

## Managing the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Aceh: Strategies for Conflict Management

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines Aceh's challenges in managing Rohingya refugees and proposes conflict management strategies. Using a qualitative approach, it identifies issues in implementing Presidential Regulation 125/2016 and potential conflicts with local communities. A three-phase conflict management framework is proposed: prevention, cessation, and post-conflict recovery. Prevention strategies include developing institutional mechanisms, early warning systems, and community capacity building. Conflict cessation focuses on establishing specialized task forces and strengthening security systems. Post-conflict recovery emphasizes inclusive economic initiatives, sustained dialogue forums, integrated data management, comprehensive relocation studies, and psychosocial support. The research highlights the importance of collaborative efforts involving government agencies, international organizations, and local communities in addressing the complex challenges of refugee management

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Rohingya ethnic group in Rakhine, Myanmar, has faced a long history of oppression and discrimination, resulting in a significant humanitarian crisis. Research conducted by Ansar & Khaled (2023) indicates that this largest Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar's northwestern Rakhine state has experienced systematic violence and oppression since the 1970s. The United Nations has described the suffering of the Rohingya people as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing," emphasizing the gravity of their situation (Ahmed et al., 2021). The Rohingya have also been stripped of their citizenship in Myanmar, subjected to forced displacement, and faced conflict due to discrimination, resulting in high social vulnerability (Debnath et al., 2022). The Rohingya crisis is characterized by human rights violations, denationalization, and ethnic cleansing, with Rohingya Muslims facing systematic killings and large-scale state violence (Ware & Laoutides, 2018).

Violence and oppression in Myanmar's Rakhine state in 2017 led to the displacement of nearly 1 million Rohingya to Bangladesh (Hossain et al., 2021). This forced displacement was a response by Myanmar security forces against the Rohingya minority, displacing thousands to Bangladesh (Parmar et al., 2019). By 2021, according to the Fragile State Index (FSI), Myanmar was in the vulnerable (alert) group of countries and deteriorated to high alert post-coup in 2022 and 2023. As a result of this situation, thousands of people left Myanmar, and the refugee wave expanded to neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2021 reported that the main sailing and landing routes of Rohingya refugees target neighbouring countries' territories such as Ranong in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Kuala Lumpur, and several landing points in western Indonesia, including Aceh and North Sumatra. The increasing number of refugees indicates significant challenges in managing the conflict and humanitarian crisis occurring in Myanmar. The refugee flow in transit countries also poses a unique challenge to territorial interests and sovereignty, particularly in Indonesia.

Indonesia, especially Aceh, has become a transit point for Rohingya refugees and faces domestic challenges with this refugee influx. Aceh's geographical proximity to Myanmar is the main reason why many Rohingya refugees settle in this region compared to other areas in Indonesia. Motives of rights and freedom, violence and conflict, and economic factors dominate the reasons for refugees to flee to other countries (Sutikno, 2024). According to a 2023 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Indonesia hosts 12,805 refugees from 51 countries, with approximately 1,000 (8%) being Rohingya refugees. From November 2023 to February 2024, the Aceh Ministry of Law and Human Rights reported 11 waves of Rohingya refugee

arrivals in Aceh, totaling more than 1,900 individuals. They are dispersed across several regions in Aceh, including Pidie, Bireuen, East Aceh, Sabang, and Greater Aceh. Of the total refugees, only 1,481 are accommodated in 8 shelters.

The arrival of Rohingya refugees in Aceh also faces various problems, some of which are due to the suboptimal implementation of Presidential Regulation 125/2016 regarding the handling of foreign refugees at the regional level, resistance from local residents, and the unpreparedness of local governments to provide basic services for refugees arriving in their territory (Novialdi, 2020). Resistance manifests in various forms, ranging from student demonstrations at the Aceh Regional People's Representative Council office in late 2023 to acts of intimidation and direct violence against Rohingya refugees and their shelter facilities (BBC, 2023). Conflict between refugees and local communities becomes inevitable. Research conducted by Malik (2017) suggests that escalating and expanding conflict tensions will influence the development of conflict that could lead to direct violence. Conversely, if escalation can be detected and controlled, conflict de-escalation and the promotion of peace-building can occur.

