

## THE THAI MALAY MUSLIM EXODUS OF 1981: A MALAYSIAN DILEMMA

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### Abstract

In 1981, the Malaysian government was flabbergasted by the presence of Thai Malay Muslim refugees in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. The presence of Thai Malay Muslim refugees was regarded by the Malaysian government as Thai internal affairs, with Malaysia preferring to stay out of the fray. However, the growing number of Thai Muslim refugees, combined with Muslim separatist issue and active red insurgents on the Malaysia-Thailand border, had put the Malaysian government under strain. With its low-key involvement, the Malaysian government began to deal with the issue thoroughly on humanitarian grounds. This study investigates the causes of the Thai Malay Muslim Exodus, the Malaysian government's struggles in dealing with the issue, and the extent to which the Thai Malay Muslim Exodus affected Malaysia-Thailand relations. This study uses qualitative research to analyse the event in chronological order by referring to newspapers. Authoritative secondary sources, such as theses, books, and journal articles were also used in this study. Since the existing literature on the Thai Malay Muslim Exodus is very limited, the study is expected to fill a gap in the Thai Malay Muslim literature. This study discovers that, the Malaysian government was willing to help the refugees as they are of Islamic faith. Despite the burdening situation of dealing with the refugees, the Malaysian government strived to maintain a cordial relationship with the Thai government who was cooperating with them in suppressing the Communist insurgents at Malaysia-Thailand frontier.

**Keywords:** Thai Malay Muslim Exodus of 1981, Southern Thailand, Malaysia-Thailand relations, Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO).

### Introduction

In January 1981, the largest exodus of Thai Malay Muslims<sup>1</sup> on to the Malaysian territory occurred when more than a thousand refugees fled into the Sik, Baling, and Kroh districts of Kedah and Perak. Dubbed as the Thai Malay Muslim Exodus of 1981, the number of refugees increased continuously from March to April. Most of these Thai Muslims have Malaysian relatives in the northern states of Malaysia, who accommodated them in their homes. These Thai Muslim refugees came from Rombong Ulu, Charok Ayam, Ban Charok, Susu, and Ban Kapeak, which are located in the north and east of Betong, Thailand's southernmost town. They were said to have trekked along jungle paths usually used by smugglers to cross the densely forested border. The close proximity between Betong and Malaysia had led the refugees to cross over Malaysia easily as depicted in Map 1.

Map 1: Thai Muslim refugees crossed into Malaysia.



Source: Arkib Negara Malaysia Kuala Lumpur, File No. : 1965/0000774W, Malaysia-Thailand Relations Vol.14.

In the existing literature, there are several works that touch on the Thai Malay Muslim Exodus of 1981. Shanti Nair's *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy* touches on the Thai Muslim Exodus event by highlighting the perceptions of these two countries, which shows how Malaysia was trying to handle the Thai Muslim refugee issue. The Malaysians viewed the matter as a bona fide refugee problem, while the Thais perceived the refugees as agents of PULO who were receiving official encouragement from the Malaysians.<sup>2</sup> Nair also discussed Malaysia's policy towards Muslim refugees, which is seen as different compared to non-Muslims, where Malaysia is more open to accepting the former than the latter.

A similar thing is also discussed by Jera Beah H. Lego in her article, *Protecting and Assisting Refugees and Asylum-seekers in Malaysia: The Role of the UNHCR, Informal Mechanisms, and the 'Humanitarian Exception'*. She addresses Malaysia's contradictory policies on refugees and asylum seekers and the functioning of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As her article makes a comparison on the acceptance of refugees in Malaysia, Lego contends that Malaysia's treatment of Thai Muslim refugees differs significantly from that of Vietnamese refugees who arrived by boat on Malaysian shores after suffering from the Cambodian Conflict. She also highlights Malaysia's intention to bring this matter to the attention of the UNHCR, of which this exasperated the Thai government, which preferred that the issue remain bilateral.<sup>3</sup> However, due to Lego's focus on different races of refugees in Malaysian policy and Nair's wide ranging discussion on Malaysian policy, the Thai Malay Muslim refugee's exodus of 1981 has been discussed only in brief.

Other scholars, such as David Carment linked the exodus with the different perception of threats between the two countries where it had created a security dilemma for Malaysia in

handling the issue of Thai Muslim refugees.<sup>4</sup> Khadijah Md. Khalid and Jason Loh Seong Wei's work, *The Southern Provinces in Bilateral Cooperation during the Mahathir and Abdullah Years* also discusses in brief the exodus of Thai Malay Muslim refugees by relating the perception of threats between Malaysia and Thailand, which had delayed the efforts to resolve this refugee issue. Another significant work is Hong Lysa's "*Thailand in 1981: Reformulating the Polity from Within?*", which implies PULO starting to expand its influence into the Betong area, sparked a rivalry of influence between the Muslim separatist group and the CPM. Fearing that the CPM would exact revenge on the Muslim community in order to maintain their sphere of influence, over a thousand Thai Muslims fled across the Thai-Malaysian border.<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that she only mentioned it briefly in her article, Hong made a significant point about the exodus issue, in which she claims that the CPM and Muslim separatist groups are the result from a power struggle between the PULO and CPM, emphasising the differences in security threats between the two neighbouring countries. However, the refugees' exodus is not elaborated further in the article, which became a paucity in the literature on the 1981 refugee exodus.

