

ASEAN NEWSLETTER

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ASEAN News Updates

ASEAN to being FTA Talks with 6 partners

(August, 2012)

ASEAN along with Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand have agreed to commence first-round talks next year on a regional free-trade partnership, dubbed the regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or “ASEAN+6 trade pact. This 16-country integration market in the Asia-Pacific Region will form the world’s largest economic bloc by 2015.

The 14th Ministerial Meeting on the ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation

(Siem Reap, August 29, 2012)

At the Meeting, the Ministers took note of the progress made in the implementation of AMBDC projects. As of August 2012, there are 52 projects. A total of 14 projects still require funding worth US\$ 272.5 million. Recognizing that financing of activities remain a priority and challenge for the countries, the Ministers discussed opportunities to further strengthen cooperation among countries and stakeholders to benefit development of the region.

ASEAN to fully implement a uniform self-certification scheme by 2015.

(Siem Reap, August 29, 2012)

The self-certification system allows certified exporters to issue invoice declarations on their own without having to apply for the preferential certificate of origin form from the respective International Trade and Industry Ministry (MITI) Read more: Asean to fully implement self-certification system by 2015 http://www.btimes.com.my/Current_News/BTIMES/articles/20120829000157/Article/index_html#ixzz25NDUZQGS

ASEAN looks to integrate aviation markets

(Jakarta, August 27, 2012)

ASEAN working group on air transportation is looking to integrate the 1-0 member-state aviation market as part of the realization of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2015.

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Statement of ASEAN Foreign Ministers on the Recent Developments in the Rakhine State, Myanmar

(Phnom Penh, August 17, 2012)

Following consultations, ASEAN Foreign Ministers issue the following statement:

1. ASEAN Foreign Ministers reaffirmed their strong support for the ongoing democratization process in Myanmar. Within the context of such positive progress, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers are following closely recent developments in the Rakhine State, Myanmar, following the incidents that took place on 28 May 2012 and on 3 June 2012.
2. They welcomed the steps the Government of Myanmar has taken to address the domestic issue, including its cooperation with the United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations to address the humanitarian needs of the affected persons and communities. They further encouraged Myanmar to continue and to enhance the steps it has taken.
3. ASEAN Foreign Ministers expressed their readiness, upon the request of the Government of Myanmar, to lend necessary support in addressing the humanitarian assistance in the Rakhine State.
4. ASEAN Foreign Ministers recalled and underlined that the promotion of national solidarity and harmony among the various communities in Myanmar constitute an integral part of Myanmar’s ongoing democratization and reform process. They expressed confidence and expectation that Myanmar will continue to remain consistent with its commitment on the irreversibility of the democratization and reform process in the country.

ASEAN as ‘One Community, One Destiny’: Really?

Steven C.M. Wong

Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

ASEAN turned 45 on August 8th in typical low-key style. One news service may have hit the proverbial nail on the head by using the word ‘observed’ rather than ‘celebrated’. Attempts have been made in the past to get engage the public and inject hype and emotion into the event but ASEAN has proved remarkably resistant as a non-elitist enterprise. As a consequence, anniversaries have been relatively somber affairs, to be observed, more as a stuffy political artifact rather than celebrated as a truly dynamic mass movement.

In recent years, even this political construct has become frayed and close to outright fracturing. Clashes between member states have broken out and with ASEAN efforts at peaceful reconciliation rebuffed. And with the dysfunctional 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia almost exactly one month earlier, still fresh in everyone’s minds, one could be forgiven for thinking that the chosen theme of ‘One Community, One Destiny’ was a plaintive cry rather than a firm common aspiration.

Indeed, at 45 years of age, ASEAN appears to be a middle age organization that can no longer be excused not so much from acts of rash youthful indiscretions - for there have been very few - but indolent indifference. Expectations have been building, and for quite some time, that the organization become substantive and substantial, a hope that perked in 2007 when the ASEAN Charter was adopted to give the Association a legal personality. (Naturally, if observers only knew the true extent to which the Charter had been compromised and watered-down, they might not have held out such high hopes.)

