

The Lady remains silent on plight of Rohingya

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The crisis over thousands of Rohingya people stranded on boats in South-East Asian waters has come during a watershed year for Myanmar, the departure point of most of the migrants.

The country is preparing for general elections in which the opposition will compete for the first time since 1990 with Aung San Suu Kyi - Myanmar's pro-democracy champion and best-known politician - at its head.

With the political stakes so high, and repeated urgings for Myanmar to examine its role as the source of most of the refugees, the refusal of both the government and opposition to tackle the crisis is, for many observers, glaring.

The government has resisted pressure to, in its words, "internationalise" the issue, for example by refusing to attend a regional conference this week.

But it is Suu Kyi (photo), widely known in Myanmar as the Lady, and her opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) in particular that have been in the firing line.

Many expected Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her pro-democracy struggle under the military regime, to provide leadership on the Rohingya issue.

"Aung San Suu Kyi's silence is conspicuous in this period because the international spotlight is fully shone the plight of the Rohingyas," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Institute for Security and International Studies in Bangkok.

When asked about the treatment of Rohingya since her release in 2010, Suu Kyi has skirted the issue, instead referring to the need to respect "the rule of law", and saying Rohingya are not the only group to suffer prejudice.

"Suu Kyi has a lot of political capital within the country," said a senior analyst at an international think-tank in Yangon who wished to remain unnamed.

"She has taken up other unpopular causes in the past in the name of what is right, but this is an election year and she can't change her stance now."

When asked for comment, the NLD told our reporter that Suu Kyi was travelling and unavailable for comment.

In keeping with the government's line, the NLD spokesperson added that the party does not accept the term Rohingya but considers the more than 1-million strong population to be ethnic Bengalis, illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh.

The party also needs to take into account public sentiment in Myanmar, the spokesperson said, alluding to the tensions between the mostly Buddhist ethnic Burmese and the mostly Muslim Rohingya.

Need for votes from Buddhist majority

Suu Kyi and her party will need to rely on votes from the Buddhist majority in order to win elections slated for November, even if she herself is barred by the constitution from becoming president.

“(Suu Kyi's) hedging position on the issue is understandable,” said Thitinan.

“In view of Myanmar people's deep dislike, (Suu Kyi) can hardly afford to speak up for the Rohingyas in an election year when she has shown ambitions for the highest office.”

US-based rights group Human Rights Watch say such political strategising could bring disaster for the migrants.

“It's time for Aung San Suu Kyi to end her silence on the plight of the Rohingya,” the group's deputy Asia director, Phil Robertson (photo), said.

Although many hundreds of Rohingya on boats from Myanmar have been taken ashore in the past week in Malaysia and Indonesia, there are thought to be thousands more at sea.

“To them it is better to die at sea than living in a land full of discrimination,” said a Rohingya elder in the Maungdaw township in western Myanmar.

As pressure builds on Myanmar to resolve the Rohingya crisis, it may not be possible for the country's most celebrated leader to maintain her silence indefinitely.

- dpa