In contrast to previous studies that only focused on power struggles between the CPM and PULO and the perception of threats as the main pillar that caused the influx of Thai Malay Muslim refugees and Malaysia's delay in resolving this issue with Thailand, the main focus of this paper is not only on these matters. The paper also highlights various reasons that lead to how the Thai Muslim Exodus of 1981 happened and discusses the actions taken by the Malaysian government in dealing with this influx of refugees. For the study presented in this research paper, a qualitative approach was used in analysing the causes of this exodus event by narrating the chronology. Newspapers, such as *The News Straits Times*, *New Sunday Times*, *The Star*, *Malay Mail*, and *The Straits Times* were used as the main source of reference in identifying the chronology of this event. At the same time, authoritative secondary sources, such as theses, books, and journal articles were also used to form an informative discussion in this paper.

### **Blurry Causes of the Exodus**

There were several reasons why Thai Muslims fled their homes and sought refuge in Malaysia. In spite of blurry causes of the exodus, it could be indicated that the exodus happened for four reasons. The first reason was indicated to link with the harassment of the CPM members towards the refugees. As claimed by one of the Thai Muslim refugees, Wahid bin Seyoms, a 34-year-old farmer from Rombong Ulu who had to flee with his wife, three-month-old baby, and two-year-old son, he stated that the Communists had warned them not to practise their religious affairs. Wahid explained that: '*The communist terrorists came to the village on a number of occasions and told us not to attend prayers at the mosque. The communists distributed leaflets in Jawi, telling us that religion was not the only important matter*'.<sup>6</sup> As a result, they felt undermined and unable to freely practise their religion. The harassment did not end there since the Communists insisted to remain in their villages resulted in their suffering to make ends meet. He described the village life of his 200 fellow villagers who had to flee to Malaysia as: '*We are all poor. Our only wish is to be left alone to tap rubber and toil the land*'.<sup>7</sup> Most of the Thai Muslims are self-employed; earning their livelihood through some combination of coastal fishing, land cultivation, coconut growing, and cash crop production, including rice paddy and rubber tapping, where the rubber plantations are owned by the Thai Chinese.<sup>8</sup> Not limited to that, a refugee named Mat Jusoh recalled that the Communists would let the children in the villages play with their M16 rifles

and touch the bullets, demonstrating that the harsh reality of violence was not foreign to the children of Southern Thailand.<sup>9</sup> These Muslim villagers were afraid of being harassed by these armed men, so they left their villages with only bundles of clothing.

The second reason was a power struggle between the CPM and the PULO. As indicated by a scholar, Hong Lysa, PULO moved to extend its influence into the Betong area in February 1981, in which the area had been dominated by the CPM. The CPM who had made Betong as its safe haven since 1949, succeeded in gaining support within the local residents of Betong, particularly those of Chinese and Malay descent, who played an important role in assisting the Communist guerillas in surviving in the new area. Major-General Datuk Mahmood Sulaiman, the co-chairman of the Malaysian-Thai regional border committee, stated that there are no links between Thai Muslim separatists and the CPM, with Muslim irredentists taking great care to keep themselves as far away from the communists as possible. He attested that: *'They fear that any association with the communists would damage their cause and taint their image'*.<sup>10</sup> As the PULO began to exert influence into the area, the CPM was thwarted by the presence of the separatist group and could not let the area fall into the arms of another group that could exasperate them from the local support. A Thai National Security Command spokesman, Colonel Thaweesak Suwannathat, explicated that the CPM then made cooperation with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) against government forces, pushed Muslim separatists out of their areas, and prevented the Communist members from surrendering.<sup>11</sup> According to Chuti Sanga Waleecheti, Betong District Officer, the CPM had strongly resisted PULO's attempt to gain a foothold in the area, in which both sides had used various allegations and propaganda, such as leaflet distribution, to win over the villagers. The constant presence of the Communists in the villages in Betong to block the local residents from succumbing to the separatists had been witnessed by the Thai Malay Muslim villagers. A villager from Ban Kapeak, Latifah binti Hamid claimed that: *'The communists came to our village in groups of sixty to eighty armed men and told us that they are good people unlike the PULO, whom we should not support'*.<sup>12</sup> The villagers were not only blocked from supporting the separatist, but also had to convince the CPM members that they were not involved with PULO. Haji Zakaria bin Mohamed, a Rombong Ulu refugee, recalled this harrowing experience when they were harassed by communist terrorists who came to the village at night, in which he denied any involvement of the villagers with PULO: *'It is ridiculous. I have not seen a PULO man in the village'*.<sup>13</sup> This experience indicates that the exodus was prompted by apprehension about harassment by the CPM.