In the five years since the ASEAN Charter what exactly has been achieved? Has the hitherto glacial pace of organisational evolution and renewal quickened in any way? Are decisions made today of a more relevant, timely and cohesive nature? Have ASEAN countries moved away from concocting ever grander visions, goals and statements of purpose and begun to show that it is prepared to act on any of these purposefully? Or has there been the usual tinkering around of the system, half-hearted attempts at establishing at least moral even if not administrative legitimacy?

In economic and business circles, two ‘C’s’ that have drawn attention to the region are Community and Connectivity. Are we closer to either of these in our lifetimes, never mind as we edge towards 2015? In diplomatic and security circles, there also two ‘C’s’: viz. the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. Despite the fact that ASEAN is an organization that sees a constant changing of the guard, from the Secretary General down to the ministers and ASEAN director generals of member states, it needs to be borne in mind (by someone) that these are likely to make-or-break ASEAN’s reputation and credibility, possibly beyond repair.

More immediately on ASEAN’s plate is the Rohingya refugee problem and developments in Rakhine State in Myanmar. If ASEAN cannot bring its collective influence and good offices to bear on this humanitarian crisis, one might well see yet another pillar pulled away from its so-called ‘destiny’.

Of course throwing brickbats in ASEAN’s direction is an easy spectator sport. Over the years, ASEAN officials have grown virtually immune to criticisms, citing a lack of understanding about the organization and the environment in which it exists and/or a lack of knowledge of new and ‘important’ measures and initiatives taken. Some have even a more taciturn response: Would the region be any more cohesive, safer or prosperous without the ASEAN that we have at the moment, warts-and-all?

The obvious implication is that the answer is ‘no’ – no matter how badly it functions, the ASEAN we have is better than no ASEAN at all. But whether this will remain the ‘reality’ – if it is one – by 2017, when ASEAN turns 50 years old, remains to be seen. One might well find a region of disparate coalesced interests even greater than today. No doubt there will be a great deal more of deep reflection, angst and hand wringing on display until then.

Interview with the Indian Ambassador to Malaysia

H.E. Vijay Gokhale

Indian Ambassador to Malaysia

Q.1 How does ASEAN fit into India's Look-East Policy?

India's long historical and commercial association with South East Asia is well documented, and our renewed engagement with the region got a fillip with the launch of our Look East Policy in 1991. In the first decade, the main focus was on strengthening our trade and investment linkages centered on ASEAN. But in the later years, starting around 2003, you can see an expanded definition of 'East', extending from Australia to East Asia, with ASEAN at its core. The new phase has also marked a shift from trade to wider economic, political and security issues, including joint efforts to protect the sea lanes, coordinate counter-terrorism activities, collaborate on curbing piracy, trafficking in narcotics and human beings, and cooperate in the field of disaster management.

Q.2 ASEAN and India are celebrating two decades of India-ASEAN relations, how would you describe the relationship thus far?

Our relations with ASEAN have witnessed significant growth in all the three pillars, i.e. political security, economic, and socio-cultural.

We have actively participated in all the ASEAN-related meetings since we became a full dialogue partner of the ASEAN. India respects ASEAN's centrality in the various architectures in the region. We commend ASEAN for its success in binding major regional and global powers to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. We believe that adherence to the principles enshrined in this Treaty will ensure peace and stability in this strategically important region, which is critical to ensure unhindered economic growth and development.

Many commentators have stressed the fact that the center of global economic gravity is shifting to Asia. India and ASEAN Member States have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of the ongoing global financial crisis. Between India and the ASEAN, we have a combined GDP of USD 2.8 trillion and a population of 1.8 billion.

Our bilateral trade was close to USD 60 billion last year and we had set ourselves the trade target of USD 70 billion by 2012. We are glad that in the year 2011-12 our bilateral trade reached USD 79.86 billion. The ASEAN-India FTA in Goods has already come into force. We are hoping to conclude the negotiations on Trade in Services and Investments Agreement soon. This will lead to the establishment of one of the largest Free Trade Areas in the world. We are also witnessing a significant growth in bilateral investment between India and the ASEAN region.