Pruitt and Rubin (2009) define conflict as a perceived divergence of interest or a belief that the aspirations of conflicting parties cannot reach a mutually agreeable resolution. In cases of intimidation perpetrated by certain groups against refugees, provocation often serves as a catalyzing factor. David et al. (2018) elucidate that provocation can stimulate emotional responses from groups and exacerbate societal divisions. Within a broader communication context, negative narratives disseminated through social media platforms can also trigger escalation. Specific groups may propagate adverse information and narratives about Rohingya refugees, associating them with security threats, economic competition, or the spread of foreign cultural influences, thereby potentially inciting fear, and xenophobia among the local populace.

The multiplication of media platforms and the proliferation of information sources in cyberspace are two crucial aspects that contribute to and facilitate the proliferation of negative narratives, hoaxes, and fake news in the post-truth era (Rijal et al., 2021). Bradford Vivian (2018) characterizes the post-truth era as a situation where individuals are more receptive to emotion-based and belief-based arguments rather than fact-based reasoning, leading to stereotypes and prejudices. Tajfel (1982) explicates that the tendency to evaluate one's own group more favorably while devaluing other groups can result in the formation of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination against other group identities, potentially culminating in direct intimidation or violence.

The violence and intimidation experienced by refugees contravene the principle of non-discrimination in international law. This principle aims to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are not treated differently based on race, religion, nationality, membership in particular social groups, or political opinions (Costello & Foster, 2022). This principle is enshrined in international laws ratified by Indonesia, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (UNHCR, 2022). Consequently, it is imperative to adopt a conflict management approach to prevent, halt, and facilitate post-conflict recovery.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Soekanto and Sulistyowati (2006) define conflict as a divergence or antagonism between individuals or social groups that arises due to disparate interests, coupled with efforts to achieve objectives by opposing the adversarial party, often accompanied by threats or violence. Meanwhile, Galtung (1969) conceptualizes conflict as "a natural thing," positing it as an inherent and ordinary aspect of human existence. He argues that conflict does not invariably culminate in violence, asserting that it is a normal and unavoidable component of societal life. Nevertheless, Galtung contends that it is entirely feasible to implement preventive measures to preclude the escalation of conflicts into violent confrontations. This preventive approach, he suggests, necessitates creative, non-violent methodologies.

In Galtung's framework, communal violence is defined as aggression occurring between disparate groups. These groupings may be delineated along various lines, including religious, ethnic, sectarian, or racial distinctions. Consequently, in the context of the Rohingya refugee influx in Aceh, the potential for violent conflict emerges as a significant concern.

According to Law Number 7 of 2012 concerning the Handling of Social Conflicts (PKS Law), conflict management is defined as a series of activities conducted systematically and in a planned manner across various situations and events—before, during, and after the occurrence of conflict. This comprehensive approach encompasses conflict prevention, conflict cessation, and post-conflict recovery. The objectives of conflict prevention, as delineated in the Law on Handling Social Conflicts (PKS Law), are to maintain peaceful conditions, mitigate potential conflicts, establish early warning systems, and develop mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research employs a qualitative approach to explore potential conflict management strategies. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is an appropriate approach for understanding the meaning of social and humanitarian issues. The method utilized in this study is literature review. The literature review is conducted by collecting primary and secondary data sources. Primary data sources in qualitative research are derived from official reports of the Indonesian Government, the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, UNHCR Indonesia, the Aceh Regional Government, the Aceh Regional People's Representative Council, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other stakeholders related to the Rohingya refugee issue. Secondary data sources are obtained from credible mass media reports such as BBC Indonesia, VoA Indonesia, Tempo.com, The Jakarta Post, hukumonline.com, and Aceh regional government website sources. Data analysis is performed by thoroughly reading all data sources for comprehensive understanding. Subsequently, the researcher elaborates on the narrative and describes findings on the discussed topics based on the understanding of the collected data.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

According to Law No. 7 of 2012 concerning Social Conflict Management, conflict management cannot be conducted individually and separately. Article 6 Paragraph 2 states that conflict management is carried out by the government, regional governments, and the community. In this case, regional governments at both provincial and district/city levels recognize the importance of involving non-governmental institutions and communities in conflict prevention, cessation, and post-conflict recovery efforts. Rahayu et al. (2024) in their research also mention that addressing the multifaceted nature of non-military threats, such as the entry of foreign refugees into Indonesian territory, requires a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach.

