

## The problem is the state



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***The litmus test of how governments and populations treat refugees and how Myanmar treats minority groups, is the pathetic plight of the Rohingya.***

THE waves of hapless refugees lately washing ashore in Asia and Europe confront the world with two starkly contrasting realities.

First, that human hardships are universal yet avoidable. And second, that political expediencies are just as universal in creating those hardships in the first place.

Illegal migration has become a “non-traditional threat,” meaning that as an offence it has become a new, socially destabilising and politically aggravating challenge from abroad.

Although the phenomenon itself is not new, particularly in border regions of neighbouring countries, the new development is its increased numbers and frequency.

Recent weeks and months have seen waves of illegal migrants at sea drifting towards Europe and South-East Asia. Some but not all of these are legitimate refugees fleeing lethal violence and abuse.

From parts of West Asia and North Africa, migrants have boarded boats illegally bound for Europe. Many fear for their lives as a result of internecine strife.

European governments and their peoples are generally unsympathetic to accepting refugees this time. It marks a significant departure from the immediate post-war (World War II) period, but then those refugees were European themselves.

This time, however, the refugees are different in race and religion. That Europe also happens to be in a time of economic decline has further helped close the doors to them.

Ironically, the links between Europe and such refugee source countries as Libya and Syria go back to colonial times, when the stamp of the European imperial powers was involuntarily forced on them.



*Waiting for salvation: Rohingya gathering to receive medical treatments at a temporary shelter in Langsa, Aceh province. AP*

Political upheavals continued in the post-colonial period until today. And even when some European powers still have a hand in the turmoil, the refugees produced as a result are made to feel unwelcome.

Europe's rejectionist attitude has been adopted by Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott. He shuns the prospect of providing refuge to even genuine refugees, saying Australia would not do anything to encourage more asylum seekers hoping to go to "a European country."

Australia occasionally reveals its Western core, usually in times of stress. Abbott says countries in South-East Asia nearer to Myanmar should resettle the migrants but not Australia.

In the early months of this year, 38,000 refugees headed for Europe by sea. About 5% of them died on the way.

In the same period, 25,000 headed for South-East Asia, mostly hoping to arrive in Malaysia or Indonesia.

But after these countries turned the boats away upon repairing them and supplying them with food and water, Western governments criticised and pressured them to accept the migrants.

Countries have the right to deny entry to illegal migrants, but are obliged by international law to grant asylum to refugees. Much of the contention revolves around definitions.

Genuine refugees are people seeking sanctuary from persecution. They want the most basic human need, safety from harm, by fleeing from oppression in their home country.

They are different from economic migrants who seek better jobs or a higher standard of living. They are also not criminals fleeing prosecution by due process, whatever the legal system may be like at home.

Among the current boatloads of illegal migrants in South-East Asia, less than half are estimated to be refugees from Myanmar. Most of them are said to be economic migrants from Bangladesh.

The illegal migrants who reach shore may be deported forthwith. Their greater numbers compared to occasional trickles at other times does not make them more acceptable, instead rather less so.

The Rohingya refugees from Myanmar represent the crux of the problem for countries in the region and beyond. Despite the Myanmar government's repeated denials, there is no doubt that they are a persecuted minority in their country and forced to flee.

Neighbouring Bangladesh already has 200,000 Rohingya in camps, although the official number is a fraction of that. Thailand has another 100,000.

Malaysia has taken in some 150,000 refugees from around the world, nearly a third of whom are Rohingya. Indonesia, with nearly 10 times the population and six times the land area, has taken a total of 12,000 refugees, most of them Rohingya.

In one estimate, there was said to be 1.2 million Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Some reports now say there are just 800,000, following forced evictions and murders by racist Myanmar groups.

All countries except Myanmar recognise the problem as Naypyidaw's own creation. The government rejects the Rohingya as Myanmar citizens, thus denying them civil, political and even human rights.

At the same time, Naypyidaw turns a blind eye to mass murders and rapes of Rohingya as extremist groups raze their villages. Human rights reports have cited the involvement of Myanmar troops in such crimes.

For generations, the Rohingya have been native to Rakhine state, previously known as Arakan. They have formed the Muslim community of Arakan for centuries, a territory which used to have its own kingdom.

Through its tumultuous history, Arakan grew into a regional power on its own terms between the 15th and 18th centuries. But it could not match the power of Burma, which in turn was contained by China.

In the late 18th century, imperial Burma invaded and sacked the Siamese capital of Ayutthaya. However, a resurgent Siam soon drove out the Burmese who then turned their attention to Arakan.

Burmese forces conquered Arakan in 1785 but lost it to Britain in the First Anglo-Burmese War four decades later. After three Anglo-Burmese Wars, all of Burma came under British colonial rule.

By the time Burma gained independence in 1948, Arakan had been made a state in the new Burma. In 1989 the ruling military junta renamed Burma as "Myanmar" and Arakan as "Rakhine".

Naypyidaw insists that the strife afflicting the Rohingya is not based on religious grounds. That is a technical detail that is in effect disingenuous.

There are certainly no grounds for anyone in Myanmar to discriminate against Muslims. However, in a country that denies the national integration of ethnic minority groups, Rohingya Muslims are evidently different from the majority Buddhist "Mongoloid Orientals."

That does not make the Rohingya any less Myanmar by identity, since their homeland is Rakhine or the former Arakan.

Myanmar's official "line" is that Rohingya are Bengalis. That would be going by skin complexion, facial features and historical links predating the formation of today's Myanmar – and engaging in racial discrimination.

Communities living in border regions tend to resemble the majority populations of neighbouring nations: Asiatics in the Asian regions of a Eurasian Russia, East Asians in the northern states of India near China, and Rohingya in today's Rakhine state next to Bangladesh.

There have been some limited migrant flows from Bangladesh into Rakhine as in other border regions elsewhere. But the Rohingya remain a distinct community in Myanmar worthy of all due rights and entitlements as citizens.

Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has become a flawed icon by refusing to confront the persecution of Rohingya. Senior members of her party have even joined in attacks of the Rohingya, as government and opposition parties unite on that sordid front.

The cruel oppression of the Rohingya is the sharpest edge of Myanmar's racist treatment of its many minority groups. So long as that problem is not satisfactorily solved, none of the country's ethnic problems can conceivably be solved.

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