We are satisfied with the pace of progress in our functional cooperation with ASEAN in a wide range of sectors, including agriculture, ICT, energy, environment, space, S&T and tourism, as also in furthering physical, institutional and people-to-people connectivity.

Q.3 It is said the possible EU-India Free Trade Agreement will change business dramatically, how has the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement that was signed in 2009 (once finalized) benefited India?

Since 1 August 2011, the India-ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement has been implemented by India and all the ten ASEAN countries. With the aim of promoting awareness among our business communities about the benefits of the AIFTA, we have held an ASEAN-India SMEs conference in Kuala Lumpur on 21-22 June 2012. Similarly, the first ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks Meeting that was organized by RIS in New Delhi on 7-8 August 2012 focussed on this issue as well. From December 18 to 20 this year, we will hold the second ASEAN-India Business Fair and Conclave in New Delhi with the participation of the Trade Ministers of ASEAN and India; and a business fair representing a wide range of sectors such as automotive and light engineering, electrical and electronics goods, chemicals and chemical products, agriculture and food processing, textiles, infrastructure, IT and ITES, healthcare etc. So we are making a concerted effort to not only diversify the trade basket but also promote B2B linkages for harnessing the full potential of the FTA in Goods for both ASEAN and India.

Q.4 ASEAN-India Vision 2020 has an 82-point Plan of Action worth about US \$ 40 million till 2015, what is the progress and what is needed to achieve this?

We are quite satisfied with the pace of progress in the implementation of the Plan of Action. Especially in the past one and a half years, we have witnessed an increase in intensity in our sectoral cooperation with ASEAN.

India became the first dialogue partner of ASEAN to conclude an MOU on strengthening tourism cooperation in Manado, Indonesia earlier this year.

In implementation of the Medium Term Plan of Action for Agricultural Cooperation, we have already conducted three training programmes this year. We are planning the second meeting of the ASEAN-India Agriculture Ministers, for 17-18 October, during which the Ministers would also inaugurate an ASEAN-India Agri Expo and release the first issue of the ASEAN-India Newsletter on Agriculture and Forestry.

The ASEAN-India Heads of Space Agencies Meeting has concluded in Bangalore on 17-19 June 2012. We are discussing two large projects in this important sector.

A large number of collaborative S&T projects are ongoing. They range from digital networks to surface engineering and functional food technology.

Environment experts from ASEAN and India met in Bangalore on 27-29 June 2012 for drawing up a regional action plan on climate change. We will host a workshop on Nagoya Protocol on 4-5 September 2012 in New Delhi, for which the National Biodiversity Authority of India is working closely with the ASEAN Center for Biodiversity, based in Manila. This would be followed by the meeting of ASEAN-India Environment Ministers on 6-7 September 2012.

We are also going to convene a workshop on New and Renewable Energy on 5-6 November 2012, to be followed by the first meeting of New and Renewable Energy Ministers from ASEAN and India on 7 November.

Our initiatives for furthering people-to-people contacts have a wide focus. The ASEAN-centric Delhi Dialogue, held annually since 2009 has evolved into a prominent Track 1.5 forum in the region. Under an institutionalized ASEAN-India Media Exchange Programme, we have regular visits of journalists. In November last year at the ASEAN-India Summit in Bali, our Prime Minister announced an increase in the number of students from ASEAN that we annually invite under a two week familiarization trip to India from 100 to 250. Our Foreign Service Institute has been conducting special courses for ASEAN diplomats. Since last year, the institute has been hosting 50 ASEAN diplomats and 3 officers from the ASEAN Secretariat

We have set up a USD 50 million ASEAN-India Fund for carrying out these activities. India was also the first dialogue partner to set up a Green Fund for ASEAN with a contribution of USD 5 million. We have a separate USD 1 million ASEAN-India Science & Technology Development Fund dedicated to collaborative scientific R&D activities.

Q.5 Tell us more about India's role in supporting ASEAN connectivity. How much progress has been made with regards to the Thailand-Burma-India road link and are there plans to extend it to the east to include Laos and Cambodia?

