

# **INDONESIA AND THE ROHINGYA CRISIS**

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## CONTENTS

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Indonesian Government Policy.....	1
	A. Response to the 2012 Violence.....	2
	B. More Boat People and More Aid.....	3
	C. Response to the October 2016 Violence .....	5
III.	Rohingya Crisis 2017: The Government Response .....	6
IV.	The Engaged Muslim Response.....	7
	A. The Islamist Response .....	8
	B. The Mainstream Islamic Organisations.....	9
V.	Latecomers to Humanitarian Relief.....	10
VI.	Deterioration of Relations with Aung San Suu Kyi .....	11
VII.	Signs of Extremist Interest .....	12
VIII.	Conclusions .....	13

## I. INTRODUCTION

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Indonesia has performed a delicate balancing act with respect to Myanmar and the Rohingya refugee crisis. Led by the Foreign Ministry, the government of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) has tried to demonstrate concern for the Rohingya without alienating a fellow member of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It has tried to pre-empt domestic calls for harsher measures against Myanmar by embracing some Islamist groups within a moderate government-sanctioned humanitarian coalition. It has tried to engage Myanmar on other issues, including counter-terrorism, to ensure that channels to the government were kept open even as relations with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi deteriorated in late 2017. By mid-2018, Indonesia's Rohingya policy was focused primarily on getting aid to the camps around Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh. But its newly secured position on the United Nations Security Council opened the possibility that it could work for a resolution of Rohingya refugee crisis and conflict in Rakhine State more generally. If it is to have any chance of success, however, all ministries and government agencies will have to take the same line.

Indonesia's relations with Myanmar are driven by its commitment to (ASEAN); its belief – especially during the government of Thein Sein – that its own democratic transition offered models for Myanmar; its desire to be a peace broker; its efforts to ensure access for humanitarian aid; and its need to respond to domestic pressure to defend fellow Muslims under attack.

The Jokowi government's response to the 2017 violence against ethnic Rohingya and resulting refugee outflow began with highly visible diplomacy on the part of Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi. As it became clear that Myanmar (and Aung San Suu Kyi in particular) did not welcome an activist Indonesian role, the Foreign Ministry focused on the provision of humanitarian assistance in partnership with a civil society coalition. The partnership, led by Indonesia's two largest Muslim organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, serves two main purposes. It keeps the government engaged on the Rohingya issue when it has little leverage to affect Myanmar's policies in Rakhine state, and it provides an outlet for Indonesian NGOs to put their anger at the violence against fellow Muslims to constructive use. It also appears to be a reasonably effective response to Islamist critics of President Jokowi, who at the height of the crisis in September 2017 were calling on his administration to do more.

Indonesian sympathy for the Rohingya does not thus far extend to a willingness to accept large numbers of those in Bangladesh for resettlement, despite the fact that public support could probably have been mobilised had the government been committed to such a gesture. While it has been reasonably hospitable to those who have landed accidentally in Aceh, usually en route to Malaysia, it is not a signatory to the U.N. Refugee Convention and has one of the lowest refugee populations in the region. This is largely because asylum-seekers, refugees and economic migrants who reach its shores are generally seeking to go to either Malaysia or Australia; Indonesia is not a destination of choice. With the Rohingya, some Indonesian officials are also wary of possible contact between Indonesian extremist groups and militants of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), though there has been no evidence thus far that ARSA has any interest. That said, some Islamist groups operating outside the government-sanctioned coalition are going on their own to the refugee camps in Bangladesh, and if there are routes and contacts set up, it may be a matter of time before more systematic communication between Indonesian extremists and ARSA – or more radical Rohingya networks in the camps – is established.

## II. INDONESIAN GOVERNMENT POLICY

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Indonesia's commitment to ASEAN means that it has generally subscribed to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member countries (Myanmar became a member

in 1997.) The exception was the pressure ASEAN exerted on Myanmar in 2008 after the devastating Cyclone Nargis to allow access for relief efforts. The result was the Tripartite Core Group, bringing together the Myanmar government, ASEAN and the U.N. that opened the way for the ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force and humanitarian agencies to help affected areas.<sup>1</sup>

There was never much chance that ASEAN would be allowed a similar level of involvement in response to periodic waves of violence against the Rohingya. From late 2008, when thousands of Rohingyas risked their lives by trying to sail to Malaysia on rickety boats, Myanmar made it clear that it would not allow ASEAN discussion of a solution.<sup>2</sup> On 14-15 April 2009, for example, Indonesia tried to use the Third Ministerial Conference of the so-called Bali Process to address the Rohingya plight.<sup>3</sup> The Myanmar delegation would only attend provided the Rohingya issue was excluded from the formal agenda, though the delegation head, Myanmar's national police commander, did meet with officials in an informal meeting where several called on Myanmar to provide full citizenship to an ethnic minority it insists are "illegal immigrants".<sup>4</sup> One positive outcome was that Indonesia agreed to set up camps in Aceh for boatloads of Rohingyas and Bangladeshis who drifted into Indonesian waters, sometimes as the result of pushbacks from Thailand.<sup>5</sup> In terms of granting more rights to the Rohingya, however, Myanmar did not budge, then or later.

#### A. Response to the 2012 Violence

In mid-2012, widespread violence between Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya erupted in Rakhine state, sparked by the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by Muslim men.<sup>6</sup> The sectarian violence resulted in dozens of fatalities and more than 120,000 people (mostly Rohingyas) displaced by the end of the year.<sup>7</sup> For the first time, violence in Myanmar generated serious domestic political pressure on an Indonesian government and the Yudhoyono administration was forced to respond.<sup>8</sup>

President Yudhoyono saw the crisis as giving Indonesia a chance to play a leadership role in various multilateral fora. On 4 August 2012, he wrote to Myanmar President Thein Sein urging Myanmar to uphold human rights, ensure transparency of information and allow international delegations to monitor the situation on the ground. He also made several speeches on national television, calling for a bigger role from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, ASEAN

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- 1 Key players then in overcoming the government's opposition to outside assistance were the late Surin Pitsuwan, then ASEAN Secretary-General; Singapore as ASEAN chair; and Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda. See International Crisis Group, "Burma/Myanmar After Nargis: Time to Normalise Aid Relations", Asia Report No.161, 20 October 2008; and Alex J. Bellamy, *East Asia's Other Miracle: Decline of Mass Atrocities*, Oxford, 2017, p. 175.
  - 2 The spectre of Thai authorities pushing Rohingya boats back to open sea with little food and drink became a regional scandal after some foreign tourists photographed the incident. See "Perilous Plight: Burma's Rohingya Take to the Seas", Human Rights Watch, 25 May 2009.
  - 3 The Bali Process was established in 2002 as a forum for more than 48 countries and international organisations to discuss and formulate practical measures to combat people-smuggling, trafficking, and related transnational crimes in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.
  - 4 "Bali Process Reinvigorated, Seeks Answers to Rohingya Crisis", [www.wikileaks.org](http://www.wikileaks.org), 17 April 2009 and "Bali Process to Address Rohingya Issue in July Ad Hoc Meeting", [www.wikileaks.org](http://www.wikileaks.org), 1 June 2009.
  - 5 "Indonesia Denies Migrants Asylum", [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com), 24 January 2009.
  - 6 International Crisis Group, "Myanmar: Storm Clouds on the Horizon", Asia Report N°238, November 2012.
  - 7 A recognised Muslim minority group, the Kaman, was targeted by Buddhist extremists in Rakhine state. In Karen state, two mosques were damaged by grenades thrown by an unknown assailant. See "Fleeing Muslims seek food, shelter after Myanmar sectarian chaos", [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com), 26 October 2012.; "Two mosques attacked in Karen State", [www.irrawaddy.com](http://www.irrawaddy.com), 29 October 2012.
  - 8 Robin Bush, "Religious politics and minority rights during the Yudhoyono presidency", in Edward Aspinall, Marcus Mietzner and Dirk Tommsa (eds), *The Yudhoyono Presidency: Indonesia's Decade of Stability and Stagnation*, Singapore, 2015. For example, the head of Front Pembela Islam, firebrand preacher Habib Rizieq Shihab, promised to send the FPI militia, Laskar Pembela Islam (LPI) to help "Muslim brothers" in Myanmar. See "Habib Rizieq Syihab: Solusi Kaum Muslimin Rohingya adalah Jihad!", [www.annah.com](http://www.annah.com), 1 May 2013.

