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Turning to ASEAN: Response to the Rakhine Crisis

By Sangeetha Yogendran

Synopsis

Myanmar's call for an emergency ASEAN meeting to discuss the crisis over the Rohingya issue on 19 December 2016, presents ASEAN member states the opportunity to discuss extending humanitarian assistance for the displaced, and also underlying tensions that led to the crisis.

Commentary

THE VIOLENCE in Rakhine has seen protesters take to the streets in the hundreds and thousands recently, in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Dhaka and Karachi. Concerned about allegations of killings and rape in a military crackdown on the Rohingya population in Rakhine state, some ASEAN members have been extremely vocal about the dire humanitarian situation. States with predominantly Muslim populations have seen the largest protests.

Malaysia's Cabinet issued a statement condemning the violence, stating that "Malaysia ... calls on the government of Myanmar to take all necessary actions to address the alleged ethnic cleansing". Indonesia's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi flew to Naypyidaw on 6 December at State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's invitation to convey Indonesia's strong concern and urge that humanitarian aid be allowed to reach those affected communities in Rakhine state.

Myanmar Turns to ASEAN

In an unprecedented turn of events, Aung San Suu Kyi has called for an ASEAN meeting to respond to regional concerns over Rakhine. The informal meeting with ASEAN foreign ministries will be held on 19 December in Yangon to discuss these

concerns. The call for the meeting was made recently at an informal gathering of senior ASEAN officials in Bali.

The meeting was scheduled to bring together officials to discuss the outlook for ASEAN in a changing global environment, but saw the deteriorating situation in Rakhine feature prominently in the discussions.

It is worth noting that this is the first time Myanmar has initiated a meeting with other ASEAN countries on this issue. If nothing more, it is an indication that if any solution is to be found, it can and should be found with multiple stakeholders, and Myanmar sees the value in doing so through ASEAN.

Substantive Response Long Overdue

A substantive response to address the protracted dire humanitarian situation and root causes of conflict in Rakhine, whether domestic, regional, or international, is long overdue. It is also crucial to resolve not just the immediate violence but longer standing issues if regional countries, and ASEAN as a whole, do not want to contend with future boat refugees.

The region witnessed this in 2015 when thousands were stranded at sea, after the discovery of several dead bodies and gruesome trafficking camps along the Thai-Malaysia border. At its height, approximately 8,000 people were adrift in the Andaman Sea.

With Bangladesh closing its border to those fleeing from Rakhine, and the risks associated with undertaking that boat journey alone, it is foreseeable that people affected by this violence will flee into the Andaman Sea again. It is also foreseeable that people fleeing will seek the assistance of smugglers to bring them across borders, and this can easily lead to the resurgence of the brutal human trafficking camps witnessed last year. ASEAN was ill-prepared to handle the situation then and will be again if this repeats itself without substantive regional action, a likely scenario if conditions do not change in Rakhine.

An ASEAN Response

Malaysia and Indonesia's vocal expressions of concern over the situation in Rakhine present a unique opportunity for ASEAN as a whole to not just provide humanitarian assistance but to support accountability efforts. The need for such action might be implicitly acknowledged by Myanmar's call for an informal ASEAN meeting on the situation. As the Indonesian foreign minister said at the Bali meeting, ASEAN has an opportunity to urge Myanmar to facilitate flows of humanitarian aid to Rakhine state. This is especially crucial given that the state has been faced with a suspension of all food and medical aid in the weeks since the attacks on the police reportedly by Muslim militants.

An ASEAN-led response to the situation in Rakhine must include Bangladesh, currently hosting those who fled the violence in Rakhine across the border before it was closed by the government. The Bangladesh government has said that it is not its sole responsibility to give them refuge. For any joint response between ASEAN and

Bangladesh to be effective, Dhaka must first keep its border with Myanmar open to allow those fleeing the violence safe passage.

This needs to take effect immediately, concurrent with Myanmar dealing with the situation domestically and with ASEAN member states. The shouldering of this burden on Bangladesh's part can be eased by a commitment from ASEAN to assist in the provision of humanitarian assistance, especially for immediate needs like food, water, medical care and shelter. Fellow ASEAN members like Malaysia and Indonesia can take the lead in doing so.

Granted, this is a temporary solution; the larger questions of how long the displaced Rohingya population should stay in Bangladesh or if they should be allowed the right to seek asylum elsewhere remain unanswered. However, doing nothing will only cause a rise in the death toll of those people caught in the violence, those trying to flee by crossing borders, and those stranded or in hiding in Bangladesh. That is a horrific scenario that the regional community must avoid.

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