As stated by our Prime Minister at the 9th ASEAN-India Summit in Bali in November 2011, greater physical connectivity between India and ASEAN remains our strategic objective. The most significant project under the ASEAN-India Connectivity initiative is the 1360 km India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway. Out of the 160 Km section of the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo (TKK) Highway that India had undertaken to build, construction has been completed for 132 kms. Work on the remaining 28 kms is underway. During the visit of our Prime Minister to Myanmar in May 2012, we have undertaken to repair 71 bridges on the TKK road and also to upgrade the Kalewa-Yargi road segment to highway standard while Myanmar would undertake the up-gradation of Yargi-Monywa stretch to highway standard by 2016. At the ASEAN-India Land Transport Working Group Meeting in Vientiane held last month, Thailand has conveyed that they have made good progress on the implementation of the Mae Sot/Myawaddy-Hpa an-Thaton road section. When the work is complete, it would help in establishing seamless road connectivity between Moreh in India and Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar.

Both ASEAN Member States and India have agreed to discuss connectivity issues further at the ASEAN Highways Sub-Working Group Meeting. These discussions would include the extension of the Trilateral Highway to Cambodia and Laos.

Q.6 What are your views on the Mekong-India Economic Corridor, how advanced is this and where are the benefits hoped to be achieved?

The Jakarta-based Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) has conducted a study on Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC). The MIEC essentially envisions integrating the four Greater Mekong countries including Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam with India through its East Coast. It is proposed to connect Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam through the land route with Dawei in Myanmar via Bangkok and Phnom Penh and further linking this network with Chennai through sea route. This would definitely spur bilateral trade and would also open up avenues for investment.

Q.7 China, Japan and South Korea each have set up an ASEAN centre. Are there plans to set up ASEAN-India Centre?

We are aware that China, Japan and South Korea have set up ASEAN Centers,

We have an ASEAN-India Business Council, spearheaded by Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) and counterpart organizations from the ASEAN Member States that is functional. The ASEAN-India Business Fair and Conclave has now become an important annual event in our business calendar. So we need to consider the various aspects of a similar center before taking a decision, as we would like to avoid duplication of efforts.

Q.8 What programmes, activities have been planned between India and ASEAN to commemorate 20 years of partnership and where do you see India's relationship with ASEAN in the next 20 years?

India will be hosting a special Commemorative Summit in New Delhi on 20-21 December 2012 to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of our dialogue relations and 10 years of Summit-level partnership with the ASEAN. The theme for the Summit will be 'ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace and Shared Prosperity.' Our External Affairs Minister launched the Logo for the Summit and the Commemorative Year with his ASEAN counterparts in Phnom Penh last month.

I have already touched upon a number of activities and special Ministerial Meetings that we will be holding this year in the run up to the Summit. A delegation of ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) has just returned from a visit to India. The ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG) will have its fourth and final meeting in Kochi, India on 16-17 September 2012 to finalize their recommendations on elevating our relationship with ASEAN to a higher, plane that they would submit to the Leaders at the 10th ASEAN-India Summit in Phnom Penh in November.

Other big activities through which we wish to highlight connectivity and our trade and people-to-people linkages are the ASEAN-India Car Rally in end November and December 2012 and the expedition of Indian Navy's Sail Training Ship Sudarshini to ASEAN ports in the last quarter of 2012 and the first quarter of 2013. We will be organizing a series of business and cultural marker events along the rally route and in the ports of call by the ship in both India and ASEAN countries. So we have an elaborate plan in place to celebrate in a befitting manner our historical bonding, and our robust, multi-faceted relationship with the ASEAN at present that holds tremendous promise and potential for further intensification of the partnership in future.

Rohingya , Rakhine state and ASEAN

By Subir Bhaumik

Former BBC correspondent and author

The 2012 summer riots in Myanmar's Rakhine (former Arakans) state has resurrected prospects of fresh large-scale outmigration by Muslim Rohingyas , that could affect both South Asian and the ASEAN countries.

After the Myanmar government declared an emergency in June 2012 to control the rioting in the Rakhine state , the Tatmadaw (army) and the police have been accused of unleashing a reign of terror against the Rohingyas .

