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REFUGEE STORIES

# Refugee Week Ambassador: **Habiburahman**

**M**y full name is Habiburahman. But I'm well known as Habib. I'm a member of the Rohingya community, from Western Burma – also known as Myanmar. Since 1982, the Government has refused citizenship to us. We aren't allowed to say we are Rohingya or report what happens to us to the authorities. We are the unspeakable. I'm over 35 years old now and I've been stateless for my entire life.

## **Selling bread on the bridge**

I was 19 when I fled Burma. I'd been harassed, arrested, tortured and forced to work against my will. First, I crossed into Thailand via the Golden Triangle.

One day, in January 2000, I was selling bread packages and flowers on the bridge between Malaysia and Thailand, when I was called over by a Malaysian Border Force guard. I had to cross the border, to reach him. He asked me for my passport. I said, "No, I left it at home. I'm selling bread on the bridge."

He said, "No, you have come into our territory and you are illegal here." Border Force put me into a Malaysian detention centre for the first time.



Photo: Habiburahman

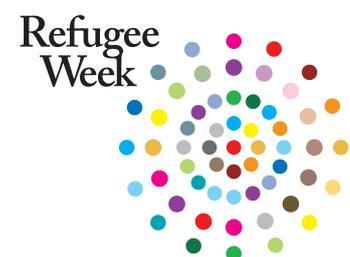
I spent a total of ten years in Malaysia – from 2000 until 2009. I worked with Rohingya organisations, Burmese political opposition groups and local NGOs. I was detained in detention centres five times and deported to the Thai border on three occasions.

## **A boat to Australia**

In 2009, I decided to go to Australia, by fishing boat. After three and half days of sailing, not knowing where we were heading, we were found by an Australian aircraft. Within an hour, the Australian Navy had saved us.

I spent 32 months in detention centres, before being released in Melbourne by August 2012.

**I'm a member of the Rohingya community, from Western Burma – also known as Myanmar.**



[www.refugeeweek.org.au](http://www.refugeeweek.org.au)

## Refugee Facts - Rohingya Refugee Crisis

- The outbreak of violence in Rakhine State Burma in August 2017 resulted in the exodus of approximately 725,000 refugees into neighbouring Bangladesh.
- The Rohingya are a stateless Muslim minority in Myanmar. The vast majority of Rohingya refugees are women and children, including newborn babies. Many others are elderly people requiring additional aid and protection.
- The Rohingya refugee crisis is the fastest growing crisis in the world.

Source: UNHCR and Refugee Council of Australia

## Founding the Australian Burmese Rohingya Organisation

When I arrived, there was only a few Rohingya people in Melbourne, but many more have come since. I wanted to raise the voices of our oppressed Rohingya people. So, I founded a Rohingya organisation, called the Australian Burmese Rohingya Organisation.

We began by engaging our people in English classes. Then, through Refugee Survivors and Ex-Detainees (RISE) and Monash Wholefoods, we provided food banks and support for accommodation. We've also cooperated with local NGOs, communities, activists and the Immigration Department, to ask for help to release our people from detention centres.

I work casually as a support service coordinator at (RISE) and serve as

Secretary of the Arakan Rohingya National Assembly (ARNA), an international Rohingya organisation based in the UK.

### 'First they erased our name'

In 2017, I published a book, *First They Erased Our Name*, which I co-wrote with French author Sophie Ansel. It's an updated version of my first book, *Taboo Burmese*, which I published in August 2012, while in detention. It's about my life and the story of my people.

The book was launched in the European Parliament in February 2018 and Maria Arena, a Belgian Member of the European Parliament, invited me to speak. I was unable to attend, because of my visa restrictions in Australia. If I leave the country, I won't be allowed to re-enter.



**Visit the Refugee Week website for recipe ideas for your 'Share a Meal, Share a Story' event.**

**[www.refugeeweek.org.au](http://www.refugeeweek.org.au)**



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