The harassment led the villagers to lodge reports to the Thai local authorities. However, to much disappointment, there had been no response from the Thai authorities, which left them threatened. Realising their needs for protection from the Thai authorities for their safety, was the third reason why the Thai Muslims deserted their villages and crossed the border. This reason was also suspected by Chuti on why the villagers fled in fear. Chuti's suspicion came to fruition when Haji Zakaria attested that they would rather die in Malaysia than return home since the security situation in their villages had not improved, saying: *'Since our safety could not be guaranteed, we had no choice but to flee'*.<sup>14</sup> Haji Zakaria even revealed that the refugees claimed that Thai authorities were collaborating with Communists, with one Communist leader frequently called to mediate in their villages' crises.<sup>15</sup> Chuti, however, affirmed that the Thai authorities were not collaborating with the CPM to harass the villagers, and he did not understand why this matter was brought up. In fact, he attested that: *'The recent killing of four of our troops in clashes against the CPM is proof that we cannot be working with the terrorists'*. Chuti also expressed the Thai authorities' desire, saying: *'We don't wish to see our people creating a problem for a friendly neighbouring country like*

*Malaysia. We want them to return home*'.<sup>16</sup> Despite the Thai authorities' denials, Thai Prime Minister, General Prem Tinsulanonda, admitted that Thai Muslims had been harassed by some Thai officials and the Thai Prime Minister urged the officials to change their treatment towards the villagers.<sup>17</sup> In fact, these treatments towards the villagers were based on the Thai local officials' suspicion of support given for PULO's separatist advocacy.

The Thai authorities were suspicious of the support given by Thai Muslims to the Muslim separatist movement, which were believed involved in criminal misconducts in Southern Thailand, causing the Thai authorities to take steps to arrest individuals suspected of being involved with the groups. As stated by the Malaysian Home Minister, Ghazali Shafie, this could be another reason resulting in the fleeing of the Thai Muslims since the Thai authorities attempted to sweep out bandits and robbers in the south.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Malaysia's First Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, explained that an official Malaysian source stated that some Thai Muslims joined the exodus purely for the purpose of coming to Malaysia.<sup>19</sup> As such, Tunku emphasised the general consensus among the Malaysian and Thai government officials that the refugees fled for unknown reasons as was indicated by the Fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad. The synthesis of the discussion throughout this article will lead to a conclusion on why the exodus happened.

### **Malaysian Reactions on the Thai Malay Muslim Exodus**

The exodus of Thai Muslim refugees into the northern states of Malaysia in 1981 had certainly developed a new issue in the Malaysia-Thailand relations. Malaysia had been burdened with the Muslim separatist issue, which seemed as a counter weight in getting a continuous cooperation with Thailand in suppressing the Communist insurgents at the frontier, which became a dilemma in dealing with the Muslim refugees. The main focus of Malaysia in that period was suppressing the Communist but at the same juncture, the Malaysian government could not let the refugees suffer when an aid was needed. At a press conference following the 39th Regional Border Committee Meeting in Songkhla, the Malaysian delegation leader, Major General Ahmad bin Haji Abdul Kadir, emphasised that, while attention was diverted to the problem, the Malaysian authorities should not allow communist terrorists to strike other areas, but rather, security forces and the general public should be more vigilant against communist terrorists who might exploit the refugee crisis.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the Malaysian government could not interfere with the refugees' claims on the harassment that threatened the livelihood of the refugees involving threats from the CPM and PULO, and Thai authorities' lack of action. The Malaysian Home Minister, Ghazali Shafie, stated that the Malaysian government would not interfere in the issue since it was an internal issue of the kingdom. At a press conference in Kuala Lumpur, Ghazali reiterated that: *'It is not our business to check what is happening in Thai territory. We have taken this (the complaints of the refugees) only at face value and we will leave it to the Thai government to handle*'.<sup>21</sup> Malaysia did not simply join the bandwagon to accuse the Thai government as claimed by the refugees because what matters to Malaysia was having a cordial relation with Thailand.

According to Mahathir, the Malaysian government provided general refuge to Thai Muslims and assured them that if Malaysia was satisfied that the Muslim refugees would not be harmed, Malaysia would send them home.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the Malaysian government decided to allow the Thai Muslim refugees to remain in the upper north of the Malaysian Peninsular, where they had fled. *'Until we know the reasons behind the exodus, we will allow the refugees to remain where they are*', Mahathir said, referring to the places where the refugees

were; in Baling, Sik, and Kroh.<sup>23</sup> The Thai Muslim refugees sought refuge in camps, such as Air Panas Camp in Kroh, Grik Camp in Perak, and Baling Camp in Kedah. In April 1981, there were an estimated 1,900 refugees in Malaysia, with over 850 in Kroh, 250 in Grik, and 200 others in Baling, but several hundred others who had not registered with the authorities were believed to have stayed in Kulim, Grik, and Kroh.<sup>24</sup>

Wisma Putra was in close contact with the Thai Government on a very low-key basis, in which both sides were on the same page to provide all collaboration to alleviate any issue pertaining to the refugees.<sup>25</sup> This is to show how valuable it was to sustain a cordial relationship between these neighbouring countries, which is paramount in the face of adversity, particularly the threats by the CPM and separatist groups along the Malaysia-Thailand border. Despite the fact that Malaysia regarded the Thai Muslim exodus as Thai internal affairs, Malaysia was committed to the welfare of the refugees by providing temporary relief on humanitarian grounds. By continuing to assist refugees based on this stance, the Malaysian government firmly stood to remain friendly with foreign countries, including Thailand, as what has been firmly guided by Malaysia's foreign policy. What mattered to Malaysia was the safety of the refugees who had fled to Malaysia. In fact, as indicated by Mahathir, the Malaysian government was willing to provide shelter, especially to refugees of Muslim descendants.<sup>26</sup>

