

Refugees 'a perennial problem for Malaysia'

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Q: What is our position on refugees?

A: Refugees have become a perennial problem for us. You know there was a time when we gave official recognition during the Vietnam crisis in 1975. (After the fall of Saigon to the communists many Vietnamese fled the country in boats).

We signed with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to accept refugees from Vietnam (or boat people as they were known).

At that time the agreement with the UNHCR was that a third country would receive them. That was the position (only in respect to Vietnamese boat people) then but it is not supposed to mean a change of position in respect of recognition of refugees or asylum seekers.

Q: So what is the status of these so-called refugees under the country's legal system?

A: We have always treated it under one law. Anybody who comes into the country without proper documentation will be considered illegal. If they are allowed to stay, we allow it

A Myanmar refugee couple who had 'rescued' 5-year-old Muhamad Nazrin Shamsul Ghazali is now in the spotlight. They are among more than 40,000 foreigners granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar speaks to V. VASUDEVAN on the country's position on refugees and the problems brought by them

more on a humanitarian basis. As it is, we have more than our fair share of illegals in our country. Some say half-a-million, some one million but because they are illegals, we don't have an actual figure. That is without recognising refugees.

Of course, the UNHCR is supposed to look at the refugee question on the basis of need, whether they are real refugees or not.

Asylum seekers are given temporary stay in a country when they are running away from political persecution, not people who run away from their country to improve themselves economically.

Economic refugees should go through the proper channels.

Q: As things stand now, once (refugees) get their documentation from the UNHCR, it appears that the government is helpless.



Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar

A: On humanitarian grounds we do not take action with the understanding that as soon as possible they should be relocated to a third country.

It is a transition. But it is becoming a flood. There are some 40,000 who have been recorded (as refugees by UNHCR and given papers). It is supposed to take care and feed them.

The fact is that we are not a

signatory to the convention (International Convention of 1951 on refugees and the additional protocol of 1967). We have given humane treatment to these people who have come to this country illegally. It (UNHCR) should get them to a third country. Otherwise, every illegal in this country will go to the UNHCR and ask to be certified as refugees. We have been liberal.

Q: Has the ministry written to the UNHCR to indicate its concern about the situation?

A: We have done that on a number of occasions. We have called the agency. We have spoken to it and explained our position. The agency understands we have been accommodating in allowing them to operate.

What we are not happy about is the current state of affairs, the difficulty, the social and economic burden we face.

Now everybody (refugees) we ask for identity papers, they come up with the UNHCR (identity papers). We don't have the international protocol cover, while UNHCR is operating in our country with our agreement.

Q: Has the UNHCR asked for a place to put all these people?

A: You cannot equate the Vietnam situation (boat people) with the current situation. I think the UNHCR recognises its role. In the first place, it should not be taking people except for those who really have a problem and it should inform us. At present, it doesn't inform us. We are not in the habit of quarrelling with UN agencies. We work with them.

Q: Why has Malaysia not signed the protocol on refugees?

A: We have been looking at it many times. We have considered it. But our concern and our worry, and the bottom line, is how we are going to manage them (refugees). These are not professionals or skilled people.

Q: Are you saying that it (UNHCR) is not doing enough?

A: I will not say it is not doing anything about it. It has worked with other embassies to place these people in third countries. I find that those who are really political refugees have no difficulty getting placed in third countries. Even Rohingyas. I was told that the US came to see. Where they can absorb, they will.

Q: What are the problems associated with the refugees?

A: You see people (the refugees) on the road. Syndicates exploit them. Children who are fatherless, motherless are on our streets. They have become street children. It is not that we have no heart.

UNHCR has to manage it properly. During the flood (last year) we found a lot of Rohingyas coming forward for aid. We gave aid, we did not discriminate against them.