

## REFUGEES IN INDONESIA TACKLE LIFE IN LIMBO THROUGH SCHOOL

**CISARUA, Indonesia:** Mahboob Jafari had barely seen the inside of a classroom, let alone taught in one, before he arrived in Indonesia as a refugee fleeing persecution in Afghanistan. The 19-year-old now teaches English at a pioneering school in the mountains south of Jakarta, where refugees from war-torn corners of the globe are banding together to educate their children. Founded by refugees, for refugees, this unique initiative is giving these children a chance to go to school while they wait years for resettlement to a new country.

"Years ago, when I came to Indonesia, I could not imagine that one day I would study in such a school like this one," 14-year-old Ali Riad from Iraq told AFP at the Refugee Learning Nest in Cisarua. "In the future I want to be a doctor and help people." The school, which marked its one-year anniversary in March, has become a source of immense pride among the migrant community in hilly Cisarua, once a key transit point on the largely closed people-smuggling route to Australia.

Its 58 students study in four brightly-painted classrooms, borrow books from a small library and play football at lunchtime at a basic pitch constructed by the parents. Nearly two dozen volunteers, all refugees themselves, teach mathematics, English, computer studies and art to students age six to 18. As the children depart in the afternoon, their parents arrive for English classes - a top priority for families awaiting resettlement to new homes in

countries like Canada, New Zealand, and the United States.

### Starting from Zero

There are 13,745 refugees and asylum seekers registered with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Indonesia, including nearly 2,700 children of school age. Although technically refugee children can attend Indonesian schools, very few do, UNHCR senior protection officer Jeffrey Savage told AFP. Language barriers, a lack of available spaces, registration problems and transport costs hinder enrolment.

The vast majority of refugee children in Indonesia go without school for years. Some are already far behind for their age, having spent a lifetime on the move. The pupils at Learning Nest are from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka. Abbas Hussaini, one of the school's founders, said the students were divided by age and ability but some "had no education before they came here". "They started at zero, from the beginning," he told AFP, gesturing to a group of students reciting the alphabet for their Afghan teacher.

For the teachers, volunteering helps alleviate the anxiety and boredom rife in refugee transit towns like Cisarua. Once registered with the UN refugee agency, there's little for asylum seekers to do but wait, unable to work or study. Jafari, who fled Afghanistan after his uncle was murdered by the Taliban, said the four months he spent idle in Cisarua before

volunteering "was like four years." "No job, nothing to do but play football," Jafari, from Afghanistan's persecuted Shiite Hazara minority, told AFP. "But this is an opportunity. Every refugee in here should use their time, because they're not going to get it back."

### Tip of the Iceberg

Other refugee communities around Cisarua are independently setting up their own education programs, with four schools now operating in the area. All are backed initially by a grant from a foreign charity, which covers rent for a school building and other basic costs. But beyond that, everything falls to the community. Parents pack lunches and maintain the school grounds, while volunteers prepare classes, manage finances and oversee administrative issues. "We think they're absolutely fantastic, and we encourage more of this," Savage told AFP.

The learning nest is already at capacity, Abbas said. Twelve students are on a waiting list as the school seeks much-needed donations for an additional classroom and learning materials. There are still far more refugee children at home than in schools. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), which assists refugees with housing and other essential needs, applauded community-run initiatives but stressed they only reached a handful of children in need. "The bigger picture is that there are thousands," IOM project manager Paul Dillon told AFP.

By its nature, the situation is continually

evolving. Abbas said one of his key co-founders was resettled to the United States just a month ago, but remains in touch via email. In July, another student will depart for Australia with her family. Sony Samandri, a 13-year Hazara refugee from Afghanistan, is another who will eventually leave for good. Her family has just received confirmation of their official refugee status from the UNHCR -

the first step towards resettlement.

It's a milestone for any family in Cisarua, but Samandri doesn't want to dwell on the prospect of leaving behind her classroom. "It's a great opportunity to show myself that I'm talented," Samandri said, before handing out platters of traditional food to celebrate the occasion. "I just hope that this school will always be here." —AFP



**CISARUA, Indonesia:** This picture taken on May 31, 2016 shows refugee children attending a pioneering school in West Java in the mountains south of Jakarta, where refugees from war-torn corners of the globe are banding together to educate their children. —AFP



**NAHA, Japan:** Protesters hold placards that read "Our anger has reached its limit" during a protest rally against the presence of US military bases on the southwestern island of Okinawa yesterday. —AP

## PROTESTERS RALLY AGAINST US MILITARY ON OKINAWA

ANGER OVER GIS' VIOLENT CRIMES

### US MILITARY FIGHTS TO CHECK CRIME STIGMA

**CHATAN, Japan:** Crimes by US troops based on the southern Japanese island of Okinawa have long angered residents, who for decades have claimed the American military was out of control. Statistics do not suggest a major problem with US military crime on the sub-tropical island. But the cases have fuelled persistent irritation at the intrusive American military presence on overcrowded Okinawa.

