staff. Their curriculum often combines core subjects such as Mathematics, Malay, English, Science, Arabic, and the Rohingya mother tongue, religious education and vocational training. Beyond UNHCR-supported initiatives, local NGOs have also contributed; for instance, Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia (PERKIM) established a school in Lembah Jaya, Ampang, covering all expenses, including rent, accommodation, textbooks, and daily necessities for students. This initiative even led to the closure of two UNHCR-run schools, as students transferred to PERKIM's free-of-charge institutions, thus depicting both the demand for education and the fragmented but critical role of NGOs in filling gaps left by the state.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Humanitarian Aid Missions to Myanmar and Bangladesh***

Malaysia has played a crucial role in organising humanitarian aid missions to assist the Rohingya community, both in Rakhine State and in refugee camps in Bangladesh. The Rohingya have relied

almost entirely on humanitarian assistance for protection, food, water, shelter, and health care. In Bangladesh, they live in temporary shelters within highly congested camps, further exacerbating their vulnerability.

When the Rohingya crisis escalated in Myanmar in 2012, Malaysia intensified its humanitarian efforts by delivering aid, including food, clothing, and medical supplies, through the work of NGOs. "We hope that through this effort, the world will realize that Malaysia is a loving country," said then Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.<sup>47</sup> The Malaysian media widely praised these efforts, and between 2012 and 2016, one of the country's leading English-language newspapers, *The Star*, consistently framed Malaysia as a humanitarian saviour in its coverage.<sup>48</sup>

However, it was challenging sending humanitarian aid to Myanmar. A prior approval from the Myanmar government was needed, and this was no easy feat as the government remained deeply sceptical and wary of foreign intervention. Even when permission was granted, the success of any aid mission was contingent upon local cooperation and security conditions. A stark example of these challenges occurred in 2014, when a Malaysian humanitarian mission to Myanmar, organised by the Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organization (MAPIM), was forced to abort its efforts due to security threats. The mission faced strong opposition from Buddhist extremist groups in Rakhine State. In a particularly alarming incident, three Malaysian volunteers were besieged at their hotel in Rakhine for four hours by almost 100 extremists before local authorities intervened, and the volunteers returned to Malaysia without completing their mission.<sup>49</sup>

Malaysia also sent two large humanitarian aid missions in 2017 for the Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh, with Prime Minister Najib Razak pledging RM10 million for humanitarian and social rehabilitation projects during the Extraordinary Session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers on the Rohingya Situation in Kuala Lumpur on January 19, 2017, particularly focusing on education and health projects to improve conditions for Rohingya in Rakhine State.<sup>50</sup> This commitment led to the Food Flotilla for Myanmar campaign, launched by Kelab Putera 1Malaysia (iM4U) and MAPIM on February 3, 2017, with the Nautical Aliya ship carrying 1,500 tons of food and medical supplies for distribution in Myanmar and Bangladesh.<sup>51</sup> There were hurdles, however, such as Myanmar refusing to allow the ship to dock, but the flotilla ultimately delivered much-needed aid to Rohingya refugees.

Seven months later, in September 2017, Malaysia launched another aid initiative, *My Country Cares: Humanitarian Mission for Rohingya*, organised by iM4U in collaboration with key actors in the aviation industry, including Malaysia Airlines, MABkargo, Malindo Air, and Malaysia Airports Holdings Berhad (MAHB). Under this initiative, humanitarian goods were collected from several airport locations across Malaysia and transported them from Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) to Chittagong, Bangladesh. The aid supplies included food items such as biscuits, oats, and powdered milk, as well as essential hygiene products like sanitary pads, soap and towels. Medical services were also provided to Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. Another mission was undertaken in 2020, when two Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) A400M aircrafts delivered aid with 35 iM4U volunteers.<sup>52</sup> A national donation drive was mobilised through the Disaster Relief Fund to ensure ongoing assistance.