and the U.N. to provide monitoring and humanitarian assistance in Rakhine state.<sup>9</sup> ASEAN was unable to come up with anything concrete, especially as it was caught up in a diplomatic crisis over the South China Sea in July 2012.<sup>10</sup> Indonesia then decided to raise the Rohingya issue at an OIC Extraordinary Summit on 14-15 August 2012. One result was the formation of the OIC Contact Group on the Rohingya Muslim Minority.

Meetings between Yudhoyono and President Thein Sein in late 2012 and early 2013 appeared to bring results: the Myanmar government agreed to a visit by an OIC delegation, including former Indonesia Vice President Jusuf Kalla in his capacity as the chairman of Indonesia Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia, PMI), to Rohingya refugee camps in Rakhine on 10 August 2012.<sup>11</sup> An OIC meeting with Thein Sein also produced an OIC-Myanmar Memorandum of Cooperation that would have established an OIC Humanitarian Office in Myanmar. Thein Sein abruptly cancelled those plans, however, after thousands of protesters led by Buddhist monks took to the streets in Yangon and Mandalay on 15 October 2012 to stop the opening of OIC office because “it is not in accordance with the people’s desires”.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Myanmar permitted Kalla’s PMI to facilitate humanitarian aid from Turkey and the OIC for post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation. On 4 October 2012 in Doha, OIC pledged US\$25 million for PMI to facilitate the construction of 4,000 houses for the victims of violence in Rakhine state.<sup>13</sup> The money never arrived, however, and the homes were never built. Instead, PMI distributed its own medical and relief assistance in conflict-affected areas of Rakhine.<sup>14</sup>

On 10 October 2012, the head of the Indonesian Parliament’s Commission I, Mahfudz Sidiq of the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS), officially summoned then Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa to explain Indonesia foreign policy on the Rohingya in front of national legislators.<sup>15</sup> Natalegawa outlined the government’s effort to persuade Myanmar to open humanitarian access for international actors and claimed success in getting the Myanmar authorities to accept an OIC visit to Rakhine. The then chairman of Muhammadiyah, Din Syamsudin, and Ma’ruf Amin, chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) both expressed disappointment with a policy that they regarded as too “soft” (*lembek*).<sup>16</sup>

### B. More Boat People and More Aid

By the time the next wave of Rohingya and Bangladeshi boat people arrived, Indonesia had a new president, Jokowi and a new foreign minister, Retno Marsudi. This time, approximately five boats carrying 1,800 Rohingyas and Bengalis, seen as victims of human trafficking and what

9 “Surati Presiden Myanmar, SBY Minta Konflik Rohingya dituntaskan”, [www.merdeka.com](http://www.merdeka.com), 4 August 2012.

10 For the first time in its history, ASEAN failed to issue a joint communique at its semi-annual summit on 13 July 2012 after the host country, Cambodia, at the behest of China, opposed the inclusion of a passage critical of China in the draft of the communique. IPAC interview with Dewi Fortuna Anwar, Jakarta, 19 April 2018.

11 President Yudhoyono met with Thein Sein in November 2012 during an ASEAN meeting and again during a state visit to Myanmar in April 2013. Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa had criticised OIC for being too harsh in its statements on the Rohingya issue. See “Indonesia Criticizes OIC on Rohingya”, [www.tempo.co](http://www.tempo.co), 26 September 2013. OIC Delegation Visits Rohingya Refugee Camps Amid Protests”, [www.rfa.org](http://www.rfa.org), 15 November 2013.; “Islamic Body to take Rohingya Issue to United Nations”, [www.dvb.no](http://www.dvb.no), 16 August 2012.

12 “President Yields to Protesters, Says No to OIC Office”, [Irrawaddy](http://Irrawaddy), 15 October 2012.

13 During OIC’s annual consultative meeting on humanitarian aid in Doha, on 6 October 2012, Jusuf Kalla asked the Conference to decide three things in resolving the Rohingya conflict, namely: finalising the action plan, collecting funds and establishing the system and organisation to execute the plan. In turn, the OIC agreed to collect US\$15 million from its member countries and US\$10 million from affiliated humanitarian institutions to fund humanitarian work in Rakhine.

14 “ICRC dan Palang Merah Myanmar Bantu Pengungsi di Rakhine, Myanmar”, [www.blogs.icrc.org](http://www.blogs.icrc.org), 14 January 2013.

15 See Satria, Novandre and Ahmad Jamaan, “Islam dan Kebijakan Luar Negeri Indonesia: Peran Indonesia dalam Konflik di Rakhine, Myanmar”, *Jurnal Transnasional*, Vol. 5 No. 1, July 2013.

16 “Din Syamsyuddin: Soal Rohingya, Saya Tak Mau Diadu-Adu”, [VOA Islam](http://VOA Islam), 14 May 2014.; “Muslim Rohingya Ditindas, Inilah Sikap MUI”, [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), 25 July 2012.

Human Rights Watch called a “dangerous game of human ping-pong”, arrived in Aceh between 10 and 20 May 2015.<sup>17</sup>

The Indonesian government did not grant asylum status to the Rohingyas but allowed them to stay temporarily with the assistance of UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Most of those with Bangladeshi citizenship were eventually repatriated.<sup>18</sup> The boat people gradually wore out their welcome in Aceh, with reports of conflicts in the camp and a few cases of reported sexual harassment.<sup>19</sup> Eventually, local police assisted groups of men to leave the camp at night, get to the beach and get a boat to try and reach Malaysia, which was their original destination.<sup>20</sup> Of 1,000 refugees registered by IOM as Rohingya, only 281, including 48 minors, were left in four camps in Aceh by April 2016.<sup>21</sup>

On 23 March 2016, Foreign Minister Retno, opening a meeting of the Bali Process, said it was clear that the process, set up 14 years before to address trafficking, was patently “not able to address sudden movements of irregular migration in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal.” She said a new mechanism was needed that would allow members to address the problem collectively, in a way that would “strike a balance between firm law enforcement, victim protection and humanitarian responses”. She stressed the need “to address the root causes to achieve durable solutions” without explicitly urging full citizenship for the Rohingya. It was a soft diplomatic job.<sup>22</sup>

Indonesian humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya in Myanmar increased under the Jokowi government with the government helping to broker private funding of US\$1.9 million to build a hospital in Mrauk-U township, Rakhine state, some 80 km north of Sittwe.<sup>23</sup> The idea had been proposed in July 2016, when the Islamic humanitarian organisation Medical Emergency Rescue Committee (MER-C) visited the Office of the Vice President to propose a joint program with PMI to build an Islamic hospital for Rohingya on land MER-C had purchased in Myanmar several years earlier. Kalla – now back again as vice-president – was supportive, provided that it would not be an “Islamic” hospital but a medical facility that would cater to all communities, including Rakhine Buddhists. Kalla then urged MER-C to work together with Indonesia Buddhist Federation (Perwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia, Walubi) to demonstrate Indonesian pluralism and tolerance between Muslim and Buddhist communities.<sup>24</sup> On 15 September 2017, Walubi donated US\$1 million to PMI and MER-C for the project, while other private donors covered the rest.<sup>25</sup> Kalla arranged permission from the Thein Sein government without going through the Indonesian foreign ministry. Construction started on 19 November 2017, with Minister Retno presiding over the ground-breaking ceremony.