As for the well-being of the refugees, the Welfare Department, in collaboration with Malaysian Task Force VII, was in charge of taking care of the refugees. Food and shelter were given to the refugees by the Malaysian government and non-governmental organisations, such as the Red Crescent. According to M.S. Maniam, Secretary of the Sungai Siput District Red Crescent, one hundred Thai Muslim children were taught English, Bahasa Malaysia, physical education, and organised games as these would be the most effective ways for them to pass the time in the refugee camps.<sup>27</sup> Datuk Seri Haji Wan Mohamed bin Haji Wan, Chief Minister of Perak, emphasised that the best treatment given to the refugees was not intended to persuade them to make Malaysia their permanent home, but rather that, *'We must maintain the standard here and we don't want diseases to spread at the camp. What we are doing for the refugees is strictly humanitarian and we do not support PULO'*.<sup>28</sup>

In dealing with the refugees, rumours circulated in Southern Thailand that the Malaysian Government was giving each Thai Muslim refugee family ten acres of land. In a joint security committee statement, Kedah Chief Minister, Datuk Seri Syed Nahar Shahabuddin, and Perak Chief Minister, Datuk Seri Haji Wan Mohamad bin Haji Wan Teh, both strongly denied the allegations,

“Such rumours may only serve to create suspicions among Thai authorities about our role in receiving Thai Muslim refugees into the country. We wish to stress that on no occasion has the government made such a promise and we will not condone attempts by anti-national elements in perpetuating such unfounded rumours.”<sup>29</sup>

To dispel such rumours, the Malaysian government decided to organise the refugee camp. In mid-April 1981, around 375 Thai Muslim refugees from Kedah were transported to Air Panas Camp in Kroh, Perak, indicating that centralisation was required to coordinate efforts aimed at resolving the refugee issue. As the temporary housing for the refugees was not yet ready, Task Force VII was in charge of moving them in stages to the Air Panas centre.<sup>30</sup> Task Force

VII Deputy Director, Senior Assistant Commissioner Zulkifli Abdul Rahman, indicated that about 668 Thai refugees had then lived in the Kroh area, the majority of whom had relatives in nearby villages, worked as rubber tappers and odd-job labourers.<sup>31</sup>

### **Malaysia's Reluctance to Support the Muslim Separatist Movement**

Since the emergence of separatist groups in Southern Thailand, the Thai government has struggled to eliminate the groups and relied on the cooperation from Malaysia to not support the movement. Ghazali attested that the terms of reference in the Malaysia-Thailand border agreement clearly states that operations would only be undertaken against a "common enemy". The difference of perception on threats resulted in no cooperation between the governments to combat PULO as Malaysia regarded the CPM as an enemy, while Thailand regarded separatist groups as an enemy. Nonetheless, Malaysia permitted three Thai units to be stationed in Malaysia at Pasir Mas, Kroh, and Jerteh following the Thai government's request for permission to conduct hot pursuit operations into the Malaysian territory in response to PULO attacks.<sup>32</sup> This indicates that, the Malaysian government still allowed the Thai authorities to use its territory in efforts to eliminate any PULO attacks for the sake of peace, albeit Malaysia's refusal to intervene with the separatist issue, in which they regarded it as Thai's internal affairs.

The Thai government had been accusing Malaysia of providing sanctuary for separatist members who fled to Malaysia, particularly in Kelantan. It is well known that PULO is a well-organised organisation, with its second level headquarters in Tumpat, Kelantan.<sup>33</sup> However, it was not an easy task, to track down those who cooperated with the organisation, moreover when the state-government of Kelantan, PAS (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*) was quite vocal in providing support for the separatist movement as what had been done under the leadership of Asri Muda. Because of this, the federal government was accused of supporting the movement as well. Mahathir strongly denied any support for the separatist movement, despite Thai allegations that the PAS government had provided sanctuary to separatist members. Speaking on the subject, Mahathir stated,

"We could not prove PAS's involvement in supporting the separatist movement, but we knew PAS sympathised with Muslims in Southern Thailand since the Thai Muslim are also Malays and Muslims. Inevitably, a party claiming to be Islamic would not reveal the names of Muslim rebels to their enemies."<sup>34</sup>

Mahathir also emphasised that there was no evidence linking Malaysia to the separatist movement or that Malaysia granted asylum to its members.<sup>35</sup> Muhyiddin Yassin, Malaysia's Parliamentary Secretary to the Foreign Minister, agreed that Malaysia has no ties with PULO, saying, '*...the question of preventing such a relationship which would strain the Malaysia-Thailand relations does not arise.*'<sup>36</sup> In addition, the Malaysian government has stated publicly that there would be no offer to include Southern Thailand in Malaysia, in line with the agreement between the Malaysian government and the Thai government. Malaysia, in particular, has no policy of encouraging or supporting separatist movements in Southern Thailand, nor has it used the religion card to avoid cooperation with Thailand.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, the degree of mistrust was still there when Malaysia was ranked as one of the top threats to Thailand in a survey of Thai elites, with 93.4 percent, the same

