

Now Not The Time For Asean Non-Interference

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THE humanitarian crisis involving Rohingya refugees highlights not only the responsibility of the Myanmar government, but also the impotence of Asean.

In fact, Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs has taken a similar stance on these refugees, arguing that because of the country's limited land, it "is not in a position to accept any persons seeking political asylum or refugee status, regardless of their ethnicity or place of origin" ("S'pore can't accept refugees: MHA; Tuesday").

Most governments in the region have been quick to blame the human traffickers who have taken advantage of and abandoned thousands of these refugees.

They have also been quick to blame the government in Myanmar for allowing the persecution of the Rohingya minority, yet forget their complicity via the ineffective Asean grouping.

Officials in Myanmar may retort that the "root cause of the crisis is increased human trafficking", but these refugees risk their lives only if circumstances are bleak back home.

As they drift in the open seas, their chances of survival are slim.

The plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar is well documented. Since 1982, they have been denied their citizenship and, thus, stripped of corresponding rights, and are victims of regular attacks by radical Buddhist mobs.

The United Nations seems distracted by similar episodes in Europe, the silence of opposition leader and democracy advocate Aung San Suu Kyi has been deafening, while Asean and its governments have been rendered impotent by its policy of non-interference.

Harmonisation of international and regional efforts is necessary to provide humanitarian assistance, to ascertain the events unfolding in Myanmar, and to eventually collaborate if transgressions are confirmed.

When that happens, those responsible must be held accountable - otherwise, this unfortunate cycle of persecution, migration, and subsequent abandonment by other states will persist.

Kwan Jin Yao