On 22 February 2016, an Islamic humanitarian group affiliated with PKS called Pos Keadilan Peduli Umat (PKPU) started an emergency school construction program in the Rohingya displaced persons camp in Hla Ma Chae village, Sittwe. By January 2017, PKPU said it had

17 “Southeast Asia: End Rohingya Boat Pushbacks”, [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org), 14 May 2015. UNHCR estimated more than 25,000 people were smuggled by boat across the Bay of Bengal between January and March 2015. While many landed in other countries, UNHCR estimated at least 370 people perished at sea. “Bay of Bengal people-smuggling doubles in 2015: UNHCR”, [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com), 8 May 2015.; See Amnesty International, *Deadly journeys: The Refugee and Trafficking Crisis in Southeast Asia*, London, 2015.

18 “Pengungsi Bangladesh di Aceh Rela dipulangkan”, [www.rappler.com](http://www.rappler.com), 18 May 2015.

19 “Simpul Dendam Para Pengungsi Rohingya dan Bangladesh”, [www.kbr.id](http://www.kbr.id), 2 June 2015.; “Kamp Pengungsi Rohingya di Aceh Diguncang Isu Perkosaan”, [www.voaindonesia.com](http://www.voaindonesia.com), 30 September 2015.

20 IPAC conversations with local officials in Aceh at the time.

21 Antje Missbach, “Rohingya Refugees in Aceh, Indonesia: Hostile Hospitality”, *Middle East Institute*, 2 June 2016.

22 “Remarks by H.E. Retno L.P Marsudi at the Opening Session of the 6<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference of the Bali Process”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Indonesia, 23 March 2016.

23 “Wapres Fasilitasi Pertemuan Mer-C dan Walubi Bangun RS di Myanmar”, [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), 16 June 2016.

24 IPAC Interview with the head of Parisada Buddha Niciren Syosyu Indonesia (NSI) Mr. Suhadi, Jakarta, 15 November 2017.

25 “Walubi Sumbang USD 1 Juta Untuk Bangun Rumah Sakit di Rakhine”, [www.walubi.or.id](http://www.walubi.or.id), 15 September 2017.



finished two schools and was planning to construct four more facilities intended to accommodate children from any ethnic background.<sup>26</sup> In reality, because of the location in the midst of Rohingya camps, only Rohingyas attended.

### C. Response to the October 2016 Violence

On 9 October 2016, Rohingya militants from a new insurgency called in Arabic “Harakah al-Yakin” (Faith Movement), later more commonly known by its English name, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), attacked police posts, killing nine police, while the attackers escaped with dozens of firearms and thousands of bullets.<sup>27</sup> Ten days before the attack, ARSA was also reportedly responsible for the killing of two Rohingya informants in Maungdaw. The Myanmar military responded by a wave of violence against the Rohingya and by closing off access for humanitarian aid.<sup>28</sup>

The deteriorating situation in Rakhine state prompted President Jokowi to send Foreign Minister Retno meet with Myanmar State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at Nay Pyi Taw on 6 December 2016. Minister Retno expressed Indonesia’s concerns over violence against the Rohingya and its readiness to provide humanitarian relief for the victims of violence. The Rohingya issue was highlighted again two days later, at the tenth meeting of the Bali Democracy Forum. On 19 December, Minister Retno had a bilateral discussion with Aung San Suu Kyi on the sidelines of ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Retreat at Yangon, Myanmar.<sup>29</sup> Reportedly she convinced Myanmar to host the event to strengthen ASEAN unity and solidarity and particularly to reduce tensions between then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak and Suu Kyi.<sup>30</sup> Suu Kyi agreed to convene the meeting as an informal platform for members states to express their concern about the violence, with little expected in terms of results aside from Myanmar’s assurances that it would accept ASEAN humanitarian aid in Rakhine.<sup>31</sup> Shortly afterwards, on 29 December, President Jokowi and Vice President Jusuf Kalla held a ceremony at Halim Perdana Kusuma airport to release ten containers of humanitarian relief purchased by the government and destined for Sittwe, Rakhine.

It was at this point that Indonesia decided to make humanitarian relief through civil society the cornerstone of its diplomacy in Myanmar. This was partly out of necessity – the Indonesian government lacks a legal mechanism that would allow it to accept donations from humanitarian organisations or private donors that it can then send on to other countries in cash or in kind. This could change with the establishment of a much-discussed Indonesian bilateral aid agency, but that could be on the drawing board for some time to come. For the last decade and in some cases longer, many Indonesian NGOs, particularly those linked to Islamist organisations, have been providing aid outside Indonesia for religious outreach (*dakwah*), social welfare and disaster relief. One of the highest profile cases was the participation of Indonesian NGOs in the flotilla of aid to Gaza in 2010 led by the Turkish ship SS Marmara that was attacked by Israel. These organisations have sought government diplomatic support to ensure their efforts are accepted by the host country.<sup>32</sup>

26 “Sekolah bantuan Indonesia diharapkan jadi titian perdamaian di Myanmar”, [www.bbc.com/indonesia](http://www.bbc.com/indonesia), 11 January 2017.

27 International Crisis Group, “Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State”, Asia Report N°283, 15 December 2016.

28 Ibid.

29 Indonesia Ministry of Foreign Affairs Report on Rohingya Issue Development (*Perkembangan Isu Rohingya*).

30 In early December, PM Najib Razak accused Suu Kyi’s government of presiding over “genocide” in Rakhine and calling for international action. See also Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Indonesia, “Indonesia Ready to ‘Play Bridging Role’ with OIC in Taking Constructive Steps in Helping Improve Rakhine State Situation”, 19 January 2017.

31 “Myanmar rebuffs Malaysia on OIC as ASEAN warns on Rohingya naming issue”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 22 January 2017.

32 Several Islamic humanitarian organisations including MER-C, PKPU, ACT, Dompot Dhuafa and Rumah Zakat have been involved in sending relief to the Rohingya in Myanmar since 2012.

