

Malaysia, Indonesia to accept boats in migrant breakthrough
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Malaysia and Indonesia said today they would no longer turn away boatpeople, in a major breakthrough for the region's migrant crisis that came just hours after hundreds more starving people were rescued at sea.

Earlier, Myanmar also softened its line on the issue, offering to help provide humanitarian assistance to stricken migrants.

Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand had sparked growing international outrage for driving off boats overloaded with exhausted and dying migrants from Bangladesh and from Myanmar's ethnic Rohingya minority.

But Malaysian Foreign Minister Tan Sri Anifah Aman announced that "the towing and the shooing (away of boats) is not going to happen" anymore.

"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 said following talks with his Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsudi and Thailand's Tanasak Patimapragorn.

The Thai envoy refrained from participating in the offer, saying he had to check with his government first, Anifah said.

Nearly 3,000 boatpeople have already swum to shore or been rescued off the three countries over the past 10 days after a Thai crackdown disrupted long-established smuggling routes, prompting some of the gangs responsible to abandon their human cargo at sea.

Anifah said Malaysian intelligence estimates put the number of people still stranded at sea at about 7,000 people.

In the latest drama involving incoming migrants, 433 starving people were rescued from their rickety boat off Indonesia by local fisherman earlier today, officials and fisherman said.

AFP journalists confirmed it was the same boat that had earlier bounced between Thailand and Malaysia in recent days as images of its emaciated passengers shocked observers worldwide.

"Their condition is very weak. Many are sick, they told me that some of their friends died from starvation," said Teuku Nyak Idrus, a local fishermen involved in the rescue.

Those rescued included 30 children and 26 women, search and rescue officials said.

Myanmar state media today quoted a foreign ministry statement saying the government "shares concerns" expressed by the international community and is "ready to provide humanitarian assistance to anyone who suffered in the sea".

That marked the most conciliatory statement yet from Myanmar's Buddhist-dominated government, which considers the Muslim Rohingya to be foreigners from neighbouring Bangladesh and disavows responsibility for them.

Myanmar has come under growing pressure over its policies toward Rohingya, who flee by the thousands annually to escape years of violence and discrimination at the hands of the Buddhist majority.

Most head for Muslim-majority Malaysia.

US assistant secretary of state Tom Malinowski said Myanmar must change its Rohingya policy.

"They need to be treated as citizens with dignity and with human rights," he told CNN.

The Myanmar government's "relationship with the international community is never going to be completely right and normal" until that happens, he said.

The UN's refugee agency told AFP yesterday it had received reports that at least 2,000 migrants had been stranded for weeks on boats off the Myanmar-Bangladesh coasts.

They are being held on board amid horrific conditions by human-traffickers who are demanding payment from the passengers to release them, a spokeswoman said.

The Bangladeshis who take to the seas are largely economic migrants seeking to escape poverty at home.

In their joint statement Anifah and Marsudi said the "root causes" of the Bay of Bengal exodus must be addressed, while not singling out any country.

Today's joint statement recommended convening an emergency meeting of the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

Malaysia is this year's chair of Asean, which includes Myanmar as a member.

Following appeals by UN chief Ban Ki-moon and Washington last week for the Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants to be rescued, Pope Francis issued his first comments on the issue Tuesday.

"We think of the poor Rohingya of Myanmar. As they leave their land to escape persecution they do not know what will happen to them," he said in a mass at the Vatican, likening the plight of the Rohingya to that of Christian and ethnic Yazidi people brutalised by the Islamic State group. – AFP, May 20, 2015.

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