The official death toll in the summer riots has been pegged at between 80 and 90 , but the Burma Rohingya Organisation of UK (BROUK) has alleged that at least 650 Rohingyas have been killed and more than 1200 of them are missing. There is no way to verify these figures independently and they could well be somewhat exaggerated . But media reports and those from independent NGOs active in the Rakhine state does point to large scale arrests and torture of Rohingyas , even extra-judicial executions.

“ This situation will doubtlessly create the decisive push factor for the Rohingyas to leave Myanmar . Already many of them have tried to reach Bangladesh only to pushed back , but since they are driven to desperation in Myanmar, they will have no choice but to leave ,” says Sabyasachi Basu Roy Choudhury, a long time researcher on migration patterns on the India-Myanmar-Bangladesh frontier.

A 1982 law denies the more than 800,000 Rohingyas citizenship of Myanmar. In July this year, President Thein Sein's government asserted that the Rohingyas were “stateless Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh” and refused to include them in the list of more than 130 races who qualify for Myanmar citizenship.

The President actually wants their resettlement in “some other country that may agree to take them”. Most Burmese and Rakhines , including pro-democracy elements , end up supporting Thein Sein's views on the Rohingyas. Strangely, the iconic opposition leader Daw Aung Sang Suu Kyi has spoken up for the rights of ethnic minorities but has been strangely silent on the plight of the Rohingyas.

And this despite reports that the army and police in Rakhine state are forcing Rohingyas to flee their villages and take shelter either in secluded areas or in refugee camps. More than 80,000 Rohingyas are believed to have been uprooted since the summer riots – and while most Rakhines displaced by the riots are going back home, the number of Rohingyas in the camps are said to be increasing.

Many Rohingyas have tried fleeing into Bangladesh by land and sea – without much success. Some are also trying to sneak into India. And like in the last decade, many Rohingyas may again try to sneak into ASEAN countries through the hazardous sea route . Muslim-majority Malaysia and Indonesia may be their preferred destination but some of the Rohingyas may try to sneak into Thailand , as they have done before.

Any large scale outmigration of the Rohingyas will create a regional security dilemma for India, Bangladesh and the ASEAN. “Since the South Asian and ASEAN countries are likely to be affected by possible Rohingya migrations, they have every right to engage Myanmar for a durable solution of the problem,” says Ranabir Samadhar , director of the Calcutta Research Group that runs a highly efficient Annual Migration Workshop .

Rohingyas across the world would welcome that prospect.

“Myanmar is taking over the chairmanship of ASEAN , so it is about time the other ASEAN countries pushed Myanmar to grant our people citizenship . We are as much indigenous to the region as the Rakhines ,” says Fayaz Ahmed , a journalist with the Rohingya newsgroup “Kaladan”. “ Our people should get land rights, the rights to practice our religion , to officially travel .”

That seems like asking for a tall order for a community which is clearly unwanted, but there seems to be a consensus amongst Myanmar watchers that unless the Rohingyas get citizenship rights and some relief from persecution, there is no way they will stop trying to migrate. And whenever they do migrate, they raise the hackles amongst neighbours in South and Southeast Asia.

“ Myanmar has to accept the Rohingyas as their citizens. And the ASEAN countries must play a major role in pushing the Thein Sein government on the issue,” says Paula Banerji of Calcutta University’s Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

She says that even if the Rohingyas are descendants of Bengali Muslims from the Chittagong region who settled down in the Arakans during British rule, there is no way they should be deprived of citizenship. “ History cannot be used to justify ethnic cleansing, surely not by governments established by the due process of law,” she says.

Some would suggest that the ASEAN countries should join others in the Islamic world to rehabilitate Rohingya refugees who have been forced to flee Myanmar. “But that would encourage Myanmar to push them out all the more,” says Banerji.

More than a quarter of a million Rohingyas fled into Bangladesh in 1978 after the Myanmar army started a massive military operation, “Operation King Dragon” in the Arakans. Their numbers continue to swell to close to half a million. But in recent years, Bangladesh has tried to send back the Rohingyas who remained in refugee camps run by the UNHCR.