On 5 January 2017, Minister Retno invited representatives of eleven faith-based humanitarian groups to discuss collaboration between the government and civil society organisations in the provision of aid to Rakhine state.<sup>33</sup> The meeting resulted in the formation of an umbrella organisation, Indonesia Humanitarian Alliance (IHA). Its Indonesian name is Aliansi Kemanusiaan Indonesia (AKIM).<sup>34</sup> IHA developed a \$2 million program called “Humanitarian Assistance for Sustainable Community (HASCO)”, focusing on development of schools, traditional markets and hospitals activities in Rakhine state, particularly in Sittwe, Rathedaung, and Maungdaw.<sup>35</sup> The Foreign Ministry sponsored the visa applications of IHA staff and made regular site visits to the programs, underscoring that the alliance’s work was considered an integral part of Indonesian humanitarian diplomacy.

On 19 January 2017, Minister Retno submitted a proposal to the OIC during the Extraordinary Ministerial Conference in Kuala Lumpur, urging the conference respond to the latest phase of Rohingya conflict. “Only by taking constructive and inclusive steps can the OIC contribute to improving the situation in Rakhine State”, she said.<sup>36</sup> She then visited Myanmar from 20 to 22 January 2017 to formally deliver relief containers from Indonesia that had just arrived in Yangon and attend the inauguration of the two schools built by PKPU in Sittwe, Rakhine.<sup>37</sup>

### III. ROHINGYA CRISIS 2017: THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

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An attack by ARSA against 30 police posts and an army base on 25 August 2017 and the killings, rapes and burnings of entire villages by the Myanmar military and armed Buddhist vigilantes that followed produced one of the fastest and largest refugee exoduses in modern times. More than 700,000 Rohingyas were driven out of northern Rakhine into Bangladesh in a matter of weeks.

The violence led to unprecedented domestic pressure on the Indonesian government to respond, generated in part by genuine outrage but also in part by an Islamist coalition intent on bringing down the Jokowi government in 2019. The Jokowi government settled on a policy of humanitarian assistance, mostly in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, without direct criticism of the Myanmar government and without any commitment to taking in more refugees itself. It was enough, however, to keep the Islamist opposition quiet.

Myanmar’s scorched earth tactics – that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid bin Ra’ad referred to as a “textbook case of ethnic cleansing” – abruptly stopped almost all Indonesian government and non-government humanitarian work in Rakhine state.<sup>38</sup> The Jokowi government, knowing it would be targeted by its Islamist opponents if it failed to make a strong response, immediately went into action. Foreign Minister Retno’s highly visible shuttle diplomacy to Myanmar in late 2016 and 2017 put the government in a good position to

33 Most of these groups were part of an existing coalition called Humanitarian Forum Indonesia.

34 IHA’s initial eleven members were MuhammadiyahAid (Muhammadiyah’s humanitarian affiliate); Climate Change and Disaster Management Institution of Nahdlatul Ulama (LPBI-NU); Dompot Dhuafa; DPU Daarut Tauhiid (humanitarian group founded by preacher Abdulah Gymnastiar); Rumah Zakat; LAZIS Wahdah (Zaitun Rasmin’s Wahdah Islamiyah affiliate); PKPU (affiliated with the Prosperous Justice Party, PKS); and smaller alms and Islamic donation management organisations such as Forum Zakat, BAZNAS, LAZ Al-Irsyad al-Islamiyah, and Pusat Zakat Umum, LAZNAS LMI. A splinter of Dompot Dhuafa called ACT left the alliance due to differences with the other members.

35 IPAC interview with the head of IHA, Muhammad Ali Yusuf, Jakarta, 23 October 2017.

36 Indonesia Ministry of Foreign Affairs Report on Rohingya Issue Development (*Perkembangan Isu Rohingya*).

37 It is noteworthy that while Indonesia humanitarian aid was accepted by Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi accused Malaysia of exploiting the Rohingya issue “to promote a certain political agenda” for convening a special OIC meeting in Kuala Lumpur. See Myanmar rebuffs Malaysia for organising OIC meeting on Rohingya”, [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com), 21 January 2017.

38 Apparently, the construction of Indonesian hospital at Mrauk-U by MER-C was uninterrupted amid the conflict in northern Rakhine. See “Tim Pembangunan RS Indonesia Kembali Berangkat ke Rakhine Myanmar”, [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), 23 October 2017.



move quickly in response to the 2017 violence, even with limited options. The existence of IHA ensured support from mainstream Muslim constituencies, including NU and Muhammadiyah and meant there was a body to receive donations as many wanted to help. IHA had set a target of raising US\$ 2 million by the end of the year but had met that goal by mid-September.

On 3 September, Jokowi held a press conference at the presidential palace, announcing that he had instructed the Foreign Minister to go to Myanmar and urge it to stop the violence, protect its Muslims and ensure access for humanitarian organisations. He also said he had instructed Minister Retno to open intensive discussions with U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as well as with Kofi Annan.

The following day, 4 September, Foreign Minister Retno flew to Myanmar to meet State Councillor Aung San Suu Kyi and army chief U Min Aung Hlaing. She proposed a “4+1 Formula” for resolving the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine. The four main points were restoration of stability and security; maximum self-restraint and commitment not to use violence; protection of all persons in Rakhine State, regardless of race and religion; and immediate access for humanitarian assistance. The ‘plus’ was the implementation of the recommendations of Kofi Annan’s Advisory Commission on Rakhine State.<sup>39</sup> She also wanted to inspect progress in the construction of the Indonesian hospital in Mrauk-U. The next day, Minister Retno met with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to discuss the condition of Rohingya refugee camps and Indonesia’s readiness to provide humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh.<sup>40</sup> A week later, Jokowi went personally to Halim airport in Jakarta to see off the departure of four Hercules cargo planes, packed with 34 tonnes of humanitarian aid.

Some observers also contrasted the approaches of Jokowi and then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib, who seemed to be using political grandstanding on Myanmar as a way of diverting attention from corruption scandals at home. Jokowi refused to be goaded by his neighbour and by focusing exclusively on humanitarian needs avoided any break with Myanmar.<sup>41</sup>

The security situation in Rakhine state as military-led violence gathered pace stalled almost all of IHA’s humanitarian activities within Myanmar.<sup>42</sup> According to IHA Acting Secretary Surya Muhammad, humanitarian relief distributed to the remaining Rohingya enclaves in Rakhine were boycotted by local Buddhist communities. Banners hung in villages and townships rejecting any humanitarian convoys. Surya said that local authorities could not or would not provide assurances that humanitarian workers would not be harmed by local militants.<sup>43</sup> As a result, most Indonesian humanitarian activity moved to the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar.

#### IV. THE ENGAGED MUSLIM RESPONSE

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Indonesians, especially Indonesian Muslims, were briefly engaged by the plight of the Rohingyas but enthusiasm to act quickly faded – and never extended to any major gestures, such as offering to resettle large numbers of refugees, though Muhammadiyah called on the government to do exactly that.

39 “Guna Akhiri Krisis Rohingya, Menlu Retno Sodorkan Usulan Formula 4+1 pada Suu Kyi,” [www.okezone.com](http://www.okezone.com), 4 September 2017.

40 See also “Indonesia siap bantu Bangladesh atasi krisis pengungsi,” [www.rappler.com](http://www.rappler.com), 6 September 2017.

41 “Najib’s Dangerous and Self-Serving Rohingya Campaign,” *The Diplomat*, 24 December 2016.

42 On 17 September, PKS managed to collect Rp.108,546,000 (US\$7,892) in a rally in Klaten, Central Java. On 22 September, PKS and local organisation Surakarta Syariah Council (Dewan Syariah Kota Surakarta, DSKS) held a public praying event (*tabligh akbar*) in Solo, but there was no report over how much donation they collected. Two days later, PKS held another event in Tangerang, Banten, and garnered at least Rp.400 Million (US\$29,057) for Rohingya donation.

