

## **HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY VERSUS DOMESTIC POLITICS: THE DILEMMA OF REFUGEE MANAGEMENT IN INDONESIA**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the complex dilemma faced by Indonesia in managing refugees, particularly the tension between humanitarian diplomacy objectives and domestic political imperatives. Despite not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, Indonesia has become a significant transit country for refugees, with approximately 12,000 displaced persons currently seeking protection within its borders. Employing a qualitative approach and thematic analysis through the theoretical lens of humanitarian diplomacy, this research identifies key political factors influencing refugee management policies in Indonesia. The findings reveal that security concerns, economic considerations, public sentiment, and interest group dynamics significantly shape Indonesia's approach to refugee management. The study demonstrates how Indonesia's humanitarian diplomacy is frequently constrained by competing domestic political discourses and contested protection practices. The research contributes to the literature by analyzing local diplomatic approaches developed by regional governments to navigate these tensions. The study concludes that addressing this dilemma requires systemic transformation through stronger political commitment and a holistic, sustainable approach that harmonizes regulations with international protection standards while acknowledging legitimate domestic concerns.

**Keywords:** Refugees, Humanitarian Diplomacy, Domestic Politics, National Security, Refugee Management Policy, Indonesia

### **INTRODUCTION**

The global refugee phenomenon has reached alarming proportions. According to the latest report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of May 2024, more than 120 million people worldwide live in displacement—a significant increase of nearly 10% compared to the previous year. Armed conflicts remain the primary cause of displacement, driving millions to flee their homes (Mid-Year Trends, 2024). Of this number, an estimated 2.4 million refugees will require resettlement, with the Asia region emerging as a destination for this process (Xinhua, 2024). This movement represents not merely physical displacement but a complex

phenomenon involving interconnected factors, from root causes to the challenges refugees face during their journey and upon arrival in destination countries.

This complexity demands a comprehensive approach involving international cooperation, humane policies, and addressing root causes in countries of origin. In Southeast Asia, the complexity of the refugee phenomenon becomes increasingly apparent as the region has become a highly sought-after migration route. However, the limited regional legal framework—with Cambodia being the only Southeast Asian country to have ratified the 1951 Convention—means that refugee issues frequently conflict with the diverse national interests of countries in the region (Abraham, 2024). This challenge is particularly evident in Indonesia.

Despite not ratifying the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol concerning refugee management, Indonesia has remained a transit country of choice for refugees for several decades. Indonesia meets nearly all the determining characteristics of a transit country: strategic geographic location, an archipelagic nature providing opportunities for undetected entry, and historical connections with South Asian and Middle Eastern countries (Xinhua, 2024). The first documented wave of refugees in Indonesia's history comprised Vietnamese-Cambodian refugees who arrived from 1975 and were specifically accommodated on Galang Island, now part of the Riau Islands. This was followed by refugees from East Timor, and since the early 2000s, Indonesia has experienced an influx of refugees from South Asia, Central Asia, and Africa, including from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (Susetyo, n.d.).

By the end of 2023, 12,295 refugees—of whom 29% are children and 69% are adults—were registered with UNHCR. Men make up 72% of all adults, while women make up 28%. 1,752 Rohingya refugees stepped off 11 boats in various sites around Aceh and North Sumatra between January and December 2023. 10,543 refugees and asylum seekers make up the remainder population, which includes roughly 5,980 Afghans, 2,063 Myanmar, 1,170 Somalians, 536 Iraqis, 449 Yemenis, and others.

106 children are separated from their parents, and 227 children are unaccompanied by a parent or other adult relative out of the 3,555 children who are registered with UNHCR (Hanin, 2024).

There are several reasons why Indonesia has not ratified these treaties. Economically, although Indonesia is a developing country, it has limited resources and relatively high unemployment. The government is concerned about the economic burden of providing employment, housing, and other services to refugees as required by the Convention. Additionally, there are fears that ratification could make Indonesia a more attractive destination for refugees and potentially open opportunities for transnational crime (Maulana et al., 2022). Other reasons include the potential for social conflict with local populations and the lack of collective domestic agreement on this issue. Indonesia's observation of the various challenges faced by other countries in implementing the convention has made the government more cautious in discussing ratification (Andistan & Zulfikar, 2018).

