

## **UNHCR welcomes M'sia offer to take in Syrian refugees but...**

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**Aidila Razak**

United Nations refugee agency UNHCR welcomes Malaysia's announcement that it will take in 3,000 Syrian refugees, but also hopes for more efforts to assist the thousands already on Malaysian soil.

Its representative in Malaysia Richard Towle said there are about 154,000 refugees from various countries in Malaysia who require assistance.

"Now is a good time to look at this," he told reporters on the sidelines of the launch of the cook book 'A Taste From Home' featuring refugee cooks, in Kuala Lumpur last night.

This includes providing means for the refugee community to be assisted in a "more legal way".

He said this is better than leaving them to the "rather dark area of society".

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak (photo) told the UN General Assembly on Thursday that Malaysia will accept 3,000 Syrian refugees over a period of three years.

Towle said UNHCR has no details yet over how this will happen.

There are 970 Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR in Malaysia as at August.

Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN convention to protect refugees, despite being a transit point for thousands every year.

Refugees, including the 50,000-plus Rohingya residing in Malaysia, are considered illegal migrants and are barred from formal employment.

Some have resorted to using fake documents to secure a livelihood, a move Towle said UNHCR does not support.

### **Sailing season soon**

Malaysia came under international scrutiny in May when boats laden with hundreds of distressed persons from Myanmar and Bangladesh washed up on Malaysian shores, after people smugglers abandoned their human cargo amid a crackdown.

Towle said the same crisis is about to hit home again, with "sailing season" around the corner.

"We do understand more boats are coming from these countries.

"We need to strategise and plan. We have learnt a lot from what happened in May," he said.

Malaysia took in several hundreds who arrived during the May crisis and housed them in holding camps in Kedah, where at least one has died.

This followed the grizzly discovery of mass graves near camps used by people smugglers, along the Malaysian-Thai border in Perlis.

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