percentage as China.<sup>38</sup> According to a survey conducted by Chulalongkorn University in 1983, Malaysia would endanger Thai security by causing problems with Thai Muslims in Southern Thailand.<sup>39</sup> Despite the pressure from Thai Muslim separatist groups to support their cause, Malaysia has steadfastly refused to support dismemberment or any of their causes.<sup>40</sup> Malaysia played a safe side by not supporting the separatist groups, while most of them were closely connected with a northern Malaysian state particularly Kelantan. It appeared as a dilemma for Malaysia, where at one side to sustain a cordial relation with a neighbouring country whom much cooperation and support were needed in suppressing Communist insurgents at the border, and at another side to disregard separatist cause who were of Muslim brethren. However, the separatist groups' radical ways in championing secessionist movement left Malaysia with no other options rather than to declare no support to the separatist movements by standing firm to sustain friendly relations with Thailand.

### **Thai Reactions on the Thai Malay Muslim Exodus**

The Thai security officials blamed PULO encroachment into the Betong Salient border region just south of Bannang Star for the exodus of over a thousand Muslim refugees from Southern Thailand into Malaysia in March 1981. Placing the group as threatening the national security, the Thai authorities' believed that PULO had disrupted the area, of which the CPM guerillas considered that the Bannang Star and the salient to be their domain. Major Rujiroj Saisombuti, Thai Liaison Officer, stated that PULO groups were causing disruptions in order to frighten Thai Muslim refugees into not returning to their villages in the Betong Salient.<sup>41</sup> Rather than placing the power struggle and interaction of gaining dominance of influence between the two sides over the locals, the Thai authorities placed the main blame on the separatist group, which had been considered as a national security threat. The disruptions caused by PULO as indicated by the Thai authorities, needed to be prevented to create a safe environment for the villagers to live.

Nearly three weeks after the Thai Muslim crossed the Thai-Malaysian border, a campaign was needed to instil trust among the villagers in order to encourage the refugees to return home. Radio Betong was tasked with launching the campaign by broadcasting daily in Thai, Malay, and Chinese using a message from the Commanding Officer of the 53rd Royal Thai Army, Lieutenant Colonel Thawat Chai. The Commanding Officer, who was also the combined task force commander in Betong, stated that they should not be afraid because the Thai army, police, and border patrols were on their side.<sup>42</sup> He pledged that,

“It is our duty to stand by the people. We are not collaborating with the CPM or the PULO. Please do not desert your homes and cause problems for neighbouring countries. Anyone born in Thailand is treated equally. There is only one army, police force, and government in the country. I hope you don't let vicious rumours disrupt our peace and harmony.”<sup>43</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Thawat urged people to unite against the PULO and report the bandits to the army.<sup>44</sup> According to a Thai army source, the Thai army denied that their soldiers were harassing Muslim villagers and forcing them to flee to Malaysia, as many refugees claimed,

“Our soldiers are not doing anything of the sort. It is purely the work of the communist terrorists, PULO, bandits, and smugglers out to cause fear among the villagers. They threaten



to harm the villagers if they do not comply with demands for food, money and other forms of aid. Our troops are in the affected villages to protect the people, and border patrol units are in the rubber estates to safeguard the workers.”<sup>45</sup>

The Thai government maintained its stance on the allegations made by Thai Muslim refugees that there was no harassment to the villagers. Thai Foreign Minister, Siddhi Savetsila, later confirmed this, stating that Thai Muslims had not fled to Malaysia due to harassment by Thai security forces.<sup>46</sup> Despite the exodus of Thai Muslim refugees into Malaysia, the Thai government enunciated that the refugees would not be forced to return if they do not wish to do so.

On April 27, 1981, a ten-member delegation led by the Secretary-General of the Thai National Security Council cum advisor to Thai Prime Minister, Squadron Leader Prasong Soonsiri, and comprised of RGC committee Colonel Virat Malaiwong, representative of the RPCO joint chairman, Major General Nopadon Boonchoo, Chief of staff of the Combined Task Force (CTF), Colonel Somset Sapsomboon, Commander of the CTF, Lieutenant Colonel Thawat Chai, and advisor to Thai Prime Minister, Prasong, visited the Taman Murni refugee transit camp in Air Panas.<sup>47</sup> Malaysian officials also participated, including the Commander of Task Force VII, Major General Wan Ismail bin Mohamed Salleh, Secretary-General of Malaysian National Security Council, Malik bin Abdul Aziz, Staff Officer of the Second Division, Lieutenant Colonel Mazlan bin Haruddin, an officer from Task Force VII, Captain (Naval) Aminuddin bin Abdullah, and acting commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigadier, Colonel Yusof Dahaman.<sup>48</sup> Apart from discussing the refugee issue, both officials were pleased with each other's efforts in dealing with the issue. Prasong was pleased with the conditions at the camp and informed the Malaysian officials that the Thai government would make every effort to return the refugees. Malaysian officials said that the Thai government's decision to allow the refugees to return home was a wise decision.<sup>49</sup> The Thai government also provided aid and supplies to the affected refugees.

