

## Snapshot Out of the Shadows



The silhouettes of two Hazara Afghan women are seen as they carry dishes on their heads in the old city of Bamiyan. Bamiyan, some 200 kilometers northwest of Kabul, stands in a deep green and lush valley stretching through

central Afghanistan, on the former Silk Road. The town was home to two nearly 2,000-year-old Buddha statues before they were destroyed by the Taliban, months before their regime was toppled. AFP Photo/SHAH MARAI

**Geopolitics** Angguntari C. Sari

## Response to Oz Bribe Allegations Should Focus on Regional Boats Fix

Indonesian politicians, including Vice President Jusuf Kalla, have exercised caution in their public statements on allegations that Australian officials paid people smugglers to return a boatload of asylum seekers to Indonesia. The Indonesian government has so far tried not to accuse Australia of wrongdoing without strong evidence.

But Indonesia is demanding answers. Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said: "It's not difficult for Australia to answer my question [...] regarding the issue of payment, and not to distract on the issue."

Indonesian officials should continue to respect the Australian government's decision not to publicly disclose operational or tactical matters regarding border security. Provocative remarks will only aggravate, rather than ease, tensions in the bilateral relationship.

Meanwhile, the Indonesian public has not had a lot to say about the allegations. The Acehese, and prominent Muslim and non-Muslim religious figures, are mostly focused on providing help for Myanmar's persecuted Rohingya minority — many of whom have fled by boat to Indonesia.

Indonesian Buddhists are concerned about religious harmony. They fear that the conflict in Myanmar could spark animosity between Muslims and Buddhists in Indonesia. Consequently, they have publicly condemned Buddhist extremism in Myanmar.

The payment allegations will hopefully not distract from the search to find a workable solution to the region's asylum-seeker problem. The Indonesian and Australian governments should rather be concerned that their policies on asylum seekers do not further punish the Rohingya.

The Indonesian government could call on Australia not to give payments or other incentives to keep people smugglers from trying to enter Australian territory. It could also pressure Australia as a

result of these allegations to help find a better solution.

Indonesia could suggest Australia provide further assistance to the Myanmar government. Myanmar is continuing to develop a special economic zone in Kyaukpouy, a major town in the Rakhine state and home to many Rohingyas. This includes a deep seaport with a pipeline to China, and a multimodal transport and logistics project being developed in cooperation with India.

These efforts are Myanmar's attempt to create a solution in Rakhine. It will create jobs and boost socioeconomic development in the region. Australia could potentially contribute to these projects.

### Generosity has limits

Indonesia's policy on asylum seekers is undertaken as part of its commitment to international agreements. Indonesia is party to the two protocols on people smuggling under the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. It is also party to the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime.

The Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air mandates that Indonesia provide migrants with humane treatment. The International Organization for Migration has praised Indonesia for treating asylum seekers humanely in all circumstances, saving lives and alleviating suffering.

The Australian government has



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refused to confirm the payment allegations. However, it looks certain to continue its hostile policies toward asylum seekers. Given this context, will Indonesia open its door wider to asylum seekers?

What the international community — especially countries in Southeast Asia (and Australia) — must recognize is that Indonesia's capacity to help the Rohingyas and other asylum seekers is finite. Foreign minister Retno said recently that the facilities to house the fleeing Rohingyas are already overcrowded and that Indonesia "has given more than it should do as a non-member state of the Refugee Convention."

Social Affairs Minister Khoffifah Indar Parawansa has secured solid commitments from several parties to help take care of the Rohingyas, especially from Islamic boarding schools outside Aceh. But it is unclear whether this is an attempt to address the limitations Retno mentioned.

Indonesia refuses to create a pull factor for other Rohingyas to come to the country. The foreign minister has said that Indonesia is carefully studying the positive and negative aspects of migration. It seems, then, that the Indonesian government is highly concerned that its generosity might invite a new influx of asylum seekers from the region.

Retno has also spoken publicly about the principle of burden-sharing among source, transit and destination countries. There is clear disappointment with other countries' decisions to stop accepting asylum seekers or reduce their intake quotas. She describes these policies as a violation of the burden-sharing principle. Indonesia's compassion for asylum seekers might very well have a limit.

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The Conversation

**The Thinker** Erik Meijaard

## Measuring Loss

A newspaper article late last year stated that Indonesia lost 4.6 million hectares of forest between 2009 and 2013. This was equated to an area of three football fields every minute.

I understand what journalists are trying to do with their frequent reference to football fields. Presumably it makes that obscure, ivory tower world of weird units like hectares and square meters more palatable to the average reader.

But how helpful is this football field comparison, especially when it is so inaccurate? And also, is the average reader really that dumb, or are journalists simply being condescending, catering to a public who they believe to be unable to understand standard measurements?

To illustrate my point, I searched the internet for football field-deforestation comparisons. Bewilderingly, I found that Indonesia is being deforested at a rate of: 300 football fields every hour; 12 football fields every day; 10 football fields every minute; and somewhere else three football fields per minute.

The size of football pitches in the English Premier League already varies quite a bit with the largest, Manchester City's, being 16 percent bigger than the smallest (West Ham). American football fields are 25 percent smaller than their British soccer cousins. Canadian football fields are larger than the American ones, but luckily no one expresses annual deforestation rates in Canadian football fields yet, which may have something to do with the fact that Canada is reportedly the global leader in destruction of primary forests, so let's just keep quiet about that country.

Anyway, the point is that, based on the above statements and the variation in the size of European and American football



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fields, deforestation rates in Indonesia vary from 0.2 hectares to 648 hectares per hour. Or in the more usual measurements, between 17.5 and 57,000 square kilometers per year. That's a 3,000-fold difference! And at least one source ascribes most of that deforestation to oil palm.

Humans took the wise decision to standardize their length and area measurements to get rid of the bewildering variety of Rijnland Inches and four-inch hands. There is even the rather unusual "mornings," which equals the amount of land tillable by one man behind an ox in the morning hours of a day. Surely that one wasn't at all influenced by the strength of the ox, or the length of the morning.

All these confusing and variable measurements were replaced by standard ones for good reason. When buying a kilogram of rice or flour, we could agree that a kilogram was a kilogram.

Uncertainties in issues like deforestation rates are great friends of many politicians and NGOs alike. If we don't know exactly how much forest is lost to oil palm, small-scale agriculture, pulp and paper, bad forest management, fire or mining, then how could the government be expected to develop appropriate sector-specific policies to reduce deforestation?

But with the advent of modern technology such uncertainties are rapidly disappearing. It is pretty hard to say that there is no deforestation if anyone with an Internet connection can go online through Google Earth or other tools and simply look.

So, let's not start further confusing the issues in these days of enlightenment and scientific advances and stop dumbing down the public. Provide people with consistent measurements, units and matching amounts. Deforestation is a serious enough issue affecting everyone in this world. Reducing clarity about its magnitude is unhelpful.

And for those who do really want to know Indonesia's deforestation rates, the latest studies indicate that Indonesia lost some 14,700 square kilometers of forest annually between 2000 and 2010, increasing to about 20,000 square kilometers in 2011 and 2012. The Ministry of Environment and Forestry, however, estimated forest loss at 4,500 square kilometers per year in 2013. Now the discrepancies between these estimates have altogether different reasons. But that's a story for another time.

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