

New plan addresses plight of Muslim refugees
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Human rights groups have spurred into action following a recent conference highlighting the plight of marginalised Muslim refugees in Malaysia.

This new wave of refugees have been arriving in Malaysia from more than 40 countries – including Sri Lanka, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan – over the past decade.

Since Malaysia is an Islamic country with modest entry requirements, it is seen as an attractive safe house for asylum seekers.

sri lanka refugees civilians 290109 02During a one-day conference earlier this month, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), NGOs and the Malaysian Bar Council agreed on a comprehensive taskforce plan specifically designed to help Muslim refugee communities.

As a relatively small population of 6000 refugees, they have been falling under the radar of NGOs equipped to help them and led an almost invisible existence until now.

In comparison, Burmese refugees amount to 81,000, accounting for 92 per cent of Malaysia's total refugee population.

"It's exactly because of their smaller often scattered communities that these newcomers haven't received our help," explains Lia Syed, executive director of Malaysian Social Research Institute, a KL-based NGO and conference organiser.

Matters are made worse because these smaller communities are less able to form solid self-help networks of the type formed by the Burmese, she said.

But, leading human rights lawyer and conference speaker Andrew Khoo says the problem exists because of a wide, yet ill-conceived perception that "the government operates a pro-Muslim policy of assistance to Muslim refugees."

"With this so-called deep-pocketed supporter, community and NGOs are focussing their efforts elsewhere," he said.

According to Khoo, Muslim refugees like the earlier Burmese Rohingya have received governmental assistance in the past.

However, the new wave of Muslim refugees "have been badly let down by the government", he said.

Malaysia is one of the few countries yet to ratify the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and currently does not offer refugees any legal rights or protection.

Alan Vernon, head of the UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur, says that without legal status or protection, refugees in Malaysia "are generally on their own".

"And that is a very anxiety-ridden and dangerous place to be."

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