

Tackling the roots of the Rohingya crisis IRIN Kate Mayberry 8 June 2015 As

Malaysian police finish exhuming mass graves

in human trafficking camps along the Thai border, Southeast Asian nations are under pressure to end the brutal trade in human lives by tackling the roots of the crisis.

Richard Towle, who represents the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, in Malaysia, says the current crisis provides a "unique opportunity" to kick-start diplomatic efforts not only to deal with the trafficking of migrants, but also the underlying problems that prompt many people to leave their homes in the first place.

"Tackling the root causes has to be part of a suite of measures taken, otherwise we're simply dealing with the symptoms and not the cause," Towle told IRIN in an interview at the UNHCR compound in Kuala Lumpur.

The majority of the 3,300 migrants who have so far come ashore in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, as well as a further 2,600 thought to still be stranded at sea in boats abandoned by their smugglers and traffickers are Rohingya from Myanmar, a persecuted Muslim minority stripped of citizenship since 1982.

Tackling the trafficking networks may prove easier than addressing the deep-seated discrimination against the Rohingya in Myanmar that drives them onto the traffickers' boats.

There are indications the region is finally taking the issue seriously. Since the first boats crammed with starving people were spotted in the Andaman Sea in [mid-May](#), three high-level regional meetings have taken place, including in Bangkok on 29 May. As search-and-rescue efforts to locate the remaining stranded boats continue, Malaysia, which is chairing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) this year and is President of the UN Security Council this month, has proposed another summit.

"The migrant issue should be resolved at [the] ASEAN level with assistance from other countries and international bodies as needed," Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak told delegates at the Asia Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur this week. "Only if countries work in unison, can we defeat this trade in human misery."

(...)

"The Rohingya conundrum is not new," he told IRIN. "It has proved to be a festering wound in the borderlands where northern Rakhine state runs into southeastern Bangladesh. What's really going to be required is some new compact that, in a genuine and sustainable fashion, seeks to change the equation for the Rohingya both there and elsewhere."

Three years ago, communal violence in western Rakhine between Buddhists and Muslims, left 200 people dead. Thousands of Rohingya were corralled by the government into squalid camps, where their movements are tightly restricted and they have little access to healthcare and education. Many look to the sea to escape and smugglers, some of whom turn traffickers, have expanded their operations to meet the demand.

UNHCR says 88,000 people, both Rohingya and Bangladeshis, have journeyed across the Bay of Bengal since the beginning of 2014. It estimates about 1,000 people have died on the way. For many, the destination is Malaysia, where tens of thousands of Rohingya live on the margins of society, working illegally and unable to send their children to school.

(...)

The region has absorbed far larger numbers of refugees in the past, such as the Vietnamese boat people and those displaced by the war in Cambodia. Malaysia also hosted thousands of Indonesians from Aceh during the decades-long conflict in the Indonesian province, and, after the 2004 tsunami, temporarily gave them the right to work.

UNHCR is hoping for a similar dispensation for the thousands of Rohingya who are likely to remain in Malaysia in the long term.

“It’s a win-win-win,” Towle explained. “It’s a win for people to be able to live here legally. It takes them away from agents and exploitative employers. It’s a win for employers to have a lawful population who are here anyway and, from the government point of view, it flushes people into the daylight and allows them to tackle issues around criminality in a more complete way. The alternative is to leave people in the black economy, unregistered and unknown.” Read the full

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