

Allow stranded Rohingya, Bangladeshi to land, Malaysian Bar tells Putrajaya
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Putrajaya must allow boatloads of Rohingya and Bangladeshi to land in Malaysian shores to prevent a human catastrophe, the Malaysian Bar said, adding that there was a precedent.

Its president Steven Thiru said in the 1970s, after the fall of Saigon, the Malaysian authorities sheltered the Vietnamese boat people, to prevent further suffering and loss of human life.

"We must allow these boats to land, set up reception centres to receive the people on board, document them, and provide them with basic amenities," he said in a statement today.

He said that after all, Malaysians are, by nature, generous people.

"Blessed with relative peace and prosperity, we have reached out in the past and organised flotillas to assist the Palestinians, and have taken in Acehnese and Bosnian refugees fleeing persecution in their homeland."

"It is therefore somewhat perplexing that the same humanitarian spirit appears to be absent in the Malaysian government's response to the boatloads of Rohingyas coming to our shores," he added.

More than 1.3 million Rohingya – viewed by the United Nations as one of the world's most persecuted minorities – live in Myanmar's western Rakhine state.

AFP reported last week that Malaysia had turned away two boats carrying hundreds of migrants after supplying them with fuel and provisions.

Earlier, about 1,000 Rohingya and Bangladesh nationals were abandoned by people smugglers and swam to shore on Langkawi, a resort island in the north of Malaysia's peninsula. They are now under the custody of the immigration authorities.

Steven said while it may seem unneighbourly to accuse a fellow Asean government of wrongful conduct, it cannot be disputed that the Rohingyas have not been granted citizenship in Myanmar and thereby deprived of all political rights.

He said Malaysia has indirectly contributed to the exacerbation of this problem by repeatedly ignoring the matter for many years.

Steven said Malaysia and other Asean nations have the responsibility to protect the Rohingyas so as not to compound the issue of ethnic cleansing that is being allegedly carried out by Myanmar.

"As such the Bar welcomes that the Malaysian government has scheduled a meeting tomorrow with the governments of Indonesia and Thailand to discuss the situation," he added.

However, it was critical to address this issue head-on and Malaysia, as the chair of Asean, must take the lead and show the way forward.

Myanmar is reportedly not willing to attend the meeting and Steven said that meant the process already began with a huge handicap, the refusal of the country of origin to participate in a process of finding a solution.

He said the Bar also urged Putrajaya to immediately engage with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Kuala Lumpur to put into place a system of receiving and registering this latest wave of boat people.

He said as Malaysia is a member of the UN Security Council, the Bar urged the Malaysian government to move a resolution for intervention in this crisis of alleged ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas from Myanmar.

He said it was also time for Asean to do away with the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of an Asean member state.

"This crisis clearly shows that what happens in a neighbouring country can, and often does, have cross-border implications," he added. – May 19, 2015.

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