Helping refugees in Malaysia find sanctuary with the right words

From 2008 to 2011, I served as a UNV Interpreter under the UNHCR in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I am originally from Myanmar, and when I came to the Republic of Korea where I now live, I myself was a refugee.
During the past three years I have been an international UN Volunteer in Kuala Lumpur, I learned more about the plight and struggles of refugees from Myanmar in Malaysia, and gained a new understanding of how UNHCR, the United States and other countries provide protection and resettlement for refugees.

Helping refugees by interpreting the stories of their struggles during the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) interviews was a rewarding and memorable experience. I enjoyed working with the adjudicating officers and my other colleagues.

Moreover, I was entrusted with a very important responsibility. My job dealt with people who were marginalized and displaced and in search of protection and freedom. UNHCR provides humanitarian help and protection to those who have fled their country of origin due to oppression and persecution for safer places. This assignment also focused on restoring the human rights and dignity they had been deprived in their country of origin.

The USCIS interview is the final one for refugees applying for resettlement in the United States. Passing the interview brings with it a high expectation of a better future. Failing it causes great disappointment and some refugees can even lose all hope.

Therefore, the interview needs to be handled carefully and seriously because there is so much at stake. The interpreter serves as a bridge between the interviewer and the applicant. I needed to be actively involved with both the interviewing officer and the one interviewed as well as committed to the interview process.

My job required patience, sympathy, and above all, a willingness to listen to the stories of those who had struggled and risked their lives in search of protection and security.

My experience as an interpreter has helped me to understand even more about refugees’ anxieties and apprehensions. Volunteering to assist them has been a means for me to help lessen their struggles.

I am grateful to UNV for giving me the opportunity to serve as an international UN Volunteer. My assignment entrusted me with important responsibility which I attempted to execute to the fullest of my ability and knowledge under the guidance and direction of my supervisor and the Resettlement Service Center officer.

It has been a great privilege to meet the many international friends with different backgrounds and skills who have been of great help and encouragement to me. I am thankful for the friendships I share with them.

My concern for refugees around the globe but particularly in Malaysia will remain in my heart even if I no longer serve there as an international UN Volunteer. Moreover my experience will constantly challenge me to reach out to refugees wherever and whenever assistance is needed.
Above all, I am honored for having been involved in these rewarding and memorable humanitarian services.

*Ngun Si  
UNV Interpreter, UNHCR  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*