Not being a signatory to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol has created a complex dilemma between commitment to humanitarian principles and national interests. This is particularly significant because Indonesia views itself primarily as a transit country for refugees rather than a final destination, which influences its willingness to provide long-term solutions (Missbach, 2021). Without ratifying the Convention, refugees arriving in Indonesia lack comprehensive protection, making them vulnerable to various human rights violations and limiting their access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and employment. The risk of forced return to their country of origin also increases. Conversely, Indonesia's reluctance to ratify the Convention may trigger pressure from countries and international organizations like UNHCR, potentially affecting diplomatic relations and cooperation. Indonesia's reputation as a country that upholds human rights is also called into question. Furthermore, the presence of large groups of refugees can trigger social conflict, especially when competition for resources arises.

The humanitarian approach to refugee management based on human rights has been discussed in research by Syahrin et al., who observed that Indonesia demonstrates goodwill in accepting refugees and providing assistance based on human rights principles, despite facing an accumulation of refugee flows as a transit country due to the uncertain status determination process by UNHCR. The Indonesian government has also issued Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 as a regulatory foundation for refugee management (Syahrin et al., 2022). The principle of Non-Refoulement, a norm in the 1951 Refugee Convention representing human rights, was also examined by Tjolleng, who noted that Indonesia has ratified the Convention Against Torture, Geneva Convention IV, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, all of which include the consequence that Indonesia adheres to the principle of non-refoulement (Tjolleng et al., 2017).

These studies indicate that the dilemma in refugee management continues as Indonesia attempts to balance its humanitarian obligations with its national interests, leading to a complex situation where refugees receive some protection but face limitations in their rights and long-term prospects in the country due to minimal regulatory frameworks. There exists a moral obligation to protect refugees in line with humanitarian principles mandated in the 1945 Constitution, which emphasizes the importance of peace and justice for all people. Given this phenomenon, this research aims to develop a deeper analysis of the dilemma between humanitarian diplomacy conducted by the Indonesian Government and domestic politics in managing refugees by examining the political factors influencing refugee management policies.

This research employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. The qualitative descriptive approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of refugee management issues in Indonesia, including the interaction between humanitarian diplomacy and domestic politics. The primary objective is to explore how humanitarian diplomacy can align with domestic politics to maintain refugee management amid the complexity of issues involving various aspects such as political, social, and cultural dimensions.

Thematic analysis is used to identify the main themes emerging from the collected data, such as the dilemma between humanitarian interests and domestic politics, factors influencing refugee management, and the impact of implemented policies on refugees. The research utilizes library research methods, examining scholarly articles, books, reports from international organizations, policy documents, and news sources. Through this method, the research aims to make a significant contribution to understanding the dynamics of refugee management in Indonesia and providing better policy recommendations.

The scope of this research covers the period from 2016 (when Presidential Regulation No. 125 was issued) to 2024, focusing on Indonesia's approaches to refugee management, the political factors influencing policies, and the tension between humanitarian diplomacy and domestic political considerations. The analysis is conducted through the theoretical framework of humanitarian diplomacy, examining how Indonesia navigates its moral obligations to protect refugees while addressing domestic political concerns.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Moral Obligation vs. National Interest**

The concept of humanitarian diplomacy gained prominence in the early 2000s when numerous conflicts made civilian protection complex due to political instability. This concept aims to ensure that decision-makers act in accordance with humanitarian principles. Humanitarian diplomacy is conducted by humanitarian actors and encompasses organizing safe presence for humanitarian organizations, negotiating access to civilians, monitoring aid programs, and ensuring respect for international law. The development of humanitarian aspects in diplomacy relates to protecting the most vulnerable groups—ethnic and religious minorities, women, children, refugees, victims of armed conflict, terrorism, and environmental disasters (Bogatyreva, 2022).

Lauri argues that the concept of humanitarian diplomacy essentially consists of two components: diplomacy as the representation of one government in its relations with other governments, and humanitarianism as

efforts to advocate for and assist others in need. Diplomacy is characterized by compromise and pragmatic transactions, whereas the public image of humanitarian action is the opposite: it involves working toward universal ideals and principles regardless of the interests of specific political actors (Lauri, 2018). The core principles of humanitarian diplomacy include neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Humanitarian diplomacy also involves state and non-state actors to secure humanitarian space and seeks to balance moral values with national interests, promoting a pluralistic understanding of humanitarian issues (Kelly, 2024).