### **Conflict Prevention**

According to Lan, Yanuarti, and Tryatmoko (2013), there are three elements that must be established in conflict prevention efforts. First is the development of institutional mechanisms to prevent conflict intensity and escalation. This can be achieved by strengthening the border system through coordination between the Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla), National Police, Navy, Immigration, and the National Border Management Agency (BNPP) to anticipate the arrival of Rohingya refugees, as well as involving the Laksamana Laot and Acehese fishermen in monitoring refugee boat movements as an additional surveillance mechanism. Community involvement is crucial as fishermen often occupy strategic locations and can provide early information regarding refugee boat

movements. This approach ensures that any refugee arrivals can be detected more rapidly and handled appropriately according to established procedures.

Second is the establishment of early warning mechanisms so that each institution can monitor relationships at the community and state levels. For this, early information from Acehneese fishermen about refugee boat movements is vital to ensure early detection. Additionally, an effective reporting mechanism is needed, one of which is by encouraging the formation of refugee monitoring task forces involving fishing groups, youth groups, or local customary institutions to participate in the early warning mechanism. Third is capacity building for conflict-prone communities. To enhance the capacity of Aceh's coastal communities vulnerable to conflicts related to refugee arrivals, the government needs to conduct training and socialization regarding refugee handling, refugee rights, and methods for maintaining mutual security and order. As a support, communication channels and dialogue forums between the government, community, and civil society organizations also need to be provided to discuss issues that could potentially trigger conflicts with refugees. The incident of hundreds of students in Aceh storming temporary shelters while burning tires and shouting at and kicking refugees' belongings in December 2023 serves as evidence that open conflict can arise from the lack of effective communication channels and limited information regarding refugee handling and rights (VOA, 2023).

