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A humanitarian response

THREATENED peoples, threatened borders. This aptly describes the plight of the Filipinos fleeing from Philippine military attacks against Muslim rebels on Jolo Island and alas, the state of Malaysia's borders - which saw infiltration by Filipino illegal migrants in the past and will increasingly see a larger influx of asylum claimants and refugees.

In any military raid-and-rescue mission, there is always the risk of innocent civilians being caught in the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. This seems to be the case with the Filipinos knocking on our doors for refuge. In calling for the military offensive, President Joseph Estrada plainly did not want the state to be brought to its knees by the Abu Sayyaf group over the abduction of the 17 hostages. And rightly so.

But whether his order was misconstrued by the military as a blanket "crush" of all Muslims factions, irrespective of the civilians in their midst, does not change the fact that the military's action has unleashed refugee flows into Malaysia. Apart from physical contiguity, Malaysia is a targeted destination for the displaced Filipinos because it is a kin state - whereby it is home to a majority population of the same religion as the minority population caught in the conflict in the southern Philippines.

But kinship aside, there is the indisputable fact that we are dealing with a humanitarian issue since in this case, the civilian population bears the brunt of the harm caused by the military action. Hence, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is right in declaring that these Filipinos will be treated as war refugees, not illegal immigrants, and be placed in special centres until a time when safe repatriation is feasible.

Nevertheless, a distinction must still be made between the war refugees and Filipino illegal immigrants in Sabah, believed to be around 300,000. This is vital as Malaysia needs an intelligent foreign policy that avoid the perils of overstretch and the folly of ignoring the threats in our backyard such as illegal migration. Firm policing of our borders must continue to prevent any breach of sovereignty.

True, Malaysia adheres to Asean's non-intervention principle, which prohibits interference in the internal affairs of members. But we are in cognizance of the fact that the principle should not prejudice the application of enforcement measures to maintain the nation's peace, security and sovereignty. That said, the security threats in Sabah waters will persist as long as the conflict in the southern Philippines continues. We accept the fact that we cannot insulate ourselves from transboundary mayhem such as cross-border threats and migratory flows but Estrada, too, must recognise that continued disarray in the southern Philippines will jeopardise not only the development of its socio-economy but also that of its neighbours. The Mindanao situation has spilled over into the international system and, perhaps, it is time Manila made use of external mediation such as Asean's good office.

That said, Asean must redefine its collective security strategy to deal with new security threats such as environmental degradation - Kalimantan's forest fires that caused the haze which blanketed the region in 1997 is an example - and migratory flows caused by internal problems of member countries. As did Malaysia in recent days, Asean too must wake up to the fact that its security strategy must be governed by current realities, not old myths.

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