Humanitarian diplomacy is characterized by its focus on humanitarian needs, setting it apart from other diplomatic forms. It involves practices such as organizing safe access for humanitarian organizations, engaging in negotiations with civilian populations, and ensuring respect for international law. In the refugee phenomenon, humanitarian diplomacy becomes a key space where elements of moral obligation and national interest interact. Humanitarian diplomacy is particularly relevant for refugees, as it seeks to address their immediate needs and long-term protection through coordinated international efforts. It involves negotiating access to safe havens, ensuring the provision of essential services, and advocating for the rights and dignity of refugees. The framework also emphasizes the importance of integrating humanitarian efforts with development initiatives to create sustainable solutions for refugee populations (Zetter, 2021). From a moral obligation perspective, refugee management demonstrates respect for universal humanitarian values. Protecting people whose safety is threatened, regardless of their background, represents respect for universal humanitarian values. Indonesia has historically shown humanitarian concern through accepting refugees from various regional conflicts, providing emergency assistance, and facilitating transit for refugees seeking settlement in third countries.

Humanitarian diplomacy has evolved significantly from traditional state-centric approaches to more inclusive, multi-actor frameworks. This shift reflects broader changes in international relations, where non-state actors and emerging powers play increasingly prominent roles in addressing global

challenges. In recent years, there has been a notable shift towards a more inclusive model of humanitarian diplomacy that involves a diverse array of actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and non-state actors. This trend is characterized by the transnationalization and privatization of humanitarian efforts, with non-state and hybrid actors playing crucial roles in humanitarian negotiations and conflict resolution. Jones (Jones, 2015) have developed a more nuanced understanding of humanitarian diplomacy that distinguishes between traditional state-centric approaches and emerging multi-actor frameworks. Their research demonstrates how humanitarian diplomacy has evolved from merely facilitating humanitarian access to becoming a complex negotiation space where state and non-state actors navigate competing priorities.

As part of the global community, Indonesia also has a moral responsibility to uphold these values. Indonesia has a long history as a sending country for migrants and workers abroad. Many Indonesian citizens have experienced difficulties and needed assistance in other countries. This experience should foster solidarity and empathy for the suffering of refugees seeking protection in Indonesia. Additionally, responsibility as a member of the international community means Indonesia remains bound by other international norms and laws, such as human rights law.

The presence of national interests then triggers a dilemma in humanitarian diplomacy related to refugee management. Humanitarian refugee management enhances Indonesia's image in the international arena by positioning it as a caring and responsible country. However, there is also potential conflict with national interests that require the state to prioritize the security and welfare of its citizens. Refugee management policies are certainly not only influenced by humanitarian considerations. There are domestic political considerations affecting refugee management policies that cannot be taken lightly, including:

1. National Security Concerns

National security is indeed a political consideration for Indonesia in refugee management. Although Indonesia does not have strict

asylum and immigration policies, concerns about national security influence its approach to the refugee crisis (Prabaningtyas, 2019). For instance, in the case of Rohingya refugees, there are considerations regarding national security aspects because the presence of Rohingya refugees in Indonesia can pose threats to Indonesia's national security and resilience. These threats include instability in refugee camps, violent practices, and impacts on local communities (Anshari et al., 2024). Other than that, Rachmat (2020) also mentions that aside from that, the refugee issue can lead to the emergence of transnational crime.

The presence of refugees can trigger social conflicts with local communities, especially if there is no understanding in local communities regarding the status and rights of refugees. The existence of refugees is also feared to contribute to increased criminality, as legal and economic uncertainty may drive refugees to engage in illegal activities that could threaten national security (Alunaza S.D & Juani, 2017).

Some research also suggests that the influx of refugees can increase the risk of terrorism infiltration and the spread of radicalism, although this is often not supported by strong empirical evidence (Polo & Wucherpfennig, 2022). Nevertheless, this risk certainly cannot be ignored because the intersection between refugee movements and security issues is indeed complex. In some countries, the securitization of refugee issues can influence foreign policy, as seen in Turkey and Lebanon, where the arrival of refugees from Syria has been linked to increased security problems (Secen, 2021).