On June 25, 1981, the Thai government dropped off thousands of leaflets in Betong offering amnesty to PULO members and supporters. This was an attempt to persuade Muslim separatists and their supporters to surrender, give up their fight, and become loyal citizens of the Kingdom of Thailand. The leaflets, written in Thai and Jawi, stated that PULO's actions, which included killings and school burnings, were contrary to Islamic teaching.<sup>50</sup> Those who would surrender their weapons and ammunition would even be rewarded. The leaflets also stated that the security problem in the area was caused by the communist terrorists and the PULO, and that security forces were fully aware of their movements and were taking precautions to eliminate them. To overcome the threats posed by the communist terrorists and the PULO, however, everyone's cooperation would be required.<sup>51</sup>

### **Thai Refusal to the Involvement of the UNHCR**

The Thai Muslim Exodus had also piqued the interest of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Ghazali Shafie informed the UNHCR of the refugees' plight since the refugees would be classified as prisoners if the UNHCR did not recognise them as refugees.<sup>52</sup> However, Alimohamed, a UNHCR representative based in Kuala Lumpur, refused to comment on the status of Thai Muslims at the camp, but when asked to read out the UNHCR definition of a refugee, he did so,

“The term refugee shall apply to any person who, because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”<sup>53</sup>

Despite the fact that the Thai Muslims’ public declarations of their fears and reasons for fleeing across the border would qualify them as refugees under the UNHCR definition, Thai authorities prefer to refer to them as “illegal Thai immigrants” or “escapees”.<sup>54</sup> Hence, the Malaysian government hoped that the UNHCR would take the matter into consideration and that Malaysia would provide a plot of land in Grik, Perak, to house the refugees until a permanent solution could be found.<sup>55</sup> The refugees claimed in their memorandum to the UNHCR that they were forced to flee their homes in the Betong salient and that they wanted the authorities to eliminate the communists whom they claimed were harassing them and preventing them from carrying out their religious practices, in addition to being harassed by the Thai troops.<sup>56</sup> Haji Hassan bin Yusof, a spokesman for the refugees, said at the Taman Murni transit camp in Air Panas, Kroh, that they would prefer Malaysia to run after the refugee camps. However, since Malaysia had approached the UNHCR to take over the camp, the refugees would abide by whatever decision the higher authorities made.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, Thailand opposed any involvement by the UNHCR on the grounds that it did not want the refugee issue to be internationalised and what has been stated by a scholar, Shanti Nair, as “to avoid internationalising pressure”.<sup>58</sup> This was also shared by Mahathir, who stated, ‘*We were not asked to do anything, and Thailand does not want to internationalise the issue*’.<sup>59</sup> Following the Thai Muslim exodus into Malaysia, there had been explosions of bombs in Betong. Thai Deputy Interior Minister, Banyat Banthadtharn, said that the southern terrorists were responsible for the bomb explosions in Betong, as well as the southernmost town in the Yala province. Banyat indicated that the incident was aimed at creating tension in the border town following the exodus of over 1,000 Thai Muslims into Malaysia.<sup>60</sup> He explained that: ‘*They have accepted that some groups want to develop the incident at Betong into an international issue so that the problem will be brought in for discussions at the United Nations*’.<sup>61</sup>

But why did the Thai government refuse to allow the Thai Muslim refugee issue to be internationalised? Indeed, internationalisation would result in foreign intervention in Thai internal affairs, particularly regarding the alleged cause of Thai authorities’ treatment of Thai Muslims in Southern Thailand and the ongoing issue of Southern Thailand’s separatist movement. Yet, it was precisely such potential for bilateral “strain” that the Federal Government hoped to avoid, in the light of its inability to act otherwise on the issue of Muslim refugees.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, Ghazali stated that Malaysia could assist Thailand in presenting a correct picture of the issue to Muslim countries, as Malaysia must retain credibility to speak for Thailand in the Muslim world, but the Thais should not question Malaysian sincerity on the issue.<sup>63</sup> Ghazali and Thai Foreign Minister, Siddhi Savetsila, also discussed how Malaysia could play an effective role in assisting Thailand on the Muslim separatist issue in international forums. Malaysia has so far aided in thwarting attempts to raise the Thai Muslim issue at Islamic country gatherings.<sup>64</sup>

### **Repatriation of the Thai Malay Muslim Refugees**

Thai Ambassador to Malaysia, Nissai Vejjaiva, told Thai Muslim refugees at the Air Panas transit camp in Kroh that they were not being forced to return home, but that the Thai authorities hoped they would think about it seriously.<sup>65</sup> On April 12, 1981, a Thai National Security Council delegation led by Major General Thanom met with Thai Muslim refugees at the Air Panas Camp and appealed to them to “return home”. However, the delegation was left disappointed when the refugees refused to return to Betong, despite assurances that their safety would be ensured by the communists’ annihilation.<sup>66</sup> The Thai Muslim refugees demanded that Malaysian authorities organise a meeting for all Thai Muslim refugees in Malaysia, and that if others agreed, they would not hesitate to return home.<sup>67</sup> Malaysia discovered that it was difficult to gather all refugees in one camp for a meeting, and even if they did, there was no guarantee that the refugees would change their minds and make new demands.<sup>68</sup>

The Thai Muslim refugees agreed to return home on the condition that the United Nations monitor the Thai government’s assurances on their safety. The leader of the refugee group, Haji Zakaria Mat affirmed that: *‘Although the National Security Council of Thailand has guaranteed our safety, we want a neutral team to ensure that they don’t go back on their promise since there have been too many occasions in the past when the Thai government has broken its promises, we have to be very cautious now’*.<sup>69</sup> He also stated that the decision to return home was made at a meeting of village elders, who agreed to do so if others did not hesitate.

