

# 'Hold talks to solve human trafficking issue'

**CRITICAL:** Problem involves many countries in region, says ISIS chairman

## KUALA LUMPUR

**H**UMAN trafficking is the region's most pressing issue at the moment and people must be willing to talk about it to reach a solution.

Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia chairman Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa said even though the issue was a serious matter that involved many countries in the Asean region, there were times when people avoided discussing it.

"The problem has been in existence for some time, but when things like this escalate, we are without a solution.

"With regards to Rohingyas, Myanmar does not want it to be discussed in the Asean context and this makes it difficult to overcome," he told the *New Straits Times*.

Rastam said there had been attempts in the past by local and regional leaders to resolve the problem of trafficking, specifically of Rohingyas, but to no avail.

"(Tan Sri Datuk Seri) Syed Hamid Albar, when he was foreign minister, made an attempt at a solution, but it did not bear fruit.

"The same goes to efforts by the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Co-

operation) and the secretary-general of Asean."

The problem with the influx of human trafficking, he said, was that it only needed someone to turn on the "tap" and we get the flow.

"The important thing now is to make sure the tap is not turned on, because it is not the problem of just Malaysia and Indonesia, but everyone in the region.

"Hopefully, our situation does not worsen to the point where, in the past, tens of thousands of Vietnamese boat people landed in the region's waters, forcing governments to prepare a whole island to house them," he said, referring to the mass flight of Vietnamese boat people from 1975 to 1995 that caused an international humanitarian crisis with Southeast Asian countries refusing to accept them.

Rastam raised the question of housing the refugees in detention centres and how long it would last.

"Myanmar does not recognise their own citizens, seemingly afraid the Muslims Rohingyas will take over the country.

"It becomes an ethnic and religious issue, and nationalist feelings make it complicated.



We have to be willing to discuss and express views on this but there are times when people don't want to do it.

**Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa**  
Chairman, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

"We have to be willing to discuss and express views on this, but there are times when people don't want to do it," he said, adding that the 29th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, which begins on Monday, would be a good place to discuss the issue.

Rastam said for Myanmar, it was imperative to deal with Rohingyas, while for Bangladesh, it was important to deal with their own traffickers.

Delegates from 17 nations gathered in Thailand yesterday for talks on Southeast Asia's migrant crisis, which has seen thousands of people flee on boats across the Bay of

Bengal to Malaysia and Thailand.

It was unclear, however, what the one-day meeting would achieve, as it was not attended at a ministerial level.

More than 3,500 starving migrants have arrived on Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesian shores while the United Nations estimates that more than 2,500 are still trapped at sea.

The discovery of mass graves along the Malaysian-Thailand border in Perlis had also garnered international attention, including that of the United States, in facing an increasingly critical problem that has yet to be resolved.