

Rohingyas towed to our waters, decries Shahidan

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PARLIAMENT A neighbouring country was today accused by a cabinet member of towing ships carrying Rohingyas to Malaysian waters, thereby pushing the refugee problem to our country.

"The boat carrying Rohingya refugees was old, with a maximum speed of seven knots per hour," Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Shahidan Kassim told Parliament.

"However, the boat moved fast, as it was towed by a neighbouring country's vessel," he said. "It (the neighbour) was sending (the boatload of refugees) to us," Shahidan said, adding that the boat would take 12 days to reach Malaysia if it sailed from Myanmar.

Malaysia is not satisfied with the fact that the security vessels are sending refugee boats to Malaysian waters, he said during the question-and-answer session.

Despite this, Shahidan (left) said, Malaysia did not turn the refugees away, but acted in a humane manner and offered them food, water and fuel for their vessel.

Malaysia would only help the refugees at sea, but not allow them to land, he said.

"They can go on to international waters or wherever they want to after receiving help, but not to Malaysia," Shahidan said.

"The country has taken in 152,000 refugees in total, with 45,000 being Rohingya refugees registered under United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

"They said Malaysia has no regard for humanitarianism, but in fact they have taken no refugee," he said.

'Most see Malaysia as their destiny'

Most of the refugees see Malaysia as their destiny, rather than a transit, Shahidan said.

As such, Malaysia should be cautious in taking action that would open floodgates and invite more refugees to come, he said.

Foreign media reports that were reproduced in the local media have also made the government to be seen as inhumane, he said.

The Umno supreme council member also came up with the theory that neighbouring countries put illegal migrants they caught on the seas onto the Rohingya boats.

"While most of the people are Rohingyas, some of the others are Bangladeshis and people of unknown origin.

"It is possible that the foreign countries found them in their operations on the seas and injected them (into Rohingya) boats, where the human traffickers are also on board.

"Malaysia is burdened with the presence of immigrants from Africa and Europe as well," Shahidan added.

While Malaysia upholds its principle of not allowing refugees into the country, it will offer help if the boats face an emergency issue, such as if there was hole in the boat.

More than 100,000 stateless Rohingya Muslims have fled violence and poverty in Myanmar since 2012. Most travel in human traffickers' boats to Thailand, where they are held by traffickers in squalid jungle camps before a ransom is paid.

An estimated 25,000 Rohingyas and Bangladeshis boarded people smugglers' boats in the first three months of this year, twice as many as in the same period of 2014, UNHCR reported.

Some 8,000 people are stranded at sea

Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia have been turning away Rohingya refugees fleeing violence and persecution in their home country.

Migrant activists estimate that this has left between 6,000 and 8,000 people stranded at sea.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said an Asean solution must be taken, through the network of Asean member countries, to deal with the Rohingya refugee issue before it becomes a more deadly humanitarian catastrophe.

Myanmar should deal with the Rohingya community internally, instead of forcing it on its Asean neighbours, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has said.

"Don't they have the compassion to settle this problem internally, to the point this burden has to be dealt with by Asean?" Muhyiddin asked.