Beginning on April 20, 1981, some refugees began to return to their villages. According to Thai authorities, many of the refugees felt safe returning home after receiving assurances from friends and relatives who visited them, as well as assurances from Thai authorities about their safety and protection from communist members’ harassment.<sup>70</sup> Major Rujiroj Saisonbuti, Thai Liaison Chief, stated that the combined task force in Betong was in full command of the situation and that more troops had been deployed in the area. He believed that many of the refugees had realised that what they had heard was merely a rumour. Thai Under-Secretary of State for Interior, Pisarn Moolasartsathorn, stressed that security would be increased in Betong to ensure the safety of returning Thai Muslims, and that officials responsible for harassing Muslims and forcing them to flee their homes would face disciplinary action.<sup>71</sup> The Governor of Yala and the commander of the 10th Malaysian Infantry Brigade had also persuaded the refugees to return to their homes.<sup>72</sup> As of July 1981, there were about 277 Thai Muslim refugees remaining in the Malaysian border camps. The number started to decrease in September 1981 when there were only 30 remaining Thai Muslim refugees left in Malaysia.<sup>73</sup> However, it is not certain whether all the remaining refugees return to their homeland. The problem of illegal border crossing is still going on hitherto, with the authorities of both countries still failed to curb this matter.

### **Conclusion**

The exodus of Thai Muslim refugees in 1981 was an integral part of the Southern Thailand issue, which included major squabbles between the CPM and the PULO in Betong. Based on the preceding discussion, three major causes of the Thai Muslim exodus in 1981 were identified. The first reason is the refugees’ allegation of communist violence against villagers, which instilled fear among Thai Muslims. The second reason is the power struggles between the CPM and the PULO to win over the local populace while the third reason is, Thai

authorities' lack of action in response to Thai Muslims' reports of harassment by CPM members. Since the Thai government had a good relationship with the CPM, Thai Muslims found it difficult to gain local authorities' support for their safety in their own land. Despite the Malaysian leaders' view on the issue, there had been no concrete reason for this exodus to happen. Based on the discussion in this paper, the exodus occurred due to the growing fear of security threat among the Thai Muslim villagers. The constant fear of harassment by the CPM to assert influence and dominance over Betong, in which the CPM hoped to subside any growing attempt of dominance from the PULO, had left the refugees with no choice than illegally opted for border crossing into Malaysia.

In dealing with the exodus of Thai Muslim refugees, the Malaysian government was willing to accept their presence by providing them with the best treatment. This move was motivated by humanitarian grounds as well as the refugees' Muslim faith. As a result, the best treatment was provided without prejudice in order to protect the refugees from a potentially threatening situation. The presence of Thai Muslim refugees in Malaysia together with Thailand's ongoing suspicion of Malaysia's support for Muslim separatist groups in Southern Thailand had delayed the repatriation process of the refugees to their homeland. Although Thailand opposed the UNHCR's involvement, having the UNHCR's assurance on Thai's pledge to protect the refugees' safety from threatening situations, combined with assurances from their friends and relatives, raised confidence of the refugees in their safety. The huge difference of perception in security threats between the two neighbours, is that Malaysia saw the CPM as its greatest threat, while Thailand saw Muslim separatist groups as its true foe, was entangled with the Thai Muslim exodus issue. In lieu of this, Malaysia preferred a low-key approach in dealing with the exodus issue in order to respect Thai internal affairs and maintain a cordial relationship with Thailand. After all, being friendly with other countries is part of Malaysia's foreign policy.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In 1981, it was estimated that the Thai Muslim had emerged as Southern Thailand's second largest minority community, accounted for 1,371,784 of the Southern Thai population (5,626,942), with the Thai Buddhists community accounting for the largest (4,210,309). On the other hand, Thai Christians accounted for 4,545, while Thai Hindus, other, and unknown religions were 190, 284, and 38,830, respectively. Thai Muslims could be divided into two categories, the Malays and the non-Malays; the Malays form the majority, while the Thais, Pakistanis, Indians, Chinese, and others of Muslim faith constitute roughly 20 percent of the Thai Islamic population. The majority of Thai Muslims have been accommodated in the provinces of Patani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Songkhla. (Population by Region, Religion, and Area: 1980", *National Statistical*, Number 33: 1981-1984, National Statistical Office, Office of the Prime Minister, Thailand, p. 69 and Gaganath Jha, "Muslim Minorities in the Philippines and Thailand", *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 34: 3, 1978, p. 339)

<sup>2</sup> Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 176.

<sup>3</sup> Jera Beah H. Lego, "Protecting and Assisting Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Malaysia: The Role of the UNHCR, Informal Mechanisms, and the 'Humanitarian Exception'", *Journal of Political Science & Sociology*, 17 (2012), p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> David Carment, "Managing Interstate Ethnic Tensions: The Thailand-Malaysia Experience", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 1:4, 1995, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Hong Lysa, "Thailand in 1981: Reformulating the Polity from Within?", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 1982, p. 356.