Tens of thousands of Rohingyas have illegally migrated into the ASEAN region, as indeed to India and Pakistan and elsewhere in the Middle East, over the past twenty years. Many undertook hazardous boat voyages across the Bay of Bengal to reach Thailand enroute Malaysia – many slipped through but quite a few unlucky ones were nabbed in Thailand and their boats were dragged back to high seas after the engines were taken out.

Many of these Rohingyas perished on the high seas, some were rescued by Indian and Indonesian sailors and a few hundred were accepted back by Bangladesh, from where they have embarked on the voyages.

The Rohingyas are easily one of the world’s “most unwanted community” but the solution to their woes – and of those who have to shelter them -- lies in concrete global and regional pressure to get Myanmar to grant them citizenship. This is where the ASEAN, and maybe the UN, has a role to play.

ASEAN's New Myanmar Challenge: Rohingyas

Bridget Welsh

Associate Professor of Political Science, Singapore Management University

Just as Myanmar was moving off ASEAN's problem list, it has returned. The mob violence in May has led to hundreds of deaths and a humanitarian crisis has spilled over regionally. Local activists estimate as many as 3,000 deaths and over 100,000 displaced stateless refugees. Official reports put the numbers at 91 deaths and 70,000 displaced, as real numbers remain unknown in this growing international conflict flashpoint. From the onset, the conflict has been transnational, given the fact that the issue involves the resettlement of an estimated 1.5 million Bengalis from Bangladesh into Myanmar territory, but the strong response in a number of ASEAN countries has continued a pattern of ASEAN intervention in Myanmar and has the potential to divide the regional organization. Coming after the disastrous failure to produce a communique for the August 2012 meeting in Cambodia with divisions over the South China Sea and a persistent divide between more and less democratic countries over approaches toward human rights and varied views of trade liberalization, this adds a new wrinkle to ASEAN's growing fragmentation.

What distinguishes the Rohingya issue is that it brings together the Muslim-majority countries of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei who are facing their angry social media citizenry, who are up in arms over reports of genocide on Myanmar's periphery. For these communities, the conflict is not one of statelessness or economic competition, but one of religious persecution against Muslims. This issue is deeply sensitive in the Muslim community, who for years have felt under attack and simultaneously feel a strong sense of community toward their Muslim brothers and sisters in the ummah. The catalyst for public outcries began in late June as reports began to circulate of systematic killings. While some of the reports were false, including pictures of bodies next to monks in Tibet, the heightened emotions of deaths of fellow Muslims became a pressure point for Muslim-majority countries globally. On June 28th Myanmar's embassy in Egypt was attacked, followed by protests across the Muslim world. This issue gained special salience among Islamists, who are powerful political actors in Indonesia and Malaysia, but extended to the broader Muslim community, notably in civil society among Muslim NGOs. The issue went viral over Facebook and Twitter, which are widely used, and has included widespread fundraising efforts for humanitarian relief and multiple civil society organized observer missions.

For other countries in ASEAN, this issue did not register. This was yet another of Myanmar's ethnic problems on its borders. Singapore, Philippines, Vietnam and even Cambodia consider the issue of Rohingyas largely a domestic problem, and, their concerns, if any, were over the potential this issue would have on the ongoing economic and political reforms occurring within Myanmar. Most assessed this as having a limited impact on the transformation.

Yet, for Muslim-majority countries in ASEAN this is serious, especially in the more democratic countries where public pressure to act is intense before elections. Quietly, it was made clear to Myanmar that action was needed to address reports of attacks on Rohingyas. Special envoys were appointed and senior leaders began to openly express concern, from Dr. Mahathir and Abdullah Badawi to Jusuf Kalla. Meetings were held in Saudi Arabia in early August under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) and special sessions were called among ASEAN, led by Indonesia. The interlocutor in ASEAN was its Secretary General, Surin Pitsuwan, a Muslim from southern Thailand, who worked to convince Myanmar to accept the observer mission by the Organization of Islamic Countries, backed heavily by Indonesia diplomatic efforts. The mission was led by former Indonesian vice-president Jusuf Kalla, who is now the president of Indonesian Red Crescent and was active in peace negotiations in Indonesia. Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited the area as well, and his findings were publicized widely in Muslim Southeast Asia. OIC and ASEAN voices were echoed by other international actors, notably the United Nations, whose focus was not only on minimizing conflict but also of stemming the humanitarian crisis. After extensive international dialogue, in mid-August the Myanmar government agreed to create a 27-member presidential commission to investigate the killings, taking an important step toward a more in-depth assessment of conditions underlying the conflict.

