

The Andaman Sea refugee crisis a year on: is the region now better prepared?

Written by The Conversation USA

The Andaman Sea crisis a year ago catalysed important policy developments on forced migration in Southeast Asia. [Part one](#) recapped what happened, and how the region responded. In part two, we discuss what's happened since the crisis, and what's needed to avoid similar events in future.

If progress toward a “fix” on future forced displacement crises such as that which took place in the Andaman Sea a year ago was measured in the number of regional meetings that have taken place, it would be plentiful.

Since the temporary resolution of the crisis was announced on May 29, 2015, at the [Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean](#) in Bangkok, there have been an [unprecedented number of meetings](#) in the region.

Where has this left us?

Despite the promise of the [Bali Process ministerial meeting outcome](#) from March 2016, the sheer number of meetings hasn't translated to concerted action.

Meanwhile, not all commitments made during the Andaman Sea crisis have been honoured. And the global crisis shows no sign of abating.

A year ago Indonesia and Malaysia [agreed to](#) :

... provide humanitarian assistance and temporary shelter to those 7,000 irregular migrants still

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at sea provided that the resettlement and repatriation process [would be completed] in one year by the international community.

A number of international donors assisted the two countries.

Between May 10 and July 30, 2015, [more than 5,000 people](#) who departed from Myanmar and Bangladesh managed to disembark in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand. Between September and December 2015 embarkations resumed. At least another 1,500 people left Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Of the arrivals, 2,646 Bangladeshis were returned to Bangladesh. Another 1,132 Myanmar Muslims from Rakhine State and Bangladeshis continue to be housed in detention and shelters in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. Of those still detained in Indonesia and Thailand, more than 95% are Rohingyas.

Indonesia's partnership with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to verify the status of Rohingya and Bangladeshi arrivals in Aceh and Medan [has been commended](#). So too has a draft [presidential decree](#) on handling asylum seekers, though this is still unsigned.

But there are unconfirmed reports that a sizeable number of the Rohingya people who were rescued [later disappeared](#) from temporary camps, headed to Malaysia.

Conditions in many detention facilities and shelters remain fraught. Tuberculosis infections in Malaysian facilities have [prolonged](#) processing. And earlier this week, Thai police [reportedly](#) shot and killed a Rohingya refugee [who had fled](#) the Phang Nga detention centre in southern Thailand with 20 other Rohingya men.

The Malaysian and Indonesian governments have yet to clarify the status of those who remain.

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Progress on tackling the root causes of movement in Rakhine State has been continually frustrated despite glimmers of hope.

The leader of Myanmar's ruling party, Aung San Suu Kyi, [recently requested](#) "enough space" to resolve the issue at a joint press conference with US Secretary of State John Kerry. Yet, earlier this month,

[she asked](#) the US ambassador to Myanmar to stop using the term "Rohingya". Perhaps what Suu Kyi desires is

["quiet diplomacy"](#);

On the ground, few changes to the plight of the Rohingya are noticeable. So long as human rights violations in countries of origin and the root causes of forced migration are not solved, the flight and plight of those people will continue.

Same old plan

The plan [agreed to](#) in Bangkok last May, to prevent irregular migration, smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons, was hardly revolutionary.

Countries undertook, among other promises, to:

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eradicate transnational organised crime smuggling and trafficking syndicates;

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strengthen co-operation between law enforcement authorities and complementary data collection;

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establish key national contact points; and

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enhance legal, affordable and safe channels of migration.

There was also a commitment to form a:

... mechanism or joint taskforce to administer and ensure necessary support, including resources as well as resettlement and repatriation options from the international community.

That taskforce has yet to be established, let alone convened, despite two follow-up meetings. Permanent resettlement places for those Rohingya who disembarked [remain scarce](#).

What's more, framing continues to focus on the "irregularity" or "illegality" of such movements, even though they are now routine. The focus cannot be fighting crime over developing protection-sensitive infrastructure. It can be both.

The most promising developments are the new consultation mechanism agreed by the Bali Process in March 2016, the [creation](#) of an ASEAN Regional Trust Fund to [support victims of human trafficking](#),

and the adoption in November 2015 of the [ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children](#).

A New York moment?

In September, US President Barack Obama and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon [will convene](#) high-level summits in New York on refugees and migrants.

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The recent Bali Process outcome, if used strategically, could provide a platform and framework for a more functional and enduring system to be put in place before the next crisis. As Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi [said](#) :

This must not happen again.

Our region is now in a position to broker more predictable and effective responses – even preventative action. Such promise must be translated into action.

Forced migration is now a global phenomenon, [identified](#) by the World Economic Forum as the top global risk in terms of likelihood, and the fourth in terms of impact.

Despite the many efforts and promises made, no comprehensive and systematic responses to irregular movements of people, especially those in need of international protection, have been instituted.

Much of the focus has been on the Middle East and Europe, but Asian displacement is similarly confronting. Overall numbers of those displaced in Asia [rose by 31% in 2014](#) . Afghanistan remains the world's second-leading producer of refugees. Climate-induced migration is [expected to accelerate](#)

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Unless managed more effectively