Malaysia also provided humanitarian healthcare assistance, with the Malaysian Medical Aid Association (Mercy Malaysia) providing medical services to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Mercy Malaysia operated static and mobile clinics in Rohingya camps, catering to an average of 600 patients daily at Dhaka Community Hospital, its partner in Bangladesh. Mobile clinics also served refugee settlements in Thangkhali and informal refugee camps in Kutupalong, focusing on shelter, food, water, sanitation, hygiene (WASH), and healthcare. In late 2017, the Malaysian government also set up the Medan Field Hospital in Ukhia, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, for RM3.5 million.<sup>53</sup>

During its operation, the facility treated more than 100,000 patients and performed over 3,500 surgeries, including over 900 high-risk operations.<sup>54</sup>

In January 2018, a special delegation of government officials, armed forces personnel, and UNDP Malaysia representatives, were sent to Cox's Bazar to assess the impact of the Malaysian humanitarian aid mission. Specifically, they needed to ensure that the Medan Hospital remained adequately equipped to handle medical challenges among the refugee population. Malaysia also collaborated with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in this mission, with both nations supplying critical medical resources.<sup>55</sup> The Medan Field Hospital was scheduled to remain open until December 2020 but closed in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite its closure, the hospital played an essential role in addressing the healthcare needs of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, leaving a lasting impact on the humanitarian response to the crisis. Its legacy served as a reminder of the importance of Malaysia's humanitarian leadership and its global credibility.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Political and Diplomatic Advocacy***

Malaysia has actively championed the Rohingya cause, advocating for their rights both domestically and internationally. Recognising that no single country can manage mass displacement alone,<sup>57</sup> Malaysia has leveraged diplomatic channels and regional cooperation to address the crisis. It has utilised its influence within global organisations, including the UN to highlight the plight of the Rohingya. Prime Minister Najib Razak sought international intervention through the UN, the International Criminal Court, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

At the OIC level, Malaysia pushed for a stronger commitment from Muslim-majority countries, warning that continued neglect of the Rohingya could lead to their infiltration, recruitment, and radicalisation by extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), posing a potential regional security threat.<sup>58</sup> Recognising this risk, Malaysia organised the OIC Extraordinary Summit in Kuala Lumpur in January 2017, attended by representatives from 42 OIC member states. The summit produced two key documents: the Resolution on the Situation of the Rohingya Muslim Minority in Myanmar and the Final Communiqué of the Extraordinary Session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers on the Situation of the Rohingya Muslim Minority in Myanmar. During this session, Malaysia and other OIC members called on Myanmar to take three urgent actions. First, to grant unrestricted access to humanitarian aid organisations. Second, to address the root causes of the crisis, including citizenship denial and violations of basic rights. Third, to ensure the safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees to their homeland.<sup>59</sup>

Malaysia's consistent advocacy gained recognition from the OIC, leading to the appointment of former Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar as the OIC's Special Envoy to Myanmar in 2017. Representing the OIC, he urged the UN to act against the alleged genocide of the Rohingya. However, Malaysia's call for unified action was met with resistance, as disagreements among OIC members hindered collective efforts. The lack of strong commitment from some Muslim nations drew criticism from media outlets like Al Jazeera, which highlighted the weak response of some OIC countries. While Malaysia remained a key advocate for the Rohingya, the overall OIC response remained fragmented, reflecting the broader diplomatic challenges of securing unified action.

Within Southeast Asia, Malaysia advocated for the Rohingya through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional bloc of ten countries. Before 2016, ASEAN's approach to Myanmar's Rohingya was primarily based on constructive engagement, emphasising trust-building rather than confrontation. Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, agreed to temporarily shelter Rohingya refugees following an emergency ASEAN meeting on May 20, 2015, in Kuala Lumpur,

balancing regional commitments with domestic concerns over illegal immigration. This approach reflected ASEAN's non-interference principle, which sought to maintain diplomatic stability among its members.<sup>60</sup>

