

The story of Halimah: A father's persisting regrets

Kohar, 49 years old and a resident of Cianjur, West Java, has five children: four daughters and a son. His wife died in 1999 and his two eldest daughters have worked in Saudi Arabia. When his third daughter, Halimah, 27 years of age, asked his permission to follow in her sisters' footsteps working in Saudi Arabia as a migrant domestic worker, he could not say no. "It was hard to let her go, but we are living in poverty. She said she had to go to Saudi Arabia to earn enough money to renovate our house," he said.

Halimah, who had dropped out of junior high school, started working in Jeddah in 2007 as a migrant domestic worker for Abdul Wahab Muhammad Hasan Kholil. After working for one year, she sent home Rp. 10 million. She told her father that she had spent three months' salary going on Umroh (a small pilgrimage). She also once phoned home to say that she was ill.

Kohar never suspected that Halimah had a serious illness. He thought his daughter was working and living in her employer's house in Jeddah. Yet, his world turned up side down when a reporter from the private television station SCTV came to Cianjur and told him that another SCTV reporter had met Halimah in Jeddah. She was sick and homeless, living with other Indonesian migrant workers under a flyover.

Kohar was then brought to SCTV the following morning for an interview. The station also aired the interview with Halimah which took place under the Al Kandarrah bridge. "I don't want to die in Jeddah," an ailing Halimah told the reporter. However, a few days after the interview, Halimah died. Her father was deeply shocked upon hearing the news.

"I didn't know that she was living under a bridge in Jeddah. It's still unclear why she left her employer," he said. He learnt from the interview that Halimah was "dumped" under the bridge by an unidentified taxi driver. She passed away on 3 August 2009 after living homeless under the bridge for three weeks. It was reported that Halimah suffered from a serious case of tuberculosis.

Kohar did not believe the report, saying that Halimah did not suffer any serious illnesses when she was at home. "If she had been sick, she would not have been deployed. She was well," Kohar said. "But she probably got sick while living under the bridge."

It was also reported that Halimah had twice reported to the Indonesian Consulate in Jeddah that she had been tortured by her employer. The torture continued until she got very sick. She was then "dumped" under the bridge and lived there with hundreds of other migrant workers who likewise had serious problems, mostly Indonesians. While living under the flyover, Halimah borrowed some money for her daily needs and repaid it.

In the TV interview, Kohar demanded that the body of his daughter be brought back home. He said that he would not demand anything else from the government, if they just helped the family return the body to Indonesia. Activists from Migrant Care also staged a rally in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, demanding the ministry's help to return Halimah's body. The activists deplored the Ministry's official statement that the migrant workers intentionally "neglected" themselves so that the Indonesian government would pay for their journey home.

Halimah's body finally arrived back in Indonesia 26 days after her death. Kohar admitted that he did not check her body and just looked at the face of Halimah. The family also turned down the suggestion of a post mortem on Halimah, as they wanted the body to be buried as soon as possible. "I just saw the face to make sure that it was really Halimah. I don't know whether there were signs of violence on her body or not. We were sorry for her, she had already been dead for 26 days when we saw her," he said.

Halimah was buried at a public cemetery in Salakopi hamlet, Haurwangi, Cianjur on 29 August 2009. Kohar said he was informed that he would receive a total of Rp. 40 million from the government which included Rp. 5 million for the burial cost; however, Kohar said that the family only received Rp. 10 million. "I remembered that she once told me that she wanted to slaughter a goat during the Muslim Day of Sacrifice. I used some of the money to buy a goat and slaughtered it on her behalf to honor her wish."

To date, Halimah's dream to renovate the house so that all members of her family could live in the same house still remains a dream. The money received was not enough to renovate the house. Meanwhile, Kohar is struggling to make a living. "I do all kinds of jobs, such as helping people renovate their houses. Sometimes, I have no work at all."

Kohar hopes that no other migrant workers will have to endure problems like his daughter did, and that no families will have to suffer the sorrows his family has had to endure. "Now, many people, such as our neighbors, have asked how to work safely overseas. Unfortunately, I have little knowledge about this subject but I believe migrant workers with problems should seek help from organizations that assist migrant workers," he said. (*)