Myanmar's overtures reflects its growing majurity in international diplomacy. The acceptance of observers to visit the conflict zone reveals its responsiveness to international engagement. Only a few years ago the visit by the OIC and other groups would have been unlikely, as shown by the resistance to international engagement over Cyclone Nargis. Myanmar showed it is a responsible international actor. These actions, however, were not entirely driven by its desire for international acceptance, as it is curtailed at home to respond.

Domestically, the Rohingya issue is divisive, as the Buddhist majority hold strong anti-Muslims views and in particular do not consider the Rohingyas citizens. As Myanmar has opened up, more space has been created to discuss politics, and the Rohingya conflict mobilized millions across the country; in July US\$4 million was raised for humanitarian support in a nationwide fundraiser, with an implicit message of funding to be allocated to the «Rakhine» (not the Rohingyas). The ethnic biases against the Rohingyas run deep in Myanmar society. A recent protest within Myanmar featured posters «Stop Bringing Terrorists into Myanmar», revealing the stereotypes that are used against the Rohingyas. It is politically untenable for any of the different political parties within Myanmar across the political divide to be seen to be siding against the Buddhist majority. It is after all a Buddhist majority electorate. In the aftermath of the initial violence political elites, including Aung San Suu Kyi, have avoided criticizing the government on this issue, despite clear human rights concerns. To even create the commission had the potential of evoking strong outcries domestically. Thein Sein's government was able to use the international pressure to carve out space for creating the commission.

The challenges are compounded by Myanmar's capacity problem. The country is dependent on international funding and expertise to manage the crisis. The fact that its military was complicit in creating the situation in the first place and is now seen to be partisan in the conflict due to its ethnic links with the majority Buddhists, makes for a complicated response on the part of Myanmar officials. The crisis will need Bangladeshi cooperation as well, as reports show that conditions within Bangladesh contributed to the exodus into Myanmar territory. This international dimension will test Myanmar's diplomatic efforts further.

The next step will be whether the commission can yield results and, importantly, conditions on the ground can improve. Recent developments, including reports of ongoing violence, a razing of a mosque, convictions of two UN staff for engaging in aid work (although they were later pardoned by the president) and problems of access to areas for humanitarian assistance, are not promising. This issue has escalated in scope, with pressures being placed on Myanmar to act more decisively to reduce violence even as it begins the investigative process. There is clearly a gap between what Myanmar's response and the situation on the ground.

There is also a gap between what is expected by the Muslim community, who want more protection for their Muslim brothers and sisters. This issue continues to be a public flash point of religious persecution and suffering. In Turkey US\$33 million was raised for humanitarian relief, and similar efforts are taking place in Malaysia where volunteers are organizing for a large humanitarian mission. Iran has sent a foreign envoy, and in Indonesia a number of political parties are organizing missions, including the Islamist Indonesian Justice Party (PKS) in the governing coalition. With elections coming in Indonesia and Malaysia these demands will escalate.

Not surprisingly, these developments will extend into ASEAN. From Saudi Arabia to Iran, there is acknowledgment that ASEAN is a viable forum to raise concerns and expectations that the Southeast Asian Muslim countries will take the lead in defending the Rohingyas. Unless conditions significant improve in the Rakhine and the commission report is seen as meaningful, Brunei as the next chair will face pressure to put this issue on the agenda is the next ASEAN meeting and face serious pressure from the Muslim world to condemn Myanmar, an act that will be hard for others in ASEAN to accept, and will be harder for Myanmar to accommodate. The next few months will be decisive in determining whether Myanmar can deliver results so that this issue does not escalate into a broader and deeper ASEAN divide.
