

Malaysia silent so far on UN boat people appeal
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Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia gave no response on Wednesday to a United Nations appeal for them to rescue thousands of migrants, many of them hungry and sick, adrift in boats in Southeast Asian seas.

There were conflicting statements on whether regional governments would continue to push back migrant boats in the face of the UN warning that they risked a "massive humanitarian crisis".

"Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand have decided not to receive boat people, as far as I am aware," Major General Werachon Sukhondhapatipak, spokesman for Thailand's ruling junta, told Reuters.

He declined to comment on the UN refugee agency UNHCR's appeal on Tuesday for an international search and rescue operation for the many stranded on the seas between Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

The UN has said several thousand migrants were abandoned at sea by smugglers following a Thai government crackdown on human trafficking.

Malaysia's Home Ministry also declined to comment on the UN rescue appeal.

The issue would be discussed at a meeting of 15 countries, to be held in Bangkok on May 29, Thai junta spokesman Werachon said.

But the Royal Thai Navy said on Wednesday that its policy was not to send the boats back to sea.

"If they come to Thai waters we must help them and provide food and water," Rear Admiral Kan Deeubol told Reuters. "For human rights reasons, we will not send them back to sea."

Earlier this week, a junta spokesman said that a surge in migrants to Indonesia and Malaysia from Bangladesh and Myanmar had been caused by the crackdown and by Thai authorities blocking boats from landing.

Thailand ordered a clean-up of suspected traffickers' camps last week after 33 bodies, believed to be of migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh, were found in shallow graves near the Malaysian border.

That has made traffickers wary of landing in Thailand, the preferred destination for the region's people smuggling networks, leading to many migrants being left out at sea.

A senior Malaysian maritime official said on Tuesday, after more than 1,000 people

arrived on the Malaysian island of Langkawi at the weekend, that any more boats trying to land would be turned back

"We don't allow them in," said First Admiral Tan Kok Kwee, northern region head of the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency. "It's a policy matter."

Indonesia provided food, water and medical supplies to around 500 passengers on a boat off the coast of the northwestern province of Aceh on Monday, before sending the vessel towards Malaysia.

The Indonesian Navy said the passengers of the boat they sent onwards wanted to go to Malaysia, not Indonesia. – Reuters, May 13, 2015.

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