

Rohingya crisis: Asean's acid test

KINIBIZ ONLINE

May 21, 2015

By STEPHANIE JACOB

The slow and uncoordinated Asean response to the Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi migrants stranded at sea is symptomatic of the larger ineffectiveness of Asean as an entity and the secretariat in particular.

One week after the plight of the Rohingya finally caught the imagination of the Malaysian public at large, there finally appears to be some relief on the horizon. But the crisis remains the first real test for Asean to prove it is more than just a series of symbolic sound bites.

Desperate images of hungry and tired Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi migrants have appeared on our screens recently. For years they have been bounced from one country's coast to the next like a table tennis ball rather than boats full of human beings. Now, Malaysia and Indonesia will no longer turn boats which arrive on its shores away.

Various leaders of both the countries and from Thailand have now stated that it is the moral and humane thing to do. And it is good that they have finally realised this.

Make no mistake about it, coming a whole week after the navies of these three countries turned these people back out to sea, it is almost inevitable that inaction and politicking would have caused some among them to perish due to hunger, exhaustion or disease.

Nonetheless, perhaps something is better than nothing. And at least the three countries will no longer turn them away.

After a meeting with his Thai and Indonesian counterparts, Malaysia's Foreign Minister Anifah Aman said: "Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to continue to provide humanitarian assistance to those 7,000 irregular migrants still at sea."

"We also agreed to offer them temporary shelter provided that the resettlement and repatriation process will be done in one year by the international community," he added after the meeting near Kuala Lumpur.

The minister warned, however, that Malaysia and Indonesia have limited resources and capability to help the migrants and said that the international community will also have to help. A further caveat is that the countries will not search for the boats, but they would offer assistance only to those who reach their shores.

Later, Indonesian Vice-President Jusuf Kalla released a statement clarifying that the Bangladeshi migrants will be repatriated to their home country “because they are economic migrants”. He said the Rohingya would be able to stay longer pending resettlement in a third country.

A crisis for Asean

Interestingly, there were only three nations at this meeting to find a stop-gap solution to the crisis. No Myanmar or Bangladesh, from which these people originate from. And interestingly no other Asean nation too.

The absence of other Asean member nations is strange. Surely this is a crisis for Southeast Asia as a whole?

It is astonishing that Myanmar would not be present to offer their explanations and proposals for dealing with this crisis. More important is how other Asean nations have allowed Myanmar to simply shrug their shoulders at the problem and act like they are simply one of the countries being burdened by the crisis.

The fact remains it is the policies of the Myanmar government which drove the Rohingya into these perilous journeys to begin with.

The Rohingya crisis originated in Myanmar where they are persecuted people denied of basic human rights. The Myanmar government says they are illegal immigrants just about every other authority on the matter says they have been in what is present day Myanmar for generations.

There has been a lot of criticism for the governments which turned the boats away, but equal and more criticism should be levelled at a government which totally denies and disregards the existence of a minority within their borders.

Myanmar needs to be held accountable by the international community, but more importantly it must be held to account by Asean. Unfortunately all evidence is that Asean is incapable of holding its members to anything.

It might come as a surprise, but there is in fact an Asean secretariat, albeit one which is woefully understaffed, underfunded and unempowered. It is plainly not capable of forcing the various parties to the table, nor can it dream of holding any nation to what they have agreed upon whether in principal or as a signatory.

Asean was formed to bring peace and economic development to the region. In the first instance, it has succeeded to the extent that there has been no armed conflict between the nations. There has been progress in the second goal as well, although to what extent would vary with whom you ask.

Asean secretariat toothless

A large factor of Asean's limited influence is that no country has been willing to give even an inch of its sovereign authority away, which has made the secretariat a very toothless tiger indeed.

Furthermore, the principle of non-intervention for years has allowed various governments throughout the region to get away with human rights abuses and the suppression of democratic rights — with nothing more than gentle verbal reproaches coming from the rest.

Perhaps each individual country finds itself afraid of being labelled a hypocrite, given that none of them come to the table with clean hands.

Of late, Asean nations have chosen to focus on the Asean Economic Community (AEC) as a point of pride. To their credit, the governments have managed to remove close to all tariff barriers and achieve some economic liberalisation.

But even here, pervasive and entrenched non-tariff barriers continue to make significant economic liberalisation difficult. With AEC targeted to be fully implemented by 2015, critics say that all that has been tackled is the low-hanging fruit.

CIMB Group Bhd chairman Nazir Razak recently expressed frustration with the progress of AEC and said that Asean leaders had failed to deliver what was promised.

“We bought the whole Asean story as per 2007 (when the AEC blueprint was launched), that by 2015 there would be a single production base, free movement of labour and so on... We then began to construct a business model towards that end,

with the belief that we will get pretty much there — but we are so far from there. So although I am a big believer in Asean, net-net, it has been a frustration,” he said.

The Asean Open Skies policy is another one which Asean leaders apparently made a priority, and in theory the region is making progress towards its year-end goal. An article in AsiaOne quoted an Asean representative as saying the nations were now negotiating the air “fifth freedom” which is the right to fly between two foreign countries on a flight originating or ending in one’s own country.

However, experts have said that Asean’s biggest player have still not completely agreed to granting its regional partners their third and fourth air freedoms. Plainly there is much to do in all areas of cooperation.

Step up, Asean

There has been plenty of talk about how this is Asean’s time and how, if the region cooperates, it would become a force to be reckoned with. But how can Asean do that when it cannot even ensure that its members stick to what they say for soundbites?

The concept of non-intervention was perhaps relevant at a time when the key aim was to ensure Asean nations would not take up arms against each other. We are now using words like community, and that means to some extent getting involved in each others business. It means agreeing to something, and then being able to collectively as a group demand that each other adhere to it.

Under the principle of non-intervention, Asean nations cannot look, or speak to, emphatically against Myanmar nor do they have any means of pressuring the country to stop the Rohingya persecution.

Similarly, it cannot look at Malaysia’s car industry protections or Indonesia’s reluctance to open up its skies to competition. In its current form, Asean is incapable of bringing about significant change or progress.

If this is truly to be Asean’s time, then Asean as an entity needs to be bolder and braver. And the first step must be to address the Rohingya issue in no uncertain terms.

It should start by holding Myanmar to account for its actions against the Rohingya and by working to find a long-term solution to the crisis. Any short-term solutions in the interim should be regionally driven.

Because if Asean is to be any sort of community at all, we need to start solving our problems together.

GRRRRR!!!

© 2015 KINIBIZ. All rights reserved.

Source: <http://www.kinibiz.com/story/tigertalk/168665/rohingya-crisis-asean%E2%80%99s-acid-test.html>