However, after Myanmar's 2016 military crackdown on the Rohingya, Malaysia abandoned its cautious stance and took a more vocal position. It publicly condemned Myanmar's actions and urged Aung San Suu Kyi's government to grant citizenship, legal status, and housing to displaced Rohingya. Malaysia stressed that addressing the root causes of the crisis was essential to easing tensions and securing lasting peace in Rakhine State. This assertiveness triggered pushback from Naypyidaw, with Myanmar officials accusing Malaysia of interfering in its internal affairs following the pro-Rohingya rally in Kuala Lumpur. In response, on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, Wisma Putra issued a formal statement rejecting the accusation, stressing that the Rohingya issue was not merely Myanmar's domestic matter but a humanitarian crisis with direct security implications for Malaysia.<sup>61</sup>

This shift thus marked Malaysia's transition from "quiet diplomacy" to a more assertive and interventionist approach.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, this apparent shift was reflected in parliamentary debates, with Ministers citing the failure of "quiet diplomacy", while opposition MPs expressed concerns regarding the risk of isolation within ASEAN and strained bilateral relations *via-a-vis* Myanmar due to Malaysia's stronger rhetoric. In the Dewan Rakyat sitting of 26 November 2018, MPs accentuated this assertiveness by calling for ongoing public diplomacy, while pressing for Myanmar to face international courts, and even proposing the appointment of a humanitarian attaché at Malaysia's Embassy in Yangon.<sup>63</sup> Other debates noted a plausible intra-ASEAN divide regarding the Rohingya Question, with Malaysia and Indonesia taking consistently firm positions, while the other member states remained reluctant. To overcome this institutional bottleneck, ministers highlighted Malaysia's advocacy for repatriation through the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) Centre to ensure voluntary, safe, and dignified returns without ceding ground to UN-led interventions that might embarrass both Myanmar and ASEAN.<sup>64</sup>

Malaysia viewed the Rohingya crisis as a regional responsibility rather than an issue solely for Myanmar or the international community to handle.<sup>65</sup> Given ASEAN's population of 625 million, Malaysia believed that the organisation had the capacity to play a more active role in coordinating humanitarian aid to Rakhine State and investigating alleged atrocities against the Rohingya.<sup>66</sup> During the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Yangon on December 19, 2016, Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman proposed the formation of an independent task force, composed of prominent experts, to evaluate Myanmar's official statements on the crisis. The goal was to provide an objective assessment that could help ASEAN formulate long-term solutions, restore the Rohingya community's trust, and encourage their safe return to Myanmar. However, the proposal faced resistance from Myanmar and several ASEAN member states, who viewed it as a violation of ASEAN's non-interference policy, also known as the "ASEAN Way", which prioritises consensus-based decision-making and avoids direct intervention in a member state's internal affairs. Consequently, despite Malaysia's diplomatic push, ASEAN remained reluctant to take a stronger stance, limiting its ability to hold Myanmar accountable.<sup>67</sup>

By the early 2020s, Malaysia remained steadfast in its advocacy for the Rohingya, even openly challenging ASEAN over its approach. Many analysts criticised ASEAN as an ineffective regional bloc, arguing that its emphasis on consensus weakened its ability to respond decisively to the Myanmar crisis. In 2020, Foreign Minister Anifah Aman publicly distanced himself from ASEAN's official statement on Rakhine State, criticising it for failing to explicitly mention the Rohingya. Following the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting at the UN General Assembly in New York, he issued a separate statement condemning the official ASEAN Chairman's remarks as a "misrepresentation of reality."<sup>68</sup> ASEAN was also criticised for its inability to follow through on the Five-Point Consensus,

an agreement reached in Jakarta in April 2021, outlining steps for Myanmar's junta to move toward democracy.<sup>69</sup> Seeing ASEAN as ineffective, Malaysia was more assertive in 2022, and urged the rest of ASEAN to reconsider its Myanmar policy. Then Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah proposed "practical, pragmatic steps forward," emphasising that ASEAN should shift from a policy of "non-interference" to one of "non-indifference."<sup>70</sup>

### **Malaysia's Considerations in Providing Aid to the Rohingya**

Malaysia has played a crucial role in assisting the Rohingya, advocating for their rights, and pushing for international intervention. Over the past two decades, Malaysia has extended humanitarian aid, provided temporary refuge, and worked to increase global awareness of the Rohingya crisis. However, Malaysia's stance is shaped not only by humanitarian concerns but also by strategic, political, economic, and security considerations. Its evolving policy reflects shifting domestic realities, regional diplomacy, and the broader international response to the crisis.

The persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar has been widely condemned as a gross violation of human rights, and Malaysia has consistently called for international responsibility in addressing the crisis. Malaysian leaders have argued that the issue is not just a humanitarian emergency but a moral obligation for the global community. The plight of the Rohingya gained heightened attention in Malaysia in 2016 following renewed military crackdowns in Myanmar. The Malaysian government and public became increasingly vocal, identifying the crisis as not only a human rights violation but also an "insult to Islam." The December 2016 pro-Rohingya rally at Titiwangsa Mini Stadium in Kuala Lumpur, attended by Prime Minister Najib Razak and PAS leader Hadi Awang, reflected this sentiment. Addressing a crowd of 10,000, Najib declared, "I will not close my eyes and shut my mouth. We must defend [the Rohingyas] not just because they are of the same faith but because they are humans, their lives have value."<sup>71</sup> His participation was not just symbolic but a political move to strengthen Malaysia's standing as a defender of the global Muslim community (*ummah*).

In addition to domestic activism, Malaysia has leveraged its diplomatic influence to push for a stronger regional and international response. As a middle power, Malaysia has actively engaged with ASEAN, the OIC, and the UN, emphasising that the Rohingya crisis should be a collective responsibility rather than a burden on individual nations or international organisations. Malaysia has also positioned itself as a leading advocate within the Muslim world, reinforcing its image as a protector of oppressed Muslim communities, similar to its longstanding support for Palestine and peace efforts in southern Thailand and the southern Philippines.<sup>72</sup>

Despite Malaysia's humanitarian advocacy, its policies have also been consistently shaped by domestic realities. Concerns over national security, economic stability, and public sentiment have influenced its approach. The growing number of Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers has fuelled rising public anxiety, with many Malaysians viewing them as a social, economic, and security threat.<sup>73</sup> Media portrayals have reinforced these perceptions, frequently depicting Rohingya refugees as being involved in crime, running unlicensed businesses, and competing with locals for jobs.<sup>74</sup> Some were also seen as aggressive or defiant, fuelling further resentment. A notable incident occurred in 2020, when around 1,000 Rohingya staged a protest outside the Tabung Haji building in Kuala Lumpur, prompting intervention by the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU).<sup>75</sup> The perception that some Rohingya refugees demanded equal rights based on their economic contributions further provoked hostility from certain segments of society.<sup>76</sup> Security concerns escalated further when reports emerged of Rohingya individuals linked to militant activities and violent crimes, including the 2022-armed robbery case in Bayan Lepas, Penang. Although these incidents involved only a small fraction of the community, they reinforced negative stereotypes and justified stricter scrutiny of the Rohingya presence in Malaysia.<sup>77</sup>

These anxieties were not confined to society alone. At the policy level, ministers and MPs also framed the refugee issue as more than just a humanitarian concern, but one tied to social stability and national security.<sup>78</sup> This dual framing accentuated the tension between Malaysia's humanitarian impulses and its restrictive refugee policies.