<sup>6</sup> "Twin harassment", *New Straits Times*, 11 April 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Gaganath Jha, "Muslim Minorities in the Philippines and Thailand", *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 34: 3, 1978, p. 339.

<sup>9</sup> "Life as a Refugee", *The Star*, 20 April 1981.

<sup>10</sup> "Mahmood: No links between CPM and Muslim movement", *New Sunday Times*, 7 August 1977.

<sup>11</sup> "CPM, Thai Reds renew cooperation", *The Straits Times*, 30 May 1981.

<sup>12</sup> "Thailand to handle refugee grievances", *New Straits Times*, 11 April 1981.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "It's Reds versus Rebels: With kampong folk in the middle", *New Straits Times*, 12 April 1981.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Muslims", *Reuters*, 11 June 1980.

<sup>18</sup> "Thailand to handle refugee grievances", *New Straits Times*, 11 April 1981.

<sup>19</sup> "Tunku Abdul Rahman: As I See It – The Refugee Mystery", *The Star*, 19 April 1981.

<sup>20</sup> "Refugees: Forces put on Red alert", *New Straits Times*, 25 April 1981.

<sup>21</sup> "Thailand to handle refugee grievances", *New Straits Times*, 11 April 1981.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "Refugees will be sent back when it's safe- Mahathir", *New Straits Times*, 8 April 1981.

<sup>24</sup> "Refugees Set Terms", *The Star*, 14 April 1981.

<sup>25</sup> "Thailand to handle refugee grievances", *New Straits Times*, 11 April 1981.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamed at Perdana Leadership Foundation on 20 April 2022.

<sup>27</sup> "There's no fun being a refugee", *Malay Mail*, 22 April 1981.

<sup>28</sup> "Refugees: Forces put on Red alert," *New Straits Times*, 25 April 1981.

<sup>29</sup> "Transit camp for Thai Muslim refugees", *New Straits Times*, 17 April 1981.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> "Refugees to leave Kroh camp", *New Straits Times*, 29 August 1981.

<sup>32</sup> "No to joint anti-PULO ops", *New Straits Times*, 22 May 1981.

<sup>33</sup> Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand*, PhD Thesis, Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies, Massachusetts: Harvard University, June 1982, p. 234.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamed at Perdana Leadership Foundation on 20 April 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “No PULO links”, *New Straits Times*, 3 December 1981.

<sup>37</sup> Surapong Chayanam, *นโยบายต่างประเทศไทยต่อประเทศเพื่อนบ้านในยุคสงครามเย็น: นโยบายของไทยต่อมาเลเซีย (Thailand's Policy towards Malaysia: Thai Foreign Policy towards Neighbouring Countries in the Cold War Period: Five Cases in Comparison)*, Bangkok: Siam Publishing Company Ltd., 2017, p. 95.

<sup>38</sup> Oracha Rakdee, *ความร่วมมือความมั่นคงของไทย- ชีเยาเลเซีย: ศึกษาปัญหาและการดำเนินการออกแบบของรัฐบาลพลเอกเปรมติณสูลานนท์, พ.ศ. 2523-2531 (Thai-Malaysian Border Security Cooperation: A Study on Problems and Policy Implementation Under the Prem Tinsulanonda Administration, 1980-1988)*, Master Dissertation, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Political Science, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2004, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “Formula to solve problem at border”, *New Straits Times*, 25 May 1981.

<sup>41</sup> “Attacks by Patani group feared”, *New Straits Times*, 22 April 1981.

<sup>42</sup> “Troops guard border villages”, *New Straits Times*, 16 April 1981.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> “Refugees to take over daily chores”, *New Straits Times*, 24 April 1981.

<sup>46</sup> “Thais to probe Muslim exodus into Malaysia”, *New Straits Times*, 15 April 1981.

<sup>47</sup> “Thais launch follow-up op against Reds”, *New Straits Times*, 27 April 1981.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> “Big airdrop of leaflets for PULO men”, *New Straits Times*, 26 June 1981.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> “Formula to solve problem at border”, *New Straits Times*, 25 May 1981.

<sup>53</sup> “Two ways to convince them to go home”, *New Sunday Times*, 3 May 1981.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “Refugees seek UN help over problems”, *New Straits Times*, 30 April 1981.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, p. 179.

<sup>59</sup> “Dr. M: Together all the way”, *New Straits Times*, 24 August 1981.

<sup>60</sup> “Terrorism in South Thailand: We’re not involved”, *New Straits Times*, 20 June 1981.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, p. 179.

<sup>63</sup> “Muslims”, *Reuters*, 11 June 1980.

<sup>64</sup> Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, p. 179.

<sup>65</sup> “‘Come home’ plea to Thai refugees”, *New Straits Times*, 5 May 1981.

<sup>66</sup> “Refugees Set Terms”, *The Star*, 14 April 1981.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> “Refugees seek UN help over problems”, *New Straits Times*, 30 April 1981.

<sup>70</sup> “Life as a Refugee”, *The Star*, 20 April 1981.

<sup>71</sup> “Thai Refugees to move out by Thursday”, *New Straits Times*, 9 June 1981.

<sup>72</sup> “CPM, Thai Reds renew cooperation”, *The Straits Times*, 30 May 1981.

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