43 IPAC interview with the IHA’s Acting Secretary, Surya Muhammad, Jakarta, 9 March 2018.

### A. *The Islamist Response*

As the minister's shuttle diplomacy was taking place, Jokowi's opponents were organising protests. The so-called "212 Movement", an Islamist coalition then at the height of its powers – after mobilising mass demonstrations in late 2016 called "Actions to Defend Islam" (Aksi Bela Islam) to bring down Ahok, the Christian governor of Jakarta – responded to the violence in Myanmar by staging a series of solidarity demonstrations across the country.<sup>44</sup> They called the demonstrations "Actions to Defend the Rohingya" (Aksi Bela Rohingya), deliberately evoking the anti-Ahok campaign. The first rally was held in front of Myanmar embassy in Jakarta on 6 September 2017, with an estimated 5,000 protesters. Some burned Myanmar flags and effigies of the militant Buddhist monk (U Wirathu) while others clashed with the police for trying to break through barbed wire.<sup>45</sup> They demanded that the Myanmar ambassador be expelled from Indonesia and for the government to break diplomatic ties with Myanmar.

Hardline activists then announced plans for a solidarity demonstration on 8 September at Borobodur, the huge Buddhist temple complex in Central Java. Worried that it would turn into an anti-Buddhist protest (with possible threats against local ethnic Chinese), police forced the organisers, who claimed to represent 230 Islamic groups from Central Java, to move the rally to a mosque about 1.5 km away from the temple; it still drew thousands.<sup>46</sup>

On 16 September – leading the organisers to call the rally "Aksi 169" – some of the 212 organisers staged a huge rally in Jakarta, at which opposition politicians turned out in force. Prabowo Subianto, Jokowi's likely opponent in the 2019 presidential elections, sat alongside the founder of PAN Amien Rais and the head of PKS Sohibul Iman. Prabowo in a short statement offered no concrete policy recommendations. He was later criticised for trying to politicise the issue by linking poverty in Indonesia with Rohingya persecution.<sup>47</sup>

Most other activities were little more than publicity stunts. Several local chapters of FPI including in Jakarta, Klaten, Banda Aceh and Pasuruan opened centres where would-be mujahidin could sign up to go to Rakhine to defend the Rohingya.<sup>48</sup> FPI had no capacity to send anyone, however. FPI acting secretary general Ustadz Sobri Lubis argued that if the Indonesia military were not going to intervene in Rakhine, then it should at least provide FPI members with military training and arms so they could go instead.<sup>49</sup> FPI had encouraged a similar sign-up process after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006 and no one ever went.

News about the Rohingya on Indonesia's top-ranking Islamist websites significantly decreased in October and had almost disappeared completely by November.

44 Ahok, a close ally of President Jokowi, was charged with religious blasphemy and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. On 15 September, PKS held a Rohingya solidarity rally in Bandar Lampung where they raised Rp. 85 Million (US\$6,173). On 17 September, PKS and local Islamist groups staged in a rally in Klaten, Central Java where they collected Rp.108,546,000 (US\$7,892). On 22 September, PKS and local organisation Surakarta Syariah Council (Dewan Syariah Kota Surakarta, DSKS) held a public religious rally (*tabligh akbar*) in Solo; more money was collected but the amount was not made public. Two days later, PKS held another event in Tangerang, Banten and collected Rp. 400 million (US\$ 29,057) in donations for the Rohingya.

45 Three days before the demonstration, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at Myanmar embassy by unknown person. See "Thousands of Muslims protest outside of Myanmar embassy", [www.thejakartapost.com](http://www.thejakartapost.com), 6 September 2017.

46 "Aksi Bela Muslim Rohingya Lahirkan Piagam Borobudur", [www.panjimas.com](http://www.panjimas.com), 9 September 2017.

47 "Gerindra: Ucapan Prabowo soal Bantuan untuk Rohingya Salah Dipahami", [www.kompas.com](http://www.kompas.com), 23 September 2017; "Pernyataan Prabowo Soal Bantuan untuk Rohingya Disambut Kritis", [www.beritagar.id](http://www.beritagar.id), 19 September 2017.

48 "Jihad ke Rohingya, FPI Perkirakan Biayanya Rp. 20-30 Juta per Orang", [www.tempo.co](http://www.tempo.co), 4 September 2017. Other more obscure organisations such as Pasukan Ninja Aceh (Aceh Ninja Army) and Forum Jihad Islam (FJI) in Yogyakarta also drew media coverage for registering jihadi volunteers who wanted to go to Myanmar. Volunteers were expected to prepare at least Rp.20 to 30 million (US\$1400-2100) for transportation.

49 "Bela Rohingya, FPI Minta Senjata untuk Perangi Myanmar", [www.cnnindonesia.com](http://www.cnnindonesia.com), 16 September 2017.

## B. *The Mainstream Islamic Organisations*

Indonesia's two largest Islamic social organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah were founding members of IHA and both were quick to raise funds for the refugees.<sup>50</sup> Muhammadiyah went further, however. On 31 August, it issued a strong statement entitled "On the Genocide of the Rohingya Ethnic Group Now Taking Place in Myanmar". It called on the UN to act firmly, if necessary taking over the management of the humanitarian crisis (though it did not suggest what that might entail). It said ASEAN should consider freezing Myanmar's membership if the genocide did not stop and that it should drop its non-interventionist stance and take responsibility for protecting the Rohingya. It called for Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel Prize to be revoked and urged the International Criminal Court to prosecute those responsible for genocide (though Indonesia is not a party to the Rome Statute). It called on the Indonesian government to evaluate its quiet diplomacy toward Myanmar which had patently not succeeded in stopping the genocide. And finally, it called on the government "to consider the possibility of setting aside an area to temporarily take in Rohingya refugees as was done a few decades ago for refugees from the Vietnam War on Pulau Galang."<sup>51</sup> That marked the only such call on Indonesia to accept more refugees but it was not followed up by any sustained advocacy.

The more militant Muhammadiyah Youth (Pemuda Muhammadiyah), led by Dahnil Anzar Simanjuntak, who had enthusiastically embraced the 212 Movement, was active again in mobilising the Muhammadiyah paramilitary youth wing (Komando Kesiapan Angkatan Muda Muhammadiyah, KOKAM) to participate in movement's Rohingya solidarity rallies.<sup>52</sup> Dahnil was particularly critical of the national police chief Tito Karnavian, who accused Islamist activists of exploiting the Rohingya conflict as way to attack President Jokowi.<sup>53</sup>

Nahdlatul Ulama focused more on trying to ensure that Indonesia's Buddhists did not become a proxy for anger over Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya. While expressing deep disappointment with Aung San Suu Kyi, NU's leaders made a point of stressing that Buddhist teachings did not permit war and the attacks should not be seen as fundamentally religious in nature.<sup>54</sup> Several NU commentators took up the deeply flawed thesis that the conflict was basically about resources, including oil and gas deposits, in Rakhine state – what one commentator has called "vulgar Marxism 101".<sup>55</sup>

Even NU's Ma'ruf Amin, the highly conservative chairman of Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) who had been aligned with 212 Movement refrained from characterising the Rohingya conflict as religious and instead urged Indonesian government to act as a broker to resolve the crisis.<sup>56</sup>

50 The head of IHA, Muhamad Ali Yusuf also leads the Climate Change and Disaster Management Institution of Nahdlatul Ulama (LPBI-NU). The NU charity programme NU Care-LAZISNU collected Rp.16.7 billion (US\$1,213,574) during 2017. Some of the donations were used to fund relief programs for Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh and Asmat villages in Papua. Muhammadiyah's Disaster Management Center (MDMC) and its fund-raising foundation Lazismu raised Rp. 20 Billion (US\$1,453,382) for Rohingya humanitarian programmes in 2017 and 2018.