In fact, even Islamic-based initiatives were not free from state control. The National Security Council (MKN), for example, cautioned JAKIM against extending overly generous forms of aid, warning that this could foster dependency and heighten security risks.<sup>79</sup> This tension illustrates how Malaysia's refugee governance has been filtered not only through public opinion and socio-economic pressures but also by the state's strategic calculations. On the one hand, the involvement of JAKIM and JAIS reinforced Malaysia's claim to Islamic solidarity and strengthened its humanitarian image abroad. Conversely, MKN's intervention revealed how such efforts were consistently shaped by securitisation concerns, reflecting the selective and pragmatic nature of Malaysia's humanitarianism.<sup>80</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified xenophobic sentiments, leading to a surge in anti-Rohingya rhetoric. As the Malaysian economy suffered from lockdowns, job losses, and financial strain, frustration over the presence of refugees grew. Social media became a platform for misinformation campaigns, with petitions circulating demanding the deportation of Rohingya refugees.<sup>81</sup> An in-depth analysis of Twitter discourse during this period revealed that the campaign "#SayNoToRohingya" heightened public animosity by depicting the community as ungrateful, demanding, and even threatening to national well-being. This online discourse did not merely reflect societal frustration but actively shaped it, narrowing the space for humanitarian sympathy and reinforcing state justifications for more stringent refugee policies.<sup>82</sup> The crisis also prompted a significant policy shift. At the 36<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in June 2020, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced that Malaysia would no longer accept Rohingya refugees, citing national security concerns and public health risks amid the pandemic.<sup>83</sup>

These security-driven measures were not confined to land. The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened Malaysia's contradictions, exposing how fragile humanitarian commitments became under domestic pressure. At sea, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) was tasked with operationalising the balance between aid and deterrence. As Aizat Khairi, Afrizal Tjoetra and Phaison Da-Oh observe, officers sometimes provided food, water, and medical care to stranded refugees, but in most cases pushed boats back to prevent landings. Shaped by National Security Council directives, these practices embodied humanitarian gestures filtered through security logics, projecting Islamic solidarity abroad while avoiding long-term responsibility at home.<sup>84</sup>

In line with this restrictive stance, Malaysia intensified border security in 2020, rejecting 27 boats carrying Rohingya refugees between May and June and conducting mass detentions of undocumented migrants in areas identified as COVID-19 clusters.<sup>85</sup> It also ceased registering asylum seekers with UNHCR and began negotiating their repatriation to Myanmar, despite serious human rights concerns. These measures reflected the pragmatic considerations behind Malaysia's approach. While it has played a key role in advocating for the Rohingya internationally, domestic pressures have made indefinite support for the refugees politically and economically unsustainable. Policymakers increasingly argued that Malaysia's contribution should focus on external aid to Bangladesh or Rakhine, or on diplomatic efforts for a political solution, rather than permanent integration at home.<sup>86</sup>

This perspective aligns with ASEAN's cautious approach, which prioritises non-interference and conflict resolution through consensus-building.<sup>87</sup> Despite Malaysia's calls for a stronger intervention, ASEAN's reluctance to take decisive action has limited Malaysia's ability to push for meaningful change. While Malaysia has challenged ASEAN's passivity, urging it to shift from "non-interference" to "non-indifference", internal disagreements within the regional bloc have hindered efforts to develop a collective solution to the crisis.

## Conclusion

The study indicates that although Malaysia has provided substantial assistance to the Rohingya, that support has not been sustainable over time. As a host nation, Malaysia has granted temporary asylum, offered basic education through learning centres, and guaranteed access to healthcare with the support of NGOs and UNHCR. Humanitarian initiatives, such as the 2017 Food Flotilla and the Medan Field Hospital in Cox's Bazar, further exemplified Malaysia's commitment to regional humanitarian leadership. On the diplomatic front, Malaysia has been one of the most vocal Muslim-majority nations in speaking out on the Rohingya issue at the UN, OIC, and ASEAN, and using that voice to call for greater international responsibility.

The findings show that internal political dynamics, socioeconomic difficulties and security concerns all have an impact on Malaysia's policies in addition to humanitarian ones. Parliamentary debates frequently highlight a dual-track position, showing compassion through temporary assistance, while refraining from granting official refugee status. Increased public hostility, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has further constrained Malaysia's readiness to provide long-term refuge for refugees.

All together, these results indicate that Malaysia's aid has reduced immediate suffering and enhanced its global reputation, yet it has failed to tackle the fundamental issues leading to displacement. Rather, Malaysia has made a name for itself as a temporary and hesitant host, balancing acts of humanitarian support with strategic and domestic priorities. Its greatest impact lies not in offering permanent refuge, but in shaping regional and international dialogue, calling for shared responsibility, and pressing for political solutions through ASEAN and the OIC.

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