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The Ongoing Rakhine Crisis: Time For ASEAN to Act

By Kang Siew Kheng

Synopsis

ASEAN foreign ministers meet in Singapore this month, amid the growing Rohingya crisis that has no clear solution in sight. ASEAN's credibility is challenged by this multi-faceted tragedy. What should ASEAN do?

Commentary

EVEN AS the monsoon season readies its full onslaught into Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh, the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar remains a slow, indeed uncertain, process. The numbers being discussed by both sides are a mere trickle, compared to the estimated 600,000-700,000 in the refugee camps from the last wave of violence in Rakhine state in August 2017.

Myanmar authorities have said that they are prepared to take back the refugees in accordance with the bilateral agreement with Bangladesh, in place since November 2017. However, many of the Rohingya are reluctant to subject themselves to verification, or to return without certain guarantees. With conditions in the camps worsening, we can soon expect another round of international outrage played across news and social media.

So What Can ASEAN Do?

Against this backdrop, as the ASEAN foreign ministers gather for their annual meeting at the end of July in Singapore, the big question is what ASEAN can, or should, do. Singapore is currently mid-way into its chairmanship of ASEAN. When ASEAN leaders met in April 2018, they issued a carefully worded statement on the repatriation issue.

They encouraged the Myanmar government to implement recommendations of the

Advisory Commission on Rakhine State to “bring about peace, stability, the rule of law, to promote harmony and reconciliation among the various communities, as well as to ensure sustainable and equitable development in Rakhine State”.

But in the face of unresolved humanitarian disasters and continuing outrage, ASEAN needs to go beyond these encouraging noises to consider seriously how it can help its Myanmar neighbour.

Beyond ‘No Interference’

ASEAN cannot hide behind the “no interference” principle because working with, and alongside, the Myanmar government is not interference. Former Foreign Minister of Indonesia Marty Natalegawa recently noted that just because an issue is considered an internal matter “does not mean there is no potential for regional cooperation”.

ASEAN must work with the government of State Counsellor Ms Aung San Suu Kyi; she needs to get past her old annoyances with ASEAN leaders for engaging the preceding military government when, under house arrest, she was advocating sanctions on Myanmar.

She must realise that it is better for Myanmar to involve ASEAN countries; several of them are host to earlier waves of Rohingya refugees, and all of them are directly or indirectly affected if Myanmar were to continue to suffer unrelenting international abrogation.

While the world’s attention is focused almost exclusively on the dehumanising condition of the refugee camps in Bangladesh, the crisis is more far-reaching than what whets media appetite. The genesis of how the refugees found their way into Cox’s Bazaar is a narrative that has been repeated *ad nauseam*.

On the one hand, the United Nations regarded it as “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” of the Rohingya. On the other, the Myanmar military claimed it was responding to attacks on border security posts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in August 2017, which provoked the by-now well-known ignominious military response. It was the largest wave of refugees, but not the only, and underscored very fundamental problems in Rakhine state.

Tackling Marginalisation in Rakhine

Somewhere, it gets forgotten that Rakhine is one of the poorest, least developed states in Myanmar. Its poverty rate of 78 percent, according to World Bank estimates, is much higher than the national average of 37.5 percent.

Widespread poverty, poor infrastructure, lack of employment opportunities and perceived injustices in Rakhine have created conditions ripe for cleavages to be reaped between the Rakhine Buddhists and the Muslim Rohingya. To make matters worse, Rakhine state, like neighbouring Bangladesh, is also vulnerable to natural disasters.

The crisis resides therefore not only in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, enormous

as it is. It lies fundamentally in a situation where two million ethnic Rakhine are poor and feel marginalised in their own environment, alongside the previous population of more than a million Rohingya, now estimated to be only 120,000, many of whom are in internally displaced person' camps that are only now being dismantled.

Their future, not to mention the other Kaman, Mro and other minorities, is as uncertain as that of the majority ethnic Rakhine, mired in low socio-economic development, with limited or no access to essential basic services, including medical care. The fires of the tinder are still smoking. Something needs to be done to change the situation on the ground in Rakhine and not just in the refugee camps in Bangladesh.

The Rakhine crisis is therefore a multi-faceted one that encompasses a humanitarian dimension, as well as security and developmental ones. These are all known issues. As noted by Kofi Annan, in his report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, unless the challenges are addressed, further radicalisation in both communities is a real risk.

Whole of Myanmar Effort

State Counsellor Suu Kyi has established the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development in Rakhine to repatriate and provide humanitarian assistance, to resettle and rehabilitate, bring development to Rakhine state and establish durable peace.

One might wonder at how such a complex challenge could be met by a public-private enterprise, but it is what it is. Suu Kyi is aware that any durable solution must engage all communities in Rakhine, and above all, she wants her fellow citizens to come forward.

Presumably, she can count on the wealthy business people to invest in basic infrastructure like roads and sanitation. As Chairperson of the Union Enterprise, she leaves the door open for international organisations and other governments to offer help. The ASEAN foreign ministers, who are after all her counterparts, can engage her directly to offer concrete assistance.

Time to Show ASEAN Leadership

For ASEAN, there are mechanisms in place to do this. There is the Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA), which is already working with the Myanmar government to deliver humanitarian assistance.

But its resources are miniscule and its actions limited. Last year, AHA distributed kitchen kits and food relief supplies to displaced communities in Rakhine state. It can be resourced and empowered to do more.

There is also the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus. It is the only international structure that involves, rather than isolate, the Myanmar military, a key, indeed critical, player. The ADMM can surely be better leveraged to negotiate sustained medical access and other help to meet the needs of Rakhine. The situation in Rakhine must be stabilised for enduring peace to even remotely stand a chance.

Just as it did in 2000/2001 when ASEAN devised the multimillion-dollar Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) aimed at closing the gaps between the original ASEAN 6 and the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam), so ASEAN can again exercise real leadership by working with Myanmar to help set up a plan to stabilise and develop Rakhine state.

It is in ASEAN's own interests to do so, or the Rohingya and Rakhine state crises will continue to be a burden to ASEAN efforts at regional integration.

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