51 "Pernyataan Sikap Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah Nomor: 396/PER/I.0/H/2017 Terkait Genosida Etnis Rohingya Terkini di Myanmar," 31 August 2017, signed by Dr. H. Bahtiar Effendy and Dr H. Abdul Muti.

52 "Dahnil: tuntutan untuk Ahok Penghinaan Terhadap Nalar Publik", [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), 25 April 2017.

53 "Tito: Ada yang Kemas Isu Rohingya untuk Serang Jokowi", [www.cnnindonesia.com](http://www.cnnindonesia.com), 5 September 2017.

54 See "PBNU dan Tokoh Lintas Agama Nyatakan Sikap untuk Rohingya," [detik.com](http://detik.com), 22 September 2017 and "Ini Pernyataan Sikap GP Ansor Terkait Nasib Rohingya, ARAKAN-Rakhine, Myanmar", NU Online, 1 September 2017. NU also used its popular online platform *NU Online* to disseminate a statement produced by the Indonesia Buddhist religious council that the Rohingya conflict was a social and humanitarian problem, not a religious one. See "Pernyataan Sikap Majelis-majelis Buddha atas Krisis di Myanmar", [www.nu.or.id](http://www.nu.or.id), 4 September 2017."

55 See Lee Jones, "A Better Political Economy of the Rohingya Crisis," [www.newmandala.org](http://www.newmandala.org), 26 September 2017.

56 "MUI: Jangan Musuhi Umat Buddha Indonesia", [www.kompas.com](http://www.kompas.com), 5 September 2017.

## V. LATECOMERS TO HUMANITARIAN RELIEF

The speed and visibility of the Jokowi government's response and its use of IHA as a mechanism to deliver aid left many of the Islamist activists trying to catch up. They had little option other than to try their own hand at humanitarian aid delivery, either through partner organisations in IHA or through an alliance with local NGOs offering "humanitarian packages", complete with a price list and bidding process. International donors then can choose which package they want, each with a specified numbers of shelters, water pumps and rudimentary mosques.<sup>57</sup>

For example, PKS began fund raising as part of its Rohingya solidarity rallies in late August and September and channelled its donations through Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (Indonesia Council for Islamic Propagation, DDII) and Pos Keadilan Peduli Umat (PKPU).<sup>58</sup> DDII, working together with the Bangladesh NGO Cooperation for Humanity and Global Peace Mission, a group from Malaysia, also distributed food packages, water pumps, and funded the construction of two madrasas and two mosques. These activities were supported by donations from the Muslim Journalists Forum (Forjim).<sup>59</sup> On 6 November 2017, DDII teams visited camp Balukhali in Cox's Bazar to distribute cash hand-outs of 5000 Taka (US\$60) to twelve Rohingya Islamist preachers.

The Rohingya solidarity rallies also produced a flood of donations. The "169" rally managed to raise Rp.3,8 billion (US\$276,082) which was handed over to three IHA member organisations, namely Dompot Dhuafa, PKPU and Dewan Dakwah (Lazis).<sup>60</sup>

Some hardline organisations arranged their own humanitarian missions outside IHA's coordination. FPI's humanitarian wing Hilal Merah Indonesia (HILMI) claims to have been involved in humanitarian work in Cox's Bazar, using at least Rp.2 billion (US\$145,306) in donations.<sup>61</sup> On 18 September, FPI claimed to have sent their members to the Bangladesh-Myanmar border "to assess the situation and distribute relief packages at refugee camps in Cox's Bazar."<sup>62</sup>

Another Islamist-affiliated humanitarian organisation called Fast Action Response (Aksi Cepat Tanggap, ACT) decided to work on its own, outside IHA.<sup>63</sup> ACT has the distinction of having its own ship, Kapal Kemanusiaan (Humanitarian Ship), to deliver relief directly to the area or country in need.<sup>64</sup> In November, it announced a program to build 1,000 emergency shelters at Kutupalong camp, Cox's Bazar; the Indonesian ambassador to Bangladesh, Rina

57 IPAC interview with Surya Muhammad, Jakarta, 3 May 2018.

58 DDII is a conservative Islamist outreach organisation with a humanitarian wing that currently works under IHA coordination. DDII humanitarian efforts have a history of links to radical groups in Indonesia. DDII sponsored the charity called KOMPAK during communal conflict in Ambon and Poso in late 1990s and early 2000s that turned into a jihadi group called Mujahidin KOMPAK. It also worked with Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) and the JI-linked Hilal Ahmar Society of Indonesia (HASI) to raise funds for Syria in 2012. See International Crisis Group, "Indonesia Background: Jihad in Central Sulawesi", Asia Report No. 74, 3 February 2004; and IPAC, "Indonesians and the Syrian Conflict", Report No. 6, 30 January 2014.

59 DDII works in Cox's Bazar is under the coordination of IHA. However, each humanitarian group conducts day-to-day work in refugee camps independently, in cooperation with local NGOs. 'Penyaluran Bantuan Untuk Pengungsi Rohingya Di Bangladesh', [www.muslimdaily.net](http://www.muslimdaily.net), 2 November 2017.; See also DDII documentation in Cox's Bazar <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNUBqPQpn-g>. Forum Jurnalis Muslim (Forjim) was founded in 2016 in Jakarta by a group of conservative Muslim media activists.

60 Through Rohingya solidarity rallies PKS managed to raise hundred millions of rupiah in donations. On 12 September 2017, PKS legislators pledged Rp.250 million (US\$18,163) from their own salaries. PKS's *Tabligh Akbar*, a rally on behalf of the Rohingya in Tangerang, on 24 September 2017 raised at least Rp.400 Million (US\$29,057). See "Tiga Lembaga Zakat Salurkan Rp. 1,2 Miliar untuk Rohingya", [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), 26 September 2018.

61 FPI claimed to have collected at least Rp. 2 billion (US\$145,306) in donations for the Rohingya. See "FPI Sudah Kirim Relawan ke Perbatasan Myanmar-Bangladesh", [www.hidayatullah.com](http://www.hidayatullah.com), 18 September 2017.

62 Ibid.

63 IPAC interview with IHA's Acting Secretary, Surya Muhammad, 9 March 2017.

64 In February 2018, ACT announced its high-profile humanitarian ship programme to Palestine. It plans to deliver 500,000 tonnes of reliefs, shipped all the way from Surabaya, Indonesia to Palestine.



