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Rohingya Boat People: A Challenge for Southeast Asia

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Synopsis

The exodus of many Rohingya over the past year has brought increased international awareness to their plight, as well as Southeast Asia's inability to deal effectively with forced migration. A regional approach is needed to find a durable solution to the influx of Rohingya boat people.

Commentary

SINCE THE communal clashes began in Arakan State in June 2012, the scale of Rohingya fleeing by boat to neighbouring Southeast Asian countries has increased significantly. According to a reliable source from the human rights organisation The Arakan Project, it is estimated 19,500 registered and unregistered Rohingya, including some Bangladeshis, have fled by boat from Bangladesh and North Arakan State, with an estimated 100 people having drowned during the process.

With an estimated 115,000 people in Arakan displaced by the communal clashes, it is not surprising thousands more Rohingya have fled from other parts of Arakan State not only by boat, but by air and overland too.

The boat people problem

Myanmar, a country once under a severely repressive regime, is now considered a budding democracy. Yet the opening up of Myanmar has re-ignited deep-seated and long-repressed inter-ethnic friction that has the potential to consume Arakan State in continual civil unrest. With the government of Myanmar showing little, if any, interest in the plight of Rohingya and giving no sign of granting permanent residency to Rohingya in the near future, the exodus of Rohingya to surrounding countries is unlikely to relent in coming months with harassment, intimidation campaigns and arbitrary arrests of Rohingya continuing today.

Along with the 200,000-400,000 unregistered Rohingya in Bangladesh, many Rohingya have for years sought refuge in Malaysia which is viewed by Rohingya as a welcoming destination due to the existing Rohingya community. Malaysia is currently the only country where Rohingya receive a minimum of protection. Rohingya now make up the second largest refugee group in Malaysia.

Yet, because Kuala Lumpur is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees, nor the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, Rohingya are technically illegal immigrants. Hence they often remain urban refugees in cities, with the constant threat of arrest, detention and deportation. However, in recent

times no Rohingya have been arrested or deported, especially since 2009 when Malaysia began allowing United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) access to Immigration Detention Centers to conduct refugee status determination processes.

Thailand's unsustainable policy

In the last month Thailand seems to have become not solely a transit country to Malaysia, but a destination country as well with increasing arrivals of boats carrying Rohingya intercepted off the coast of Thailand. Thailand's current policy towards arriving boats of Rohingya is to 'help them on.' Boats found near the Thai coast are not allowed to come ashore but are escorted back out to sea with food, water, and fuel provided on the condition that the boat continues its journey to Malaysia.

While official reports state that 6000 Rohingya have illegally entered Thailand by sea since October 2012, the reality is there has been many more Rohingya arriving on Thai shores in undetected boats.

Over the last three decades from 1975, Thailand has hosted almost three million refugees, initially from countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, though mostly from Myanmar. Thai policy towards people from Myanmar during this period has fluctuated, despite international pressure urging Thailand to adopt a flexible policy towards displaced peoples. More recently, Thailand has engaged in 'soft deportation' of Rohingya across the Myanmar-Thai border as Myanmar refuses to re-admit Rohingya.

Rohingya, after being either handed directly to brokers, enter a tangled human trafficking web where they often are forced to pay brokers exorbitant fees or engage in forced labor in Thailand so as to eventually be transported to the Malaysian border. Worse, there have even been allegations against senior military officers of involvement in the smuggling racket.

Recent Thai army raids on camps in Thailand's southern border province of Songkhla unearthed an estimated 900 Rohingya waiting to be sent to work in Malaysia. This development prompted Thai Foreign Minister Surapong Tovichakchaikul to state that those found, as well as a small group of Rohingya rescued from unseaworthy boats, would be permitted to remain on Thai soil for six months.

Although not upgrading their status to refugees, the Rohingya will be given a daily allowance of 75 baht (US\$2.50) while Thailand talks with the UN, international agencies and seeks third countries willing to accept them.

Rohingya boat people will continue to arrive on Thai shores in the future. The strategy of soft deportation currently being employed will likely become unsustainable as many of the newly arrived Rohingya boat people will be unable to pay the high fees to traffickers, with many having lost their property in the recent communal violence in Arakan State.

Need for concerted regional solutions

In sum, the Rohingya immigration issue can no longer be regarded as an internal affair of the Myanmar government. Although many Southeast Asian countries understandably wish to steer clear of the sensitive debate on the Rohingya, the regional dimensions of this exodus of people seem all too evident. It is hard to escape the conclusion that what is urgently required is a concerted regional strategy aimed at coaxing the Myanmar government to more effectively address the situation in Arakan State.

While addressing the root causes of the increasing outflows of Rohingya boat people is important, it may not be sufficient. Regional countries may have to seriously explore the option of allowing boats carrying Rohingya to land on their shores and assist in the processing of people, giving Rohingya the right to apply for asylum and go through a refugee status determination process for eventual resettlement.

While undeniably only a temporary solution, this move may still help deal with the unmistakable regional repercussions of such human outflows arising from communal violence in Arakan State.

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