

Conditions worsen for refugees trapped on boats in South East Asia

By John Roberts and Peter Symonds
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The plight of refugees on overcrowded and unsafe fishing boats in South East Asia deteriorated over the weekend as authorities in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia continued to block entrance into their countries.

Around 1,300 Bangladeshi and Rohingya asylum seekers have been rescued by Indonesian fishermen and are being housed in makeshift camps in the Indonesian province of Aceh. However, an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 people are still trapped at sea with few supplies and nowhere to land.

The Muslim Rohingya, members of an ethnic minority from western Burma (Myanmar), have been subjected to communal attacks and persecution encouraged by the military-backed regime as a means of diverting mounting social tensions. In 2012, an estimated 120,000 people were driven from their homes. Many fled across the border into Bangladesh, where they have been accommodated in squalid camps.

Refugees in Aceh told horrific stories of the situation on the refugee boats after they were abandoned at sea by the crew. The lack of food, water and medical supplies, as well as unsanitary conditions, fuelled desperation and violence among those on board, leading to a number of deaths.

One survivor, Saidful Islam, said dozens died on board from starvation and fighting, with the bodies dumped overboard. Mohammad Rafique told the *Guardian* that he was aboard a boat that drifted into Indonesian waters last week. After providing the passengers with some food and water, the Indonesian navy sent them on their way to Malaysia.

Conditions for the survivors in Indonesia are precarious. Local authorities and non-government organisations are pleading for assistance. Nasruddin, the humanitarian coordinator of the Geutanyoe

Foundation, said his organisation was providing refugees three meals a day. “We have enough food, drinks, medicine, etc., for a month. After then, we don’t know,” he said.

The Indonesian navy has doubled the number of warships patrolling its maritime borders and instructed local fishermen to stop bringing refugees ashore. Armed forces spokesman Euad Basya said that on Sunday the navy spotted a vessel filled with migrants crossing the Malacca Strait. “It was heading to Indonesian waters from Malaysia and was denied entry. It was intercepted, and we stopped it from passing,” he said.

The Malaysian and Thai militaries are doing likewise. “What do you expect us to do?” Malaysian Deputy Home Minister Wan Junaidi Jafaar told the *Guardian*. “We have been very nice to the people who broke our border. We have treated them humanely, but they cannot be flooding our shores like this.”

The escalating humanitarian crisis is provoking bitter recriminations between regional governments. Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman on Sunday demanded that Burma join talks over the refugees and threatened to use his country’s presidency of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to call an emergency meeting. He called for talks with his Thai and Indonesian counterparts tomorrow.

The Thai military junta has proposed a meeting with Malaysia, Indonesia and Burma on May 29. Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, however, has already rejected assisting the refugees. “If they break the law and land in Thailand, how can we take care of them?” he asked. “Where will the budget come from?”

For years, Thailand, like Malaysia, tacitly allowed the influx of Burmese refugees, in order to acquire a super-exploited cheap labour force. The stranding of

thousands of refugees at sea is a product of a crackdown by Thai security forces on trafficking routes from southern Thailand into Malaysia, supposedly in response to the exposure of the shocking conditions facing asylum seekers, including mass graves.

The Burmese regime signalled that it might not attend the May 29 meeting. Spokesman Major Zaw Htay said Burma would stay away if the word “Rohingya” were used. Burmese authorities justify the persecution of the ethnic minority by insisting that they are illegal Bengali immigrants, even though many have lived in the country for generations. Most Rohingya have no citizenship rights.

While Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand are immediately responsible for the humanitarian crisis, no other country in the region or internationally has come to the aid of the asylum seekers.

Indeed, successive Australian governments have paved the way for the inhumane treatment of refugees by South East Asian governments through the use of the navy to prevent refugee boats from reaching Australian shores. Deliberate inaction by Australian authorities has also led to the drowning of hundreds of asylum seekers as means of warning others not to attempt the journey.

The Obama administration has made gestures of concern, but has no intention of allowing the plight of refugees to cut across its broader strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. As part of its “pivot to Asia,” the US is strengthening its military ties throughout South East Asia.

US State Department spokesman Jeff Rathke declared last week: “This is a regional issue. It needs a regional solution in short order.” However, when pressed, he made crystal clear that Washington was not about to place any pressure on Burma. “Will we decide to disengage with Burma because we have a disagreement over the approach to the Rohingya?” he stated. “No, we will remain engaged with Burma.”

Since late 2011, Washington has developed close relations with the military-backed government in Burma, not because of any improvement in the regime’s atrocious record on democratic rights, but because it demonstrated its willingness to move out of China’s orbit. The US was all but silent during the communal violence against Rohingya that erupted in 2012. It has continued to back opposition leader Aung

San Suu Kyi, even though she and her National League for Democracy support the regime’s discriminatory measures against the Rohingya.

Equally, Washington is not about to disrupt relations with other governments in the region. Over the weekend, Secretary of State John Kerry appealed to his Thai counterpart to provide aid and shelter for the Rohingya, but was immediately rebuffed by Thai leaders. The US has no intention of pressing the issue, let alone offering to open its own borders to the desperate refugees.

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