Soemarno, attended a ground-breaking event there on 10 November.<sup>65</sup> It also worked with the well-known Salafi media company Radio Rodja to deliver relief and cash hand-outs of \$100 each to 50 Rohingya teachers of the Qur'an. They also gave money to 100 orphans.<sup>66</sup> ACT programmes have been supported by notable Islamist figures and organisations, including the two of the organisers of the 212 Movement, Bachtiar Nasir and Zaitun Rasmin.<sup>67</sup>

ACT's program has come in for criticism on at least two counts, however. First, commentators on social media see it as an effort of politicians to exploit a dire situation for their own interests. For instance, on 21 September 2017, former Minister for Social Welfare, Khofifah Indar Parawansa, a candidate for governor of East Java, held a Rohingya solidarity ceremony in Surabaya where she donated 2,000 tonnes of rice for the refugees in Bangladesh. Second, the cost of maintaining the ship, when there are cheaper ways to send aid, probably exceeds the cost of the aid itself. IHA members argue that it is more economical to purchase food in the host country (i.e. Myanmar and Bangladesh). It is also easier to distribute and provides extra income for the local market.

None of the Islamist humanitarian groups from Indonesia working in Bangladesh are linked to violent extremism. Their biggest problem appears to be lack of any experience or competence in humanitarian work. According to an IHA official, some groups tend to be "hit and run", with representatives coming to visit refugee camps and being more occupied with taking selfies with refugees than actually distributing aid.<sup>68</sup> Monitoring and evaluation are non-existent. There is no information available on what percentage of the funds raised from private donors is allocated for organisational overhead and travel as opposed to actual aid.<sup>69</sup> Lastly, many of the workers cannot speak English well, meaning they do not understand the information provided during international coordination meetings in Bangladesh.<sup>70</sup>

## VI. DETERIORATION OF RELATIONS WITH AUNG SAN SUU KYI

Despite Indonesia's determination to maintain good relations with Myanmar, its efforts on behalf of the Rohingya still managed to offend Aung San Suu Kyi. Communications between Foreign Minister Retno and the State Councillor deteriorated following the former's visit to Cox's Bazar in September and Jokowi's own visit to the refugee camps there in January 2018.<sup>71</sup> Senior Myanmar officials showed little interest in continuing high-level bilateral discussions. By the time they decided they were ready to resume in mid-2018, Indonesian priorities had moved on, and both the Foreign Ministry and Vice President Jusuf Kalla were devoting most of their energies to conflict resolution and reconciliation in Afghanistan.<sup>72</sup>

IHA has faced its own difficulties sending members to Rakhine after it was invited by

65 The first phase of ACT's emergency shelter programme was attended by Indonesia ambassador for Bangladesh, Rina Soemanor, on 10 November 2017. See "Awal November, 1000 Shelter untuk Rohingya Mulai Dibangun", [www.act.id](http://www.act.id), 6 November 2017.; ACT documentation of the event: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0QDzGJ4Z2U>.

66 By mid-September 2017, Radio Rodja had raised Rp.4 Billion. (US\$ 292,524) from its subscribers' donations. On 10 November, a Radio Rodja team visited a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar to disburse US\$100 to 50 Rohingya teachers and US\$ to 100 orphans. See Laporan Santunan untuk Pengajar Al-Qur'an dan Anak Yatim Rohingya", [www.radiorodja.com](http://www.radiorodja.com), 10 November 2017.

67 More on the two Islamist figures, see IPAC, "After Ahok: the Islamist Agenda in Indonesia," Report No. 44, 6 April 2018.

68 IPAC interview with IHA member, Jakarta, 9 March 2018.

69 IHA acting secretary Surya Muhammad even admitted that some of IHA members from smaller organization have not adopted standardised budgeting and evaluation report. IPAC interview with Surya Muhammad, 9 March 2018.

70 Surya Muhammad is in charge for screening all the volunteers who want to be involved in IHA's humanitarian work in Cox's Bazar. IPAC interview with Surya Muhammad, Jakarta, 4 May 2018.

71 IPAC interviews with diplomatic sources and Jokowi government official, Jakarta, 4 April 2018.

72 "Jusuf Kalla dan Upaya Mendamaikan Afghanistan," [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), 1 March 2018. On 11 May, Indonesia hosted a trilateral Afghan Peace Meeting, involving Islamic scholars from Afghanistan and Pakistan but not the Taliban. See "Indonesia Set to Host Trilateral Afghan Peace Meeting," [www.voanews.com](http://www.voanews.com), 4 May 2018.



the Rakhine state counsellor in November 2017 to build 150 units of houses in Sittwe.<sup>73</sup> The combination of an outbreak of conflict between Buddhist dissidents against Rakhine state authorities and strained relations between the Indonesian Foreign Ministry and the Myanmar government forced IHA to rely on its networks with other NGOs on the ground, such as Muslim Aid-UK, to get clearance.<sup>74</sup> On 3 April 2018, IHA finally managed to send its representatives to visit refugee camps in Sittwe and the Indonesia hospital and schools at Mrauk-U through Muslim Aid's assistance.<sup>75</sup> (IHA also faced new problems in Bangladesh, after the government changed its immigration policy and since April 2018 has required foreign humanitarian workers to obtain a business visa to visit refugee camps in Cox's Bazar.)

Meanwhile, other ministries appear to want to replace the Foreign Ministry as the lead interlocutor with Myanmar on a whole range of issues other than the Rohingya. Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs (Menkopolkam), General (ret.) Wiranto took an active role in trying to bolster Indonesian-Myanmar relations on the security front. During his meeting with Myanmar's National Security Adviser, Minister U Thaung Tun, in Naypyidaw, on 5 December 2017, he offered Indonesia's cooperation on counter-terrorism.<sup>76</sup> Later he was invited to attend Myanmar Independence Day celebration at Naypyidaw on 4 January 2018. Wiranto also led series of meeting in April 2018 with several government stakeholders, including Aceh province executives, National Search and Rescue Agency (Basarnas), UNHCR and IOM to coordinate an emergency response for the possibility of another wave of Rohingya boat people in the Andaman Sea.<sup>77</sup> On the sidelines of the 32<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN Summit in Singapore, on 28 April, Wiranto was personally invited by Myanmar's Defense Minister to meet Aung San Suu Kyi and attend series of security meetings at Naypyidaw on 8 May 2018.<sup>78</sup> As the Foreign Ministry turned its attention to Afghanistan, it seemed that Wiranto was more than willing to take the lead on Myanmar, without exerting any pressure on the Rohingya issue. Military-to-military relations between Indonesia and Myanmar historically have been friendly, with Myanmar a strong proponent of the Suharto-era doctrine of "dual function" (*dwifungsi*): that the armed forces should have both a security and socio-political role.<sup>79</sup>

## VII. SIGNS OF EXTREMIST INTEREST

From the moment the anti-Rohingya pogrom began in response to the ARSA attack in August 2017, Indonesia's counter-terrorism officials were worried about possible retaliatory attacks by the country's violent extremist fringe or extremist outreach to ARSA in the interests of sending

73 It turned out that the houses were designated for IDPs from Hindu community who were forced to seek refuge after Rohingya conflict in August-September 2017. Surya Muhammad admitted that IHA faced a dilemma because they wanted to continue their work in Rakhine, but only if their work could address Muslim communities as well. IPAC interview with Surya Muhammad, Jakarta, 4 May 2018.