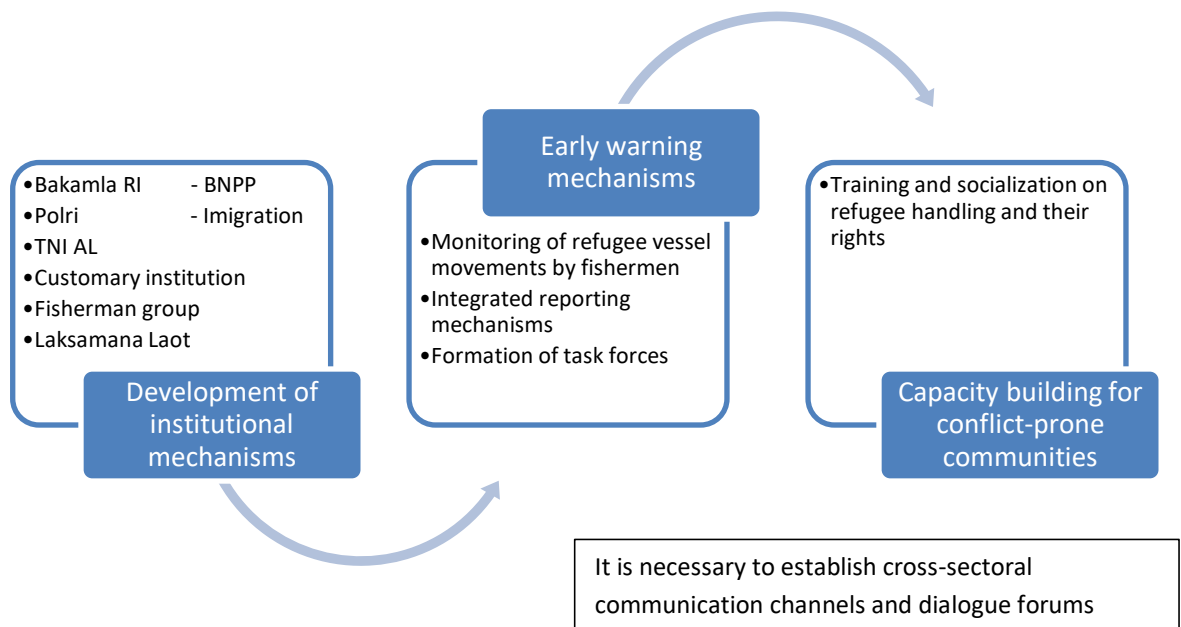


Figure 1. Refugee Conflict Prevention Mechanism in Aceh

These elements (see figure 1) constitute a comprehensive approach to conflict prevention and management in the context of refugee arrivals. The development of institutional mechanisms provides a structured framework for addressing potential conflicts. Early warning systems enable timely responses to emerging issues. Capacity building enhances community resilience and understanding. The involvement of local fishermen in monitoring refugee vessel movements leverages local knowledge and resources. Integrated reporting mechanisms ensure efficient information flow. Task forces can provide focused and coordinated responses to specific challenges. Training and socialization programs on refugee handling and rights promote informed and rights-based approaches. Finally, methods for maintaining mutual security and order contribute to social stability and peaceful coexistence. This multifaceted strategy aligns with best practices in conflict prevention and refugee management, emphasizing the importance of local involvement, institutional coordination, and community education in addressing complex humanitarian challenges.



Figure 2. Action of Hundreds of Protester Rejecting the Arrival of Rohingya Refugees in Front of the Aceh Regional People's Representative Council  
(Source: VOA Indonesia, 2023)

From a legal framework perspective, a review of Presidential Regulation No.125 of 2016 is necessary. This aims to assess the effectiveness, shortcomings, and potential improvements in the regulation. Including community representatives in the evaluation and refinement process of regulations such as Presidential Regulation No. 125/2016 can be done to accommodate community interests and perspectives. The aforementioned conflict prevention efforts align with the Social Conflict Management Law No. 7 of 2012, which explains that the

objectives of conflict prevention are to maintain peaceful conditions, mitigate conflict potential, build early warning systems, and develop peaceful dispute resolution systems.

### **Conflict Cessation**

In Indonesia, a country that has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, the process of determining refugee status is conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) based on its mandate in accordance with the 1950 UNHCR Statute. However, UNHCR often requires extensive time to conduct screening, resulting in asylum seekers waiting for indefinite periods in transit countries (Juwana, 2021). This uncertainty can trigger high levels of stress and anxiety among asylum seekers. Moreover, tensions between asylum seekers and local communities may escalate, particularly when resources are limited. Concurrently, the frustration and uncertainty experienced by asylum seekers frequently precipitate internal conflicts among themselves. The inability to work legally further exacerbates the economic situation of asylum seekers, compounding their psychological burden (Hangartner et al., 2018).

The Aceh Ulema Consultative Assembly (2024), for instance, has assessed that the highly inadequate temporary accommodation facilities for refugees in the basement of the Balai Meseuraya Aceh (BMA) building in Banda Aceh could deteriorate the psychosocial conditions of the refugees. The lack of humanitarian support for refugees in Indonesia may provide opportunities for kidnapping and human trafficking practices. This becomes a serious issue, particularly in Southeast Asia, where refugees residing in cramped and squalid temporary camps are vulnerable to human smugglers offering sea transportation to other countries, such as Malaysia or Australia, where they seek better conditions and opportunities (International Organization for Migration, 2016).

A human trafficking incident occurred in 2020 in the northern region of Sumatra near Medan City, where Rohingya refugees were apprehended after escaping from the Lhokseumawe refugee camp in Aceh and becoming intermediaries or agents for transporting other Rohingya refugees to Malaysia (The Jakarta Post, 2020). It was also reported that hundreds of Rohingya refugees had fled from camps intending to cross the Strait of Malacca to reach Malaysia. This situation demonstrates that the lack of adequate humanitarian support and protection for refugees in Indonesia may compel them to take risks and become ensnared in dangerous human trafficking practices. Therefore, more comprehensive efforts from the government, international organizations, and civil society are required to ensure refugees receive appropriate assistance and protection, thereby preventing exploitation and human trafficking. Security forces such as the TNI (Indonesian National Armed Forces) and Polri (Indonesian National Police) could be deployed to secure refugee areas from potential violence or exploitation. This figure 3 depict where refugees transported by truck, reportedly as a result of protest activity.



