

17 June 2021



The first UN Youth Volunteer of Swiss Expert Pool, Lukas Heim, visited the temple in Borobudur during his mission with UNHCR in Jakarta.

© UNHCR, 2006

From Jakarta to Jerusalem - 100 UN Youth Volunteer assignments from Switzerland

On 3 March 2020, the 100th Swiss UN Youth Volunteer finished her peacebuilding assignment in Jerusalem. On this occasion, the Swiss Expert Pool for Civilian Peacebuilding (SEF) looks back at the first UN Youth Volunteer mission, that of Lukas Heim in Indonesia in 2005. The assignment of Lukas was sponsored by the Peace and Human Rights Division (formerly Human Security Division, of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland. This is the second in a series of articles on Swiss fully funded UN volunteers.

Is this a coincidence or fate? The first Swiss UN volunteer has his office right across from the SEF and now works closely with the Human Security Department. To celebrate the completion of the 100th Swiss UN Youth Volunteer mission, we meet Lukas Heim, now a research fellow in the National Commission for the Prevention of Torture (NCPT) and responsible for mandates at the Swiss Center of Expertise in Human Rights (SCHR), to talk about his first assignment and what followed afterwards.

On April 15, 2005, Lukas was the first UN Youth Volunteer of the SEF to fly to Jakarta, Indonesia, for a year-long assignment at the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). He started with an idealistic motivation, a commitment to protect refugees, but then this experience also allowed him to achieve professional skills and knowledge of the work of the United Nations.

However, there were also some challenges — the desire to live and work in a completely different country from Switzerland. He recalls, "Life in Jakarta was a rollercoaster in the first few weeks."

His duties as an Associate Protection Officer included not only conducting interviews with asylum seekers, but also determining their refugee status in accordance with the UNHCR agreements with the host country. The contact with the people was direct and very personal.

Often, asylum seekers from various countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and various African countries ended up stranded in Indonesia on their way to Australia or New Zealand.

For instance, in Malaysia, where there were far more asylum applications than in Indonesia at the time, Lukas had a conversation with a former administrative employee from Afghanistan seeking asylum. The Afghan recounted being the target of a bomb attack for political reasons. He realized that remaining in his country could pose a direct danger to his life and was thus forced to flee. Given the circumstances, it was clear that he could claim his refugee status.

In order to decide the status of an asylum seeker, however, additional research was often necessary.

“ Lukas Heim admits, "The consequences of our decisions, which I made in close consultation with experienced colleagues, were serious for the future fate of the people affected. This task meant a great responsibility and a moral burden for me."

After his first experience as a UN Youth Volunteer, Lukas worked for the UNHCR for another four years, namely in Switzerland, Chad and Sweden. He then deepened his specialist knowledge as an advisor on freedom of expression at the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights in Strasbourg, France.

Between 2015 and 2017, he again worked with SEF. This time he traveled to Hebron in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where he worked as a legal advisor for the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH).

Although he had only been under contract with the SEF for three years since the end of the UN Youth Volunteer mission in 2006, he continued to work to protect human rights. This commitment has always been at the center of his professional career and is his personal contribution to promoting human wellbeing.

“ Lukas is convinced that his UN Youth Volunteer mission was the foundation for his further professional career, as human rights have remained the common thread in his career. On a personal level, too, this was a deeply enriching experience for him.

This article was published in the publication [Schweizer Fachspezialisten in afrikanischen Ausbildungszentren](#).



• World Refugee Day • full funding programme • Switzerland

Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals](#)