

Students union wants Malaysia to help Rohingya, sign UN Convention

The Rakyat Post

May 16, 2015

By Rajina Dhillon

KUALA LUMPUR, The United Kingdom & Eire Malaysian Law Students' Union (KPUM) has chided Malaysian authorities for not assisting the thousands of Rohingya stranded at sea in boats.

Urging Malaysian students not to remain silent over the "injustice" that has befallen them, KPUM reminded that the Rohingya were not illegal immigrants, but a minority who suffer state-sanctioned discrimination.

KPUM president Pang Jo Fan also noted that while Malaysia was not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention, it should not ignore the plight of those involved.

"This does not mean we can cold-bloodedly ignore the few thousand currently adrift at sea.

"The union echoes the statement made by the secretary-general of the United Nations that Malaysia should uphold the obligation to rescue at sea and comply with the principle of non-refoulement," Pang said in a statement.

The principle of non-refoulement, he explained, was the prohibition of all countries under customary international law to expel refugees who have the right to be recognised.

"This is a principle applicable to all countries regardless of signatory status of the Convention.

"As such, Malaysia must still provide basic minimal protection and fundamental rights to both refugees and asylum seekers regardless of length of protection.

"Malaysia's stance to turn back all refugee boats would therefore constitute a blatant breach of customary international law," added Pang.

While urging the government to establish procedures to deal with asylum applications, KPUM also wanted Malaysia to sign the 1951 Convention and commit to the protection of human rights, proper treatment of refugees and humanitarian causes.

"Due to a lack of recognition in the law, all refugees in Malaysia currently hold a status of illegal immigrants and are very often subjected to ill-treatment by the authorities.

"Therefore, whether or not Malaysia decides to officially sign the convention, the union believes that the status of refugees should at the very least be recognised through the establishment of a legal framework for asylum and immigration," he added.

Last Sunday, on May 10, 1,158 Bangladesh nationals and people of the Rohingya community from Myanmar arrived by boat in Langkawi. They were arrested for having no travel papers.

Meanwhile, several boats carrying between 5,000 and 6,000 Rohingya and Bangladesh nationals were reportedly waiting at sea for the right time to sail to Malaysia, according to Rohingya Society of Malaysia representative in Kedah, Yusuf Ali.

Subsequently, National Security Council (NSC) secretary Datuk Mohamed Thajudeen Abdul Wahab said Malaysia would prevent the entry of ships or boats bearing “illegal immigrants” to avert social problems and security issues.

This stance has raised a few eyebrows among non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who have urged authorities to help those abandoned at sea over fears that they would be living in inhumane conditions.

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