

# Refugee Week Ambassador: **Muzafar Ali**

## **Life in Afghanistan: UN and photography**

In Afghanistan, I worked for the United Nations for seven years – in a pretty precarious job. I talked and negotiated with local war lords, to convince them to give up their weapons and join the Afghan government.

This work took me to some of Afghanistan's most remote provinces. Everywhere I went, I took photos – of mountains, villages and local people. I wanted to capture a side of my country that had been hidden from the world. My images have been exhibited in many nations, including Afghanistan, Australia, US, Canada, Holland and South Korea.

## **Meeting a Taliban blockade**

In December 2012, I was driving with my family from Kandahar to Kabul, when the Taliban stopped us. I knew that, if someone recognised me from my work, we would be in great danger. My heart was in my mouth. I decided, on the spot, it was time to leave Afghanistan.



Photo:

The next day, we drove over the border to Pakistan – to Quetta, where I'd spent my childhood, as a refugee. But, a few days later – on 10 January 2013 – a bomb blast near our home killed more than 100 people and injured hundreds. We sold all our belongings and left for Indonesia, to seek asylum.

## **Indonesia: opening the first refugee school**

We lived in Cisarua, a district in West Java, around 70 kilometres south of Jakarta. Around 5,000 Hazara Afghans were there, who, like us, had fled the Taliban. When we arrived, everyone felt stuck and scared.

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Refugee  
Week



## Refugee Facts - Afghanistan

- There are approximately 2.6 million registered refugees from Afghanistan in 70 countries around the world.
- The majority (95%) are hosted by the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan.
- 53% of refugees come from Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria.
- 85% of the displaced people in the world are hosted in developing countries.
- Nearly one in 100 people worldwide have been pushed out of their homes due to war or political instability.

Source: UNHCR and Refugee Council of Australia

We didn't know what would happen to us or how long we'd be in limbo.

So, we started to have meetings. We decided that, instead of waiting for someone to help us, we would be active and solve some of our problems ourselves. For example, we could open a school, where our kids could learn, and our educated women could teach. That's how we started the first ever refugee school in Indonesia, the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre. Today, there are ten refugee schools in Indonesia, with 1,500 students.

We also decided to record our life in Cisarua – myself and another refugee, Khadim Dai who was 17 at the time. We worked with Australian filmmaker, Jolyon Hoff, who produced and directed our film, *The Staging Post*. It's about refugee resistance and agency – about what is possible and what refugees can do with the help of friendship.

## Australia: touring and studying

We were recognised as genuine refugees in 2013 and moved to Australia in 2015. In 2017, during Refugee Week, we launched *The Staging Post*, then we toured, screening the film more than 140 times in major cities and rural towns.

We wanted Australian communities to know that refugees aren't a threat. We are the victims of violence. We face the same threats that Australians do. We run away from Al Qaeda. We run away from Taliban. We run away from extremism. And we have agency. We have the ability to represent ourselves.

Today, I live in Adelaide with my family. I am co-manager of Cisaura Learning, a registered charity, with Jolyon Hoff. I'm also studying at the University of South Australia. When I finish, I hope to return to Indonesia to work with refugees.



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



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