## 2. Economic and Social Burden

The presence of refugees, especially in large numbers, can certainly create economic and social burdens for the receiving country, particularly since most countries hosting refugees are low-income countries. Providing shelter, food, healthcare, education requires significant resources. This can burden the state budget, especially if the country is also facing economic challenges. There are many potential consequences, both short-term and long-term (Maystadt et al., 2019).

With so many refugees, the Indonesian government is responsible for managing refugee care. Suyatna argues that Perpres No. 125 of 2016 needs to be amended to explicitly define the role of local governments in managing refugee issues and to include local budgets as a source of funding. In addition, local governments hosting refugees should enact relevant local regulations to implement the Perpres.

If Indonesia ratifies the convention, refugees entering the country will compete with local labor to survive. Politically, this will create burdens similar to those experienced in other receiving countries. Limited production capacity with increased purchasing power results in inflationary pressure, which in turn will create social tensions in the host country. Research presented by Kwon (Kwon & Kim, 2022) on the case of Syrian refugees in Jordan shows that local food prices increased as a result of the influx of Syrian refugees. Additionally, it is claimed that Syrian refugees have negatively impacted Jordan's economy in general. Governments need to carefully manage the economic and social impacts of refugee presence to prevent conflict and maintain social stability.

### 3. Public Sentiment and Nationalism

Refugee management is often influenced by public sentiment and nationalism, which can affect national and international policies. Research shows that attitudes toward refugees can be influenced by various factors, including national politics, international law, and public perception.

In Eastern-Central Europe, the refugee crisis has triggered the rise of parochialism and nationalism, strengthening defensive and discriminatory attitudes toward refugees. Countries such as Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic use incorrect terms to describe refugees, reflecting closed and discriminatory political attitudes (Gruszczak, 2021). Refugee policies often contradict more sympathetic public sentiments, especially in Europe. There is a need to challenge narratives linking restrictive security and humanitarian policies with foreign policy political interests (Czymara, 2020).

In Indonesia, there is also negative sentiment toward refugees driven by issues of identity, religion, and culture. Some communities may worry that the presence of refugees will threaten national identity, change demographic composition, or cause social problems. Nationalist sentiment influences Indonesia's policy in handling refugees. The country tries to assert its national stance toward the global refugee phenomenon while avoiding greater responsibility without guarantees of cooperation and solidarity from other countries (Prabaningtyas, 2019).

#### 4. Interest Group Influence

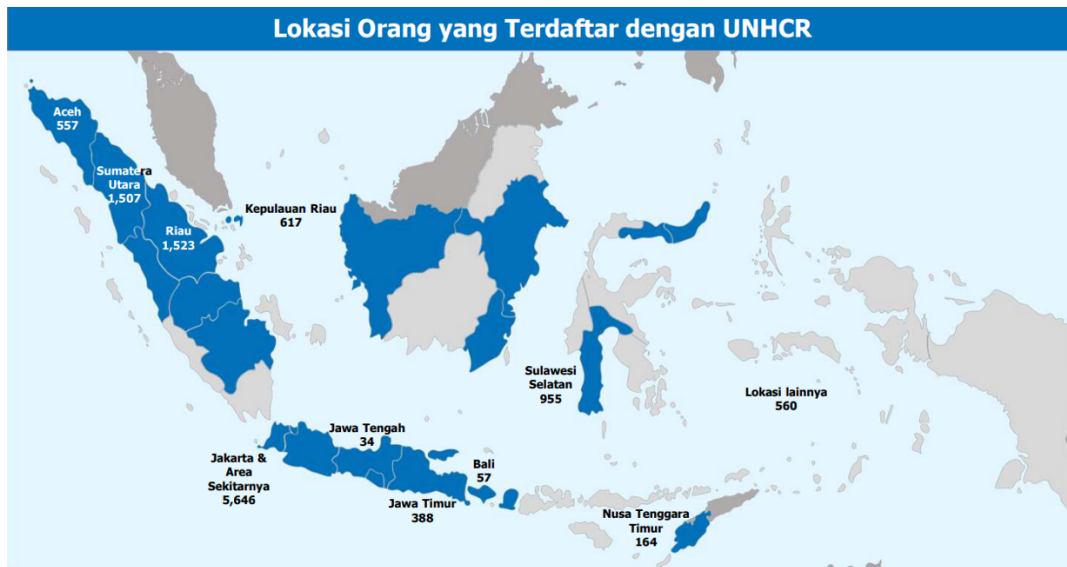
Various interest groups, such as civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and religious organizations, can influence refugee management policies. NGOs focusing on humanitarian issues and human rights tend to encourage the government to provide greater protection to refugees. Refugee Community Organizations (RCOs) play an important role in advocating rights and improving refugee conditions through civic activism. They operate in "invited spaces" opened by state institutions and international donors (Mencutek, 2021).