#### 'Stomach Turn'

"The overwhelming majority of American service members are law-abiding, upstanding members of this shared community," First Lieutenant George McArthur, a Marine public affairs officer, told AFP in a written response to questions. "There is not an Okinawan and an American way to view horrific crimes - only one view, and that is that we are all repulsed, angry and grieving together."

Troops have been instructed to stay away from the venue of yesterday's protest in the prefectural capital of Naha out of respect "and to prevent any possible conflict", McArthur said. Most American personnel approached by AFP were reluctant to speak about the situation. If they did, they stuck mostly to talking points. "We're doing everything we can to support the host nation," said a serviceman at an American-style off-base shopping mall in the beachside town of Chatan near the sprawling Kadena Air Force Base with his girlfriend.

Since the murder fewer troops

are visiting the outdoor mall - where shops, restaurants and bars have names like American Depot, Garage House, Camp Market and Outlet J - during evening hours, said Yoshie Morota, who runs a souvenir shop, though they still come during daytime. "The crime made my stomach turn," Morota, 60, said of the rape and murder. "But it doesn't mean that all the Americans are bad." She said around 30 service personnel picked up litter at a busy car parking area early Saturday at the complex and appeared to share a sense of grief with local residents.

In May the US military imposed a 30-day period of mourning, putting troops under curfew and banning the buying and consuming of alcohol off base. Last year criminal cases suspected to be linked to the US military represented just 0.8 percent of all cases in Okinawa, according to figures from the prefectural government, remaining under one percent for the third year in a row.

But critics say high-profile incidents are likely to keep happening as the actual number of troops coming to Okinawa is larger than statistics suggest, given they regularly rotate through and tend to stay for a limited period. "In reality, the number of perpetrators is huge," said Suzuyo Takazato, a female rights activist in Okinawa. "Even if only one serviceman out of 100 commits a crime, it means 10 out of 1,000, and 100 out of 10,000, do," she added. —AFP

**NAHA, Japan:** Tens of thousands rallied yesterday on the Japanese island of Okinawa to protest against the heavy US military presence and violent crimes by American personnel that have angered residents for decades. Demonstrators, claimed by organizers to total 65,000, gathered in the prefectural capital Naha, infuriated with the United States after a former Marine employed as a civilian base worker allegedly raped and murdered a young local woman in April. The case has intensified longstanding opposition to the bases - a key part of the US-Japan security alliance - on the subtropical southern outpost, a popular holiday destination for Japanese and increasingly for China and other Asian countries. Okinawa hosts about 26,000 US troops, more than half the total Washington keeps in all of Japan. The demonstration was held at an athletics park under scorching heat. Police did not have an immediate crowd estimate.

It began with a moment of silence for 20-year-old Rina Shimabukuro, the murder victim, and a message from her father. "Why my daughter, why was she killed?" said the message, read on his behalf. "My thoughts are the same as those of all the bereaved families that have met with suffering up to now." One protester carried a banner reading, "Murderer Marines. Out of Okinawa." Others read, "Our anger is past its limit" and "Pull out the Marines." Chihiro Uchimura, 71, said she was filled with sadness at Shimabukuro's death. "As long as there are US military bases this kind of incident will continue to happen," she said. Rally organizers in Okinawa said similar protests were held throughout the country.

#### 'Military Colony'

In Tokyo some 3,000 people gathered outside parliament for a rally with some signs reading "No base, no rape in Okinawa" and "Marines, go home". Hatsuko Aoki, one of the demonstrators, shouted through a microphone: "It's not just a problem for Okinawa. It is a problem for all of Japan." Protesters also want Washington and Tokyo to scrap plans to move a major US Marine base in the center of the island to pristine waters off

Okinawa's north coast. Okinawa's governor Takeshi Onaga, who attended the rally, is among those opposing the relocation. Instead he and others want Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, which sits in the middle of a crowded city, moved off the island altogether. But the anger of Onaga - who, like many on the main stage, wore black to signify mourning - was aimed more furiously at his own government than the US. "The government... must understand that Okinawa residents should not suffer any more from the burden of the bases," Onaga said. He has revoked approval for work on the facility, though Washington and Tokyo vow to push forward.

The idea of moving the base was sparked by the 1995 rape by three American personnel of a 12-year-old girl. The project was set to have been completed years ago but is still held up by local opposition and legal manoeuvring. "Japan is still a military colony of the United States," said teacher Noboru Kitano, 59, standing at an observation point overlooking the Futenma base, whose location is widely seen as a danger to nearby residents. "This base symbolizes that." At the end of World War II Okinawa was the site of a major battle between Japan and the US. A 27-year American occupation of the island followed. High-profile crimes have sparked large-scale protest rallies before on Okinawa. In 1995 tens of thousands rallied following the rape of the girl, prompting Washington to pledge to reduce its footprint on the island.

