

Busting myths on Rohingya boat people

MalaysiaKini.com

May 18, 2015

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COMMENT It is with disgust that I read about the blatant xenophobic, fear-mongering, inhumane and generally just ignorant responses that have followed news of Malaysia turning away boat refugees from Myanmar.

It may be the examination season for students, but that is no reason not to do a little fact-checking before commenting on Facebook. Here are some common myths and lies on refugees, debunked and explained.

1. We don't owe those refugees anything. They're trying to come here illegally!

No! While Malaysia isn't a party to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (the major United Nations treaty dealing with the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers), that does not mean we have no obligations under international law in relation to refugees.

There is such a thing as the 'principle of non-refoulement', and while it is not enshrined in any treaty, it is part of what we call customary international law – that is, rules considered to have become so prevalent and recognised by states internationally so as to constitute a binding law.

This principle basically states: "It prohibits the expulsion or return of a refugee, in any manner whatsoever, to a territory where his/her life or freedom would be threatened on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. This principle covers not only expulsion and return but also measures such as rejection at the frontier."

So by turning those boats away, and leaving them to illness, hunger, thirst and desperation, we are violating some very real responsibilities under international law – and yes, so is every other country doing the same shameless thing.

2. But if we let these ones in, all of the others will come in too! Malaysia will be flooded with refugees!

You may be right, except... Malaysia has already been taking in refugees for a while now (although not very happily). As of February this year the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there are more than 152,000 refugees in Malaysia – over 140,000 of whom come from Myanmar, and 45,000 of them being Rohingyas. Oops!

Aside from the fact that we have not heard reports of refugees threatening to overcrowd our country, there's also the fact that the 'pull factors' that attract refugees to any particular country have little to do with migration policy or government action – and more to do with other factors.

This myth-busting fact sheet from the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASCR) puts it quite clearly in the case of Australia, at page 21:

“Refugees flee their homes because they are unsafe. This is often due to war, poverty and political unrest, which are sometimes referred to as ‘push factors’.

“They are the driving forces behind refugee movements. To the degree that ‘pull factors’ have an impact, it is geography and family links, not the specific domestic policy of any one nation, that determine the final destination of asylum seekers. The evidence for this is overwhelming.”

As they point out, refugees flee to places they can safely reach, or where their families are. It’s not unsurprising that the Rohingyas would come to Malaysia, a country of fellow Muslims, where they might expect some brotherhood and aid.

Sadly, Malaysia has not been very keen on helping these Muslim brothers and sisters of theirs. But as the ASRC says, government actions like turning refugees away and detaining them do nothing to discourage refugees. They will come regardless.

3. Okay, but they will harm Malaysian culture and drive up crime!

No! As a matter of fact, they are the ones suffering at our hands, not the other way around. Refugees are treated like illegal migrants, which usually means detention under harsh physical conditions.

We assume that the Rohingyas, like every other non-white class of migrants, will bring antisocial attitudes and drive up crime in the country. But check your bigotry and xenophobia at the door, please: your friends may have an anecdote about a foreigner robbing someone, but I challenge you to show us the numbers to prove that foreigners are behind any spike in crime, or that locals aren’t the cause of a majority of crimes.

As a matter of fact, better logic will tell you that these refugees are usually even more careful about breaking laws or drawing negative attention to themselves – because they risk being detained and deported. And all of this precisely because they are under our bigoted, irrationally worried scrutiny.

The Refugee Council in the United Kingdom confirms as much: over there, the vast majority of asylum seekers are law-abiding. What’s really worse is that these people fear going to the police over any abuse they may be facing – again, because they don’t want to be deported.

As for the question of culture and assimilation, here’s the summary: cultures evolve. The Malaysians of today were the pendatang of the decades and centuries of the past. Of course, immigration is a balancing act every nation must handle. But cultural change isn’t the enemy. It’s an inevitable, and - if we let it – enriching part of life.

4. Well, even if we allow them in, they will simply be an economic burden on the country! What about our hungry children?

Here it is easiest to let other case studies speak for themselves.

From the ASCR, page 28: "Contrary to common belief, various waves of refugee resettlement in Australia have not led to a drain on the economy.

In 2011, Professor Graeme Hugo from the University of Adelaide, on behalf of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, undertook an extensive study into the ways in which each of the various waves of humanitarian arrivals – eastern Europeans post-World War II, Southeast Asians in the 1980s and 1990s and recent arrivals from Africa and the Middle East – have contributed to Australian society."

From a 'refugee economies' study in Uganda, page 36: "While many refugees do incorporate aid into their survival strategies, they routinely strike a complex balance in their livelihood strategies, managing diversified portfolios of income and food sources. These households and individuals rely on aid to supplement certain key shifting gaps in their income, while at the same time pursuing strategies of economic self-reliance through other means. This nuanced reality highlights the limitations of binary simplifications such as 'dependent' or 'self-reliant'."

And the Refugee Council in the UK has found that: immigrants 'pay more into the public purse', that it is much cheaper to support a refugee doctor than training a new one in the country, and that asylum-seeking children 'contribute very positively' in schools – among other things.

All of these findings challenge the assumptions that refugees are always a burden on the state and community, and that they are wholly dependent on humanitarian assistance (which the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees contributes a lot to, by the way – to the tune of over US\$20 million (RM71.24 million) in its most recent budget).

You know what's a real drain on our resources? Spending money to jail refugees and expelling them. Money that could be spent resettling these people and facilitating their integration into the economy is being spent keeping them out of our economy and workforce – wasting time and resources, and stepping on the dignity of those who have left their homes behind for safer havens.

5. But they carry diseases! They will infect us all!

They may carry diseases, of course – but no more so than any traveller, tourist or migrant who comes to the country. And the answer to all of these situations is the same: screen them, check them, have them recover and be treated if need be. No, they aren't carrying Ebola. No, they aren't carrying a zombie virus.

5. I don't care! No mercy for these pendatang!

How do you feel every time a politician calls you a pendatang and says you shouldn't be given mercy?

This is not to dismiss the fact that managing refugees is a complicated job that involves social, economic and political considerations.

However, we have proven that even in the short to mid-term, it will not cost us nearly as much as we think – and in fact, these refugees may even be great assets to our society and economy, if only we are open-minded enough to consider the possibility.

A long-term diplomatic solution is necessary, of course. Every country should step up and do its share of welcoming refugees, of course. But when you have thousands adrift in the sea, slowly running out of food, water and hope – then our immediate worry should not be crime or money.

The people on those boats don't know all that we know – they are not thinking about what the immigration officers in Malaysia will say to them or whether someone will give them a house. They are not watching Al Jazeera and keeping up with what Malaysian foreign policy is. They simply do not want to die.

These are people we can easily save – and if you are more concerned with your unfounded worries of an Ebola outbreak, or an economic collapse, or a robbery spree – then you are not a very nice human being.

Save them first. Set an example. Get the other countries to do their part. Then converge on Myanmar and end this farce once and for all.

How easy (or difficult, more likely) this will be is a story for another time.

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