

AI defends UNHCR's role
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Soon Li Tsin

Amnesty International (AI) Malaysia comes in defence of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) after Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar's criticisms against the international body.

In a statement today, AI said Syed Hamid's view clearly reflects the government's lack of respect for human dignity and human rights.

"We reiterate our position that the UNHCR is a United Nations body here to assist the government in providing assistance and protection to asylum seekers and refugees in the spirit of international solidarity and burden sharing," it read.

The organisation pointed out that refugee matters are not merely a national concern but an international concern and therefore requires a more consolidated approach.

"Malaysia must therefore abide with the concept of international solidarity and burden-sharing in relation to refugees," it stated.

AI was responding to comments made by Syed Hamid yesterday who said Malaysia was supposed to a place of transition but the number of refugees was "becoming a flood" with UNCHR registering some 40,000 of them.

"We have given humane treatment to these people who have come to this country illegally. It (the UNHCR) should get them to a third country.

"Otherwise, every illegal in this country will go to the UNHCR and ask to be certified as refugees," he was quoted as saying in New Straits Times.

UNHCR spokesperson Yante Ismail when contacted by malaysiakini to respond to Syed Hamid's allegations said: "At this time, we have no comment."

Protection for genuine refugees

AI also commended UNHCR's role and stated that refugees in Malaysia go through stringent tests and screenings before they qualify for protection.

"Such high standards are maintained by the UNHCR to ensure protection for genuine refugees.

"The protection accorded by UNHCR is termed as International Protection, in line with the function and mandate given to this body," it said.

The organisation said Burmese asylum seekers and refugees who make up a large portion of the refugees in this country, continue to flee human rights violations and persecution in their home country.

"Until the Malaysian government works with Asean countries to resolve the political and

human rights crisis in Myanmar, we will continue to see refugee flows into our country,' it stated.

The organisation also urges the government to support the work of UNHCR and other multilateral organisations including in meeting the needs of refugees.

"This multilateral approach is a matter of principle that refugee assistance should be a shared, international responsibility," it added.

Malaysia is not a party to international refugee conventions, and illegal immigrants are often detained and later deported to their home country.

However, the UNHCR can assign refugee status to applicants and assist in resettling them in another country or in voluntary repatriation.

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