On the other hand, certain nationalist or religious groups may oppose the presence of refugees and urge the government to adopt more restrictive policies. Governments need to balance these various interests in formulating comprehensive and sustainable refugee management policies.

### **Refugee Management Policies in Indonesia**

Based on UNHCR's monthly statistical report for December 2024, the number of people registered with UNHCR in Indonesia includes 7,803 refugees and 4,205 asylum seekers, all of whom have been defined as refugees under Indonesian law. They are spread across Aceh, North Sumatra, Riau, Riau Islands, Jakarta, Central Java, East Java, Bali, South Sulawesi, East Nusa Tenggara, and several other locations.

**Figure 1.** Location of people registered with UNHCR



Source: UNHCR, 2025 (<https://www.unhcr.org/id/wp-content/uploads/sites/42/2025/02/Laporan-Statistik-Bulanan-Desember-2024.pdf>)

Indonesia occupies a unique position in the international legal landscape related to refugee protection. Despite various political considerations that have been mentioned, until 2024, Indonesia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. However, a strong moral obligation makes Indonesia continue to protect refugees who arrive and transit in Indonesia. The application of the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the forcible return of refugees to their country of origin where they may face danger, has become customary international law, meaning this principle binds all countries regardless of whether they have ratified the convention or not (Sumampouw et al., 2024).

Of course, not having ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol means Indonesia does not have a comprehensive national legal framework for refugee management. Several relevant laws and regulations such as Law No. 37 of 1999 on Foreign Relations, Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration, and Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 on the Management of Foreign Refugees still have many limitations in their implementation because there is a gap between policies contained in legislation and the

practice of refugee management in the field. Existing policies, such as Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016, have not been optimally implemented due to coordination problems and legal compliance issues (Syahrin et al., 2024). Refugees often face various problems, such as limited access to basic services, prolonged detention, and future uncertainty. These various regulations need to be harmonized so they do not contradict each other and ensure refugee management in accordance with international standards.

There are several points that can be elaborated regarding the evaluation of refugee management policies in Indonesia:

1. **Influence of Political Interests:** The political interests of the ruling government can influence priorities in refugee management. Indonesia's humanitarian diplomacy strategy driven by security and political interests has been well-received, for example, in the Rohingya refugee crisis. This approach is driven not only by morality but also by the need to maintain regional stability and national security.
2. **Power Dynamics and Interest Group Influence:** Although Indonesia does not have very strict asylum and immigration policies to prevent refugee entry, there is ambivalence and anxiety in accepting protection requests from asylum seekers. This reflects Indonesia's approach to the refugee crisis, which is often influenced by political discourse and debated protection practices (Prabaningtyas, 2019). Indonesia balances the need to protect refugees and maintain its national security, which can influence Indonesia in developing domestic and foreign policies related to refugees. This is often done to assert Indonesia's stance toward the global refugee phenomenon.

The dilemma between humanitarian diplomacy and domestic politics in refugee management in Indonesia reflects complex challenges. Indonesia faces pressure to balance humanitarian interests and domestic politics in handling the refugee crisis. The humanitarian diplomacy strategy through dialogue and mediation conducted by Indonesia in several cases of refugee

management has been well-received by the international community, for example, in the Rohingya refugee issue (Komarudin & Ayuningtyas, 2024). Although through this humanitarian diplomacy, the policies implemented appear to prioritize security aspects over humanitarian ones, which may neglect the basic rights of refugees. Regulations such as Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 provide a normative framework for handling refugees but are considered not substantive enough in protecting refugee rights. This policy reflects the dilemma between welcoming refugees and treating them as a threat.

