How to solve the Asian migrant boats crisis -
expert views

With up to 8000 desperate people – Rohingya Muslims from Burma and economic
migrants from Bangladesh – stranded in boats in the Andaman Sea, experts call for
an urgent regional, humanitarian response

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Between 6,000 and 8,000 refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants from
Burma and Bangladesh are currently stranded in boats off the coasts of Malaysia,
Thailand and Indonesia, with the governments of all three nations refusing to allow
the boats to land. With reports of deaths on board and thousands more lives at risk,
the Guardian asked a panel of experts how the crisis could be solved.

Lilianne Fan

Bangkok-based expert on humanitarian and conflict issues in Asia, research
associate at the humanitarian policy group of the UK’s Overseas Development
Institute

The solution really has to be a humanitarian approach, making sure lives are not
lost and looking at temporary solutions in each of the affected countries – Malaysia,
Thailand and Indonesia.

You need to have a solution coordinated at the regional level but you also need to
think about trying to really work with the Burmese government, within the Rakhine
state in particular, to make sure conditions are being improved to the point that it is
not a push factor for the Rohingya Muslims to leave.
Fundamentally this is an issue of statelessness and citizenship. The approach that Asean (Association of South-east Asian Nations) will have to take is one that doesn’t necessarily push Burma too hard on the citizenship issue right now but looks at improving conditions more from a humanitarian and development point of view, stabilising conditions while the discussion on eventual citizenship and status takes place. This will be a long discussion, and it won’t be easy.

The temporary solution is a settlement arrangement for the asylum seekers and refugees who are coming to these countries. There has to be a mechanism and strategy at the regional level that allows countries of the Asean region to have an oversight on coordinated management – a strategy that looks at how to actually manage the population that has arrived temporarily. The approach might be slightly different in every country, but it has to be an overarching strategy. The Bangladeshi economic migrants need to have a separate process and how they should be managed will be different.

One thing that is very clear is that the affected governments – Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia – are very torn by this issue. It is not an easy decision for them to say they don’t want the boats to come – this is something we have to realise.

Charles Santiago
Chair of Asean Parliamentarians for Human Rights, a coalition of lawmakers advocating for fundamental rights in south-east Asia

Asean really has to deal with this issue. It is no longer a Burma issue, it has become a regional issue. A regional issue that has to be dealt with at the regional level. There is a lot to do in terms of applying pressure on Burma.

The problem starts with the Burma government refusing to give citizenship to the Rohingya. They are all in detention camps, they are persecuted because of their race, skin colour and religion. This is a society that has been highly persecuted. This has to come to a stop.
Asean has to put pressure on Burma in order to make changes to the lives of people in Rakhine state. This is a long-term strategy. The short-term strategies would be for these countries – Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand – to save those on the boats. Right now you have to save lives.

Asean’s non-interference policy has to come to a stop. Asean governments cannot hide behind an archaic policy, now a human catastrophe is taking place in front of our eyes. We talk about being caring and people-centred, but the people of south-east Asia need their governments to act in a responsible fashion.

David Manne

Executive director of the Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre, Australia, and principal solicitor and migration agent

Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia should immediately cease their pushback of boats and render rescue and humanitarian aid. Humanity must be put before politics, and rescue at sea before border enforcement.

Australia must show regional leadership by doing all within its power and capacity to save lives at sea through emergency logistical, financial and humanitarian assistance. Many of the asylum seekers at sea are stranded and suffering from starvation, having been pushed back from seeking refuge in Thailand, Malaysia or Indonesia.

Australia should urge joint operations between key states to rescue these people, and should then work with other countries to provide vital assistance which ensures they are humanely treated, their claims fairly assessed, and that those in need of protection are resettled to safety.

Deterrence of asylum seekers does nothing to address the desperation and dangers which force people to flee - it just sweeps people from one doorstep to dangers and
possible death elsewhere.

Nations in our region must stop constructing a fortress around the bloodied fields in front of them. What we need is for these countries – and the international community – to come together and to uphold the existing protection obligations which are owed to desperate people fleeing from persecution, and to strengthen strategies which are firmly founded in human dignity, human rights and international cooperation.  
Jeff Labovitz

Chief of mission, International Organisation for Migration, Thailand

The first possible solution is that all surrounding countries must commit boats to search and rescue, and let these boats land. They should also work together to up surveillance and to find and locate boats and track where they are.

If there needs to be greater regional solutions they could possibly involve the Bali process (the Bali process on people smuggling, trafficking in persons and related transnational crime). Thailand is holding a summit on 29 May, but that’s two weeks away, and we need to get together on a more urgent basis now. Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia need to share information, share any satellite information they have and to work out where people can disembark. They can coordinate that information with organisations such as IOM and others to make sure there’s assistance on the ground.

All the countries of the region need to get together to see what the root problems are. They have been sharing some information about smuggling networks but they haven’t done enough between countries. Essentially, there are no departures now. For the moment, it’s stopped. But the operation was huge – 13,000 people left in one month at the end of last year. We need communication, points of control, joint patrols and sharing of information, as well as identified points of contact.