74 On 17 January 2018, large demonstrations erupted in Mrauk-U during the celebration commemorating Arakan Kingdom. Seven protesters were shot dead by Myanmar police. On 31 January, the former Mrauk-U administrator was stabbed to death in Sittwe. On 24 February, three bombs went off in Sittwe. One was detonated in the backyard of the Rakhine state counsellor's house. In March, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs facilitated a meeting between former Indonesia ambassador Ito Sumardi, IHA and the newly assigned ambassador for Myanmar Iza Fadri to discuss Indonesia humanitarian work in Rakhine.

75 Muslim Aid-UK is better known as MA-UK in Myanmar to avoid sectarian sentiment from local communities. MA-UK operations in Myanmar is led by an Acehnese, Nasharuddin. They provided a letter of recommendation to that helped IHA acquire government approval to travel Rohingya refugee camps in Rakhine.

76 "Indonesia offers cooperation on counter-terrorism to Myanmar", [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), 6 December 2017.

77 IPAC interview with the head of Sub Directorate I (Southeast Asia) Hastin Dumadi, Jakarta, 24 April 2018.

78 IPAC interview with MoFA official, Jakarta, 6 May 2018.

79 The first high-level visit was made in December 1993, when Myanmar Chief of Intelligence Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt led a Tatmadaw delegations to visit Indonesia. See Alexandra, Lina A. and Marc Lanteigne, "New Actors and Innovative Approaches to Peace Building: The Case of Myanmar", in Charles T Call and Cedric de Coning (eds), *Rising Powers and Peacebuilding: Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies*, London, 2017.

mujahidin to help fight. A pattern of past violence provided grounds for concern:

- The 2012 violence against Muslims led Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, former Jemaah Islamiyah *amir* and head of a more militant organisation called Jamaah Ansharul Tauhid (JAT), to send a letter from prison to the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta citing three Quranic verses to legitimise violent jihad against Myanmar because of its inability to protect Muslim citizens. The letter was widely circulated over Islamist websites.
- On 10 August 2012, an FPI mob vandalised a Buddhist temple during a Rohingya solidarity rally in Makassar.
- On 2 May 2013, three members of a terrorist group were stopped by police en route to the Myanmar embassy where they were planning to plant pipe bombs. Most belonged to an obscure faction of Darul Islam.<sup>80</sup>
- On 19 June 2013, two members of Rohingya Solidarity Organisation visited Jakarta and urged an audience composed largely of hardline Islamists (but not violent extremists) to send bomb instructors to Myanmar.
- On August 5, 2013, two would-be bombs that more resembled firecrackers went off at a Buddhist temple Ekayana in Jakarta, planted by a cell linked to the Mujahidin of West Java, a Darul Islam splinter. They made a loud noise but did no damage.
- On 12 August 2015, an extremist named Ibadur Rahman was arrested for plotting to bomb a police post, a church and a Chinese temple, on the urging of and with funding from the late Indonesian ISIS figure in Syria, Bahrun Naim.<sup>81</sup>
- On 27 November 2016 two pro-ISIS terrorists were arrested for trying to plant bombs at DPR building and the Myanmar embassy.<sup>82</sup>

A few Indonesians have been arrested in Malaysia looking for a way to find contacts to join the “jihad” in Myanmar or intent on trying to undertake an attack there, but none had real contacts. Interest in helping fellow Muslims in the Indonesian extremist community has always far exceeded knowledge of the situation or any capacity, but the concern remains that with as many Indonesians as there are now going to the camps in Cox’s Bazar, some Indonesian extremists will eventually make contact with ARSA militants. A statement by the head of Malaysia’s counter-terrorism police, Dato Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay, that Indonesian and Malaysian combatants were fighting alongside Moro and ARSA combatants in Rakhine state has never been corroborated.<sup>83</sup>

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS

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All things considered, the Jokowi government managed to handle the Rohingya issue effectively as far as the domestic opposition is concerned. It went out of its way to work with civil society to provide humanitarian assistance without either seriously jeopardising its relations with the Myanmar government – despite Aung San Suu Kyi’s irritation with even the mildest

80 “Indonesian Extremists and the Rohingya Issue”, [www.understandingconflict.org](http://www.understandingconflict.org), 2015. .

81 Bahrun Naim, reported killed in Syria in November 2016, had instructed Ibad over Telegram to bomb the temple to avenge the violence of Buddhists against Muslim in Myanmar. See IPAC, “The Failed Solo Bombing and Bahrun Naim’s Network”, Report No. 30, 29 July 2016.

82 “Identitas Tersangka Teroris Kelompok Majalengka yang Ditangkap di Tangerang”, [www.okezoneneews.com](http://www.okezoneneews.com), 28 November 2016.

83 “Rohingya radicalisation in Malaysia: Where’s the evidence?”, [www.newmandala.org](http://www.newmandala.org), 9 February 2018.

expressions of concern over the violence – or taking any genuinely bold measures like accepting significant numbers of Rohingya refugees and encouraging other ASEAN members to do the same.

The highly visible diplomacy of Minister Retno played well at home at a time when public outrage was highest, but the Jokowi government never followed through on the “4 + 1 Formula” because there was no pressure to do so. Interest in doing anything more than providing humanitarian assistance faded quickly, and by the time the Foreign Ministry itself seemed to have relegated Myanmar to the back burner so it could focus more on mediation efforts in Afghanistan, in mid-2018, Islamist groups had also moved on to other issues.

The creation of IHA/AKIM may have been born of necessity since the Indonesia government lacked the legal mechanism to collect public donations and disseminate them in the form of overseas aid, but it was also an effective way of deflecting political opposition. The involvement of NU and Muhammadiyah ensured that there would at least be some check on the more conservative groups involved, while the involvement of MER-C, DDII and groups linked to PKS made it difficult for those groups to use the Rohingya issue against the government.

Once these groups have their own local contacts, however, it is a question as to how far the embassy in Dhaka or IHA leaders themselves can monitor activities or ensure, for example, that assistance is actually reaching its target without undue influence from ARSA militants in the camps or hardline Islamists. The fact that the Rohingya issue has temporarily dropped off the domestic radar screen can work both ways – it means the government is under no pressure to adopt more innovative measures but it also means that there may be no effective oversight of the Indonesian groups working in Cox’s Bazar.

All of this could change if there is an uptick in trafficking from the camps as the monsoons hit and people become even more desperate to leave. This where the Indonesian Foreign Ministry should be leery of ceding policy control to Wiranto and the Coordinating Ministry for Security. The security forces absolutely should not control policy related to trafficking, migration and resettlement, and if the Foreign Ministry steps aside, all of the good work it has done to establish a basis for humanitarian work in the Bangladeshi camps could be undercut.

Multilateral forums have proved to be less effective than many hoped in persuading Myanmar to grant full citizenship rights or at the very least freedom of movement to the Rohingya – ultimately the only measures that would persuade the majority in the Bangladeshi camps to return. Neither ASEAN, the Bali Process, the Bali Democracy Forum nor the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) has been useful as a vehicle for exerting pressure on Myanmar to alter its policies. Limited humanitarian aid from Indonesian NGOs, even if backed by the Foreign Ministry, will not produce any meaningful change.

The only hope may lie in Indonesia’s new position as a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council Member for 2019-2020. With sustained attention from Jakarta, this might offer a chance to push for resolution of the Rohingya humanitarian problem along the lines of “4+1 Formula”. During an earlier round membership in the UNSC, Indonesia helped create the “Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar” that in 2008 helped push for greater humanitarian access in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. Finding a way forward on the Rohingya crisis will be much harder, but there are not many other options.

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