This dilemma can result in refugees lacking legal status, making it difficult for them to access basic services such as housing, food, clean water, sanitation, and healthcare (Syailendra et al., 2024). They are not recognized by the Indonesian government and do not have rights guaranteed by international law. Restrictive policies can limit refugee movement and reduce their access to public services. Refugees are also vulnerable to various forms of violence, exploitation, and discrimination. The dilemma in refugee management can result in a lack of protection for refugees, especially if the government prioritizes national security interests over refugee human rights. Refugees often face difficulties in accessing education, skills training, and job opportunities. This can hinder their integration into society and trap them in a cycle of poverty and dependency.

Poor refugee management can worsen Indonesia's relations with refugee origin countries. The countries of origin may consider Indonesia irresponsible and not fulfilling its international obligations in protecting refugees. Indonesia certainly has an interest in maintaining its reputation as a humanitarian country that upholds human rights. Indonesia has cooperated with various international organizations, such as UNHCR and IOM, in refugee management (Putri, 2021). The dilemma in refugee management can create friction with these organizations, especially if Indonesia is considered not complying with international standards in refugee protection. Despite facing challenges due to not ratifying the 1951 refugee convention, Indonesia's humanitarian attitude and cooperation with

international bodies position it as an important player in regional refugee management.

Because refugee management is based solely on central government regulations, regional governments where refugees are located then develop diplomatic approaches according to their regional typology, for example, in Aceh using an approach based on conflict experience and local wisdom, while East Nusa Tenggara and Makassar use a community-based approach (Missbach & Adiputera, 2021).

Basically, the general pattern of diplomatic approaches implemented by regional governments has flexible characteristics, formed based on adaptation to the specific context of the region. Additionally, there is utilization of social and cultural relationships and prioritization of refugee protection. This makes diplomatic approaches at the regional level a potential solution to the dilemma of refugee management in Indonesia, especially due to the empowerment of communities that have the most direct contact with refugees. Strategies such as establishing regional coordination units, improving information network systems, and socio-economic empowerment programs are also needed in implementation.

Implementation of regional diplomatic approaches in refugee management also faces a series of challenges. The limited authority of regional governments and the centralism of the central government bureaucracy make this approach less able to operate optimally. The conflict between national interests and humanitarian obligations also has the potential to create social conflicts in local communities. There needs to be a systemic transformation through strong political commitment and a holistic and sustainable approach in addressing this refugee management dilemma.

## **CONCLUSION**

Indonesia faces a complex situation in balancing its moral responsibility to protect refugees with various considerations of its national interests. On one hand, universal humanitarian values, solidarity as a fellow migrant-sending country, and responsibility as part of the international

community encourage Indonesia to provide protection and help those forced to flee from their home countries due to conflict, persecution, or disaster. However, on the other hand, concerns about economic, social, security, demographic impacts, and sovereignty that may arise from the presence of large numbers of refugees make Indonesia hesitant to fully commit to ratifying the 1951 Refugee Convention and increasing protection for asylum seekers. Lack of support and understanding from the community also influences the government's attitude.

This dilemma has a real impact on thousands of refugees seeking protection in Indonesia. They often have to face legal status uncertainty, concerning shelter conditions, difficulties accessing basic rights such as health, education, and employment, and vulnerability to various forms of exploitation and violence. The psychological impact of traumatic experiences and prolonged uncertainty also cannot be ignored. Although not easy, Indonesia needs to strive to fulfill its moral responsibility toward refugees while mitigating risks to its national interests. Steps that can be taken include increasing cooperation with international organizations, developing a legal framework that meets international standards, improving screening and shelter systems, advocating fair regional and global burden-sharing, educating the public to foster empathy, and integrating refugee policies into broader development plans.

With a balanced, gradual approach that involves various stakeholders, Indonesia can responsibly carry out its obligation to protect the most vulnerable, while maintaining domestic welfare and stability. Humanitarian diplomacy mechanisms are developed at the regional level with a flexible approach according to local context, such as in Aceh, NTT, and Makassar. This approach empowers communities and prioritizes refugee protection but faces challenges of limited authority and centralism. To overcome this dilemma, systemic transformation is needed through strong political commitment and a holistic and sustainable approach by harmonizing regulations and ensuring management according to international standards.

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