



Roina: loving school in Kuala Lumpur

“I am sad because I never know what my future will be,” says 12-year-old refugee Roina. “Maybe I’ll stay here or maybe I’ll go somewhere else. Being a refugee is hard. The best thing here is that we can go to school and learn some things and we can make our future better.”

Roina has lived nearly half of her life away from her homeland of Afghanistan. Unlike her older siblings Tamana (14), Rashid (16), Amin (18), Ashraf (21) and Hanif (23), she does not remember the winters of Kabul, the large spacious family home or the lovely garden where she likely played as a little one.

Tamana speaks most of missing their grandparents and cousins. Roina, as the youngest child in the family, remembers little of her city and country but she knows that things in the end were terrible and that their family was not safe.

Roina’s father Abdul was a policeman in Kabul. After several family members were killed in attacks, he decided it was no longer safe for his family. They saved enough money to purchase plane tickets to Malaysia – an unknown country, an unknown language and culture but the gateway to a better life.

Thanks to the Educate A Child Programme:

- Better school premises, helping 101 students to access schooling
- Better salaries for teachers who are also refugees, helping them focus on teaching

Over six years on and now living as registered refugees in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, life is still a struggle but access to education is helping keep the future clearly in sight. And, while the eldest children were forced to leave school early to help provide an income for their family, thanks to the Educate A Child (EAC) Programme and the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) Roina and Tamana are succeeding in school, learning from caring teachers and dreaming of a better future....

The joy of learning in school

“When we lived in Afghanistan it was difficult for me to go to school,” explains Tamana, Roina’s 15-year-old sister. “It is also very difficult for us as refugees, if you don’t have a school. Three years we didn’t have this school. A year ago we couldn’t fit all the students but now this is very good.”



Tamana in her science class with Teacher Shaima of Iraq

The learning centre or ‘school’, run by UNHCR local partner Malaysian Social Research Institute, initially had space for around 30 students. But within two years of opening they had outgrown their small facilities and had a waiting list of nearly 100 refugee children desperate for access to education.

The support of the EAC Programme came just in time. Thanks to this vital funding new premises were rented, allowing more refugee children to be enrolled in kindergarten and primary school education and helping to keep older children in school. Teacher salaries were also increased, helping to retain staff who previously had to work two jobs to earn a liveable income.

“The old school did not have much space. It wasn’t peaceful and very hard to study. We like the new school very much. We study well and it’s good for us to have proper space to learn,” says Roina.

“Afghanistan, Palestine, Korea, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Liberia, Iraq, Bangladesh – students here come from all over the world,” says Tamana. “I really like going to school with children from so many other countries. It is good for us – we learn together and about each other.”

The large number of nationalities and varying languages of students at the school presents unique challenges. The children learn in English, helping them to connect with their peers of other backgrounds and also give them a useful language skill should they be resettled.

“It’s good to study and find a good future, especially for girls,” says Tamana. “My best friend is Maria and she is from Pakistan and we met here in Malaysia. School is good for making friends. Everything is good about this school – the teachers, the new school rooms. I do five subjects here and it’s very good. I like mathematics best of all. I think that one day I hope to be a doctor and help people.”

“My favourite subject is also mathematics. I like it because I am good at it. My best friend is Yelda and she is from Iran. I would like to be a dentist,” says Roina. “Learning is important and good for us so I feel sad when I remember there are some children can’t go to school.”

Adults before their time

“It is very sad for us that our brother Rashid can’t go to school. He had to leave class to help our family pay for things. It’s very bad, he’s just 16. He should be studying not working and learning to make a good future,” says Tamana.

16-year-old Rashid loved going to school with his younger sisters and his friends but with his father unable to find frequent work, and his older brothers earning only a minimum wage, he too needed to get a job to help support the family. Rashid now spends his days trying to earn a living selling carpets.

“I feel bad having to leave school,” says Rashid. “I learn a lot of things from here – find new friends – I learn English and I get to study lots of subjects. The worst thing is that I should be studying not working. Here I’m working now and this is the worst thing for me.”

“I love this school – the students, the teachers but I have to work.... It’s very expensive in Malaysia and if you don’t have money, well. We all need to help. My three older brother’s work and I also start working part time.”

Rashid is however pleased that Tamana and Roina can still go to school: “They need to learn some things – they have their own dreams and they need to come to school to study and learn. I love them and I hope nothing will stop them from coming to school. They are still young.”

“My father was a policeman and I would like to be one. I still don’t give up – if I study maybe my dreams will come true. I don’t think about the future though. All I think about is tomorrow. I don’t know what country we might go to. Who doesn’t want to go to their own country? But Afghanistan is not safe at the moment.... Inshallah, in the future maybe we can go home.”

It is only thanks to the support of the EAC Programme, UNHCR and our local partners that child refugees like Tamana and Roina are able to access formal schooling in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: “If I didn’t go to school, I don’t know what I would do. I would probably do nothing all day,” says Roina. “Thank you [EAC Programme] for being hard working for us and helping us make a better future.”

About UNHCR

For six decades, UNHCR has helped save lives, restore hope and rebuild futures. As we strive to bring protection and solutions to millions of refugees around the world, some of the world’s leading corporations are helping us have maximum impact, providing an opportunity for collaborating together on initiatives that serve both their social and business interests.

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