Figure 3. Police Supervising the Forced Relocation of Rohingya Refugees  
by Protesters

(Sumber: Antara Foto, 2023)

In March 2024, the West Aceh Regency Government issued a Regent's Decree (SK) of West Aceh Number 137 of 2024 concerning the Establishment of a Task Force to Handle Refugees from Foreign Countries, including Rohingya refugees. This decree demonstrates the local government's commitment to addressing refugee issues. The formation of a special Task Force (Satgas) also enables a more rapid and effective response to refugee situations, reducing potential tensions in the community due to slow or disorganized handling. With reduced tensions and increased public trust in the government, efforts to cease conflicts can be more successful, as stable and organized conditions foster an environment conducive to peaceful conflict resolution.

### **Post-Conflict Recovery**

Inclusive economic initiatives can serve as an effective solution for restoring social and economic stability in post-conflict scenarios. Engaging Rohingya refugees in skill development and entrepreneurship programs organized by local governments, international organizations, and the private sector can facilitate economic integration. However, this necessitates a review of Presidential Regulation 125 to provide refugees with opportunities for economic empowerment. Such economic integration has the potential to reduce tensions and enhance positive interactions between refugees and the Acehnese community. Consequently, inclusive economic initiatives not only promote economic recovery but also strengthen social cohesion, ultimately contributing to long-term peace and stability in the region.

Sustainable dialogue forums should be conducted periodically, involving representatives from Acehnese society, Rohingya refugees, government, and relevant organizations. These platforms serve as venues for discussing challenges, sharing best practices, and developing innovative solutions to address conflicts and foster harmonious relationships. Technocratic aspects can be integrated through the development of an integrated data management system. This system manages information about Rohingya refugees, including demographic data, needs, skills, and health history. By providing access to relevant parties such as government, humanitarian organizations, and service providers, better coordination and effective aid delivery can be realized (IOM, 2020).

In the context of relocation, it is essential to conduct comprehensive studies involving various stakeholders to ensure that relocation not only transfers the problem but also provides sustainable solutions (Betts et al., 2017). Relocation must consider the capacity and readiness of local communities to receive refugees. Prior to relocation, the government and relevant organizations need to conduct socialization and consultation with local communities. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Rohingya refugees'

background, reasons for relocation, and potential benefits for the local community. This socialization also serves as a platform to listen to community aspirations and concerns, enabling the formulation of appropriate solutions. The selection of relocation sites must consider the availability of infrastructure and access to basic services, such as education, healthcare, and livelihoods. Collaboration with local governments, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector can assist in providing the necessary infrastructure and services (World Bank, 2017). In the relocation process, active participation of Rohingya refugees is crucial. They should be involved in decision-making and relocation planning. Their aspirations, needs, and preferences must be heard and considered. A refugee-centered approach can help ensure that the relocation aligns with their needs and desires.

Finally, psychosocial support and mental health services should be provided for both the Acehnese community and Rohingya refugees. Conflict and tension can impact the psychological well-being of both groups (WHO, 2018). Support can include providing counseling services conducted by trained mental health professionals for both Acehnese community members and Rohingya refugees. This counseling aims to provide a safe space for individuals to express feelings, process trauma, and develop healthy coping strategies. Additionally, community-based psychosocial support involving community leaders, religious figures, and local groups in providing psychosocial support should be implemented. This approach may include activities that promote social interaction, which can help reduce stress and build community resilience.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The management of Rohingya refugees in Aceh faces challenges in implementing Presidential Regulation 125/2016 at the regional level due to the insufficient accommodation of various issues related to foreign refugees. In responding to the diverse problems concerning Rohingya refugees in Aceh, conflict management strategies need to be implemented to minimize potential conflicts and associated risks while maximizing stability to foster peace between Rohingya refugees and local residents in Aceh.

In the prevention phase, the development of institutional mechanisms, early warning systems, and community capacity building serve as key elements. For conflict cessation, the establishment of specialized task forces and the strengthening of security systems are crucial to address tension-inducing situations swiftly and effectively. In the post-conflict stage, recovery efforts encompass inclusive economic initiatives, sustained dialogue forums, development of integrated data management systems, comprehensive studies prior to relocation, and provision of psychosocial support. These measures aim to restore social, economic, and psychological stability while simultaneously building harmonious relationships between refugees and local communities.

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