Nearly 100,000 people joined a protest in 2010 against the construction of the new base. US officials have grown increasingly concerned that the behavior of its troops on the island could jeopardize support among Japanese for the security relationship. They have imposed restrictions including on off-base alcohol consumption after an intoxicated sailor injured two locals while driving this month. President Barack Obama received the equivalent of a diplomatic tongue-lashing over the death of the 20-year-old rape victim from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during a visit to Japan last month. Obama called it a tragedy and expressed "deepest regrets". —AFP

## BOOKSELLER CONTEMPLATED SUICIDE IN CHINA DETENTION

**HONG KONG:** A Hong Kong bookseller whose disappearance sparked international concern said yesterday that he was so despondent during his detention by authorities in mainland China that he considered suicide. Lam Wing-kee told AFP that he thought about using his clothes to hang himself but couldn't find a way to do it in the small room where he was kept under constant watch for five months. Lam and four other men who worked for a Hong Kong publishing company disappeared last year, only to turn up months later in police custody on the mainland.

The publisher specialized in gossip books on China's communist leadership that were popular with Chinese visitors to Hong Kong but banned on the mainland. Their case raised concerns that Beijing is tightening its hold on the former British colony and undermining its considerable autonomy. Hong Kong retains rule of law and civil liberties such as freedom of speech unseen on the mainland under its status as a special Chinese administrative region that runs until 2047.

Lam, 60, returned to Hong Kong on Tuesday, following three other colleagues who had done so earlier. But he went off the script written for him by the Chinese authorities and spoke out Thursday at a news conference, giving a harrowing account of his ordeal, which unfolded when he paid a visit to the neighboring mainland city of Shenzhen in October. He was handcuffed and blindfolded, taken on a 13-hour train

ride and then confined to a small room for months while he was interrogated about the authors writing for the Mighty Current publishing company and the customers at its Causeway Bay Bookshop, which he managed.

Lam's story contradicted the version of events given by his colleagues to Chinese media and Hong Kong police, in which they said they traveled to the mainland voluntarily to aid in investigations or confess to crimes. Lam said he was forced to sign a confession admitting to illegally mailing books to mainland buyers. Lam said his interrogators were particularly interested in details about the writers behind two of the company's books.



Lam Wing-kee

One was about a Communist Party directive that urged officials to curb the spread of ideas such as press freedom, judicial independence, civil rights, civil society and the party's historic mistakes. It was based on a high-level internal circular leaked in 2013 that was seen as an attempt to attack Western democratic ideals and crush dissent to protect the party's rule. The other book was about the purported love lives of President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders.

"At the later stage of interrogation, I was questioned about information of authors, whether I knew these authors, the source of transcripts," Lam said. "I was asked to give detailed accounts. I didn't know much about the authors because I was there to sell books. I could only tell them the limited information I knew." —AP



**BANJARNEGARA, Indonesia:** Villagers and search and rescue team members carry out the body of a landslide victim in Gumelem Kulon village yesterday. —AFP

## 35 DEAD IN INDONESIAN FLOODS AND LANDSLIDES

**BANJARNEGARA, Indonesia:** Flash floods and landslides in central Indonesia have killed at least 35 people and destroyed dozens of homes, an official said yesterday, as searchers scoured devastated villages for survivors. Dozens were also missing or injured following torrential rain and widespread flooding on the main island of Java, where thousands of homes have been swamped. Areas prone to landslides across densely-populated Central Java province have been worst hit, with drivers swept off roads and dozens of homes completely destroyed by fast-moving walls of mud, rock and water.

TV footage showed villagers sitting on rooftops to escape the rising water, their cars and homes submerged in brown water. "The number of casualties from floods and landslides in Central Java is 35 people dead, 25 people missing and 14 injured," said disaster agency spokesman Sutopo Purwo Nugroho. The worst-hit area was Purworejo district on Java's south coast, where 19 people were killed, he said. In one incident in the district, nine people died as they tried to clear rubble from a blocked road. "Suddenly a huge landslide struck the cars and

people on the street. Nine bodies were retrieved," Sutopo said.

In Banjarnegara, where six people were killed in an avalanche of mud, residents were bracing for the prospect of further floods. Emergency crews were trying to clear roads of felled trees and rocks dumped by huge landslides, an AFP journalist at the scene said. Heavy lifting equipment was being used in the hunt for survivors in Purworejo but access to sites elsewhere was difficult, said Sutopo. Hundreds of rescuers were being forced to shift debris with their bare hands in some areas.

Evacuation centers, equipped with temporary shelters and kitchens, have been erected near the disaster zones. Sutopo said late yesterday that much of the flooding had subsided but he warned people to stay on alert as heavy rains could continue into the next day. Landslides are not uncommon in Indonesia, a vast tropical archipelago prone to natural disasters and torrential downpours. Last month 15 students holidaying at a popular tourist spot in western Indonesia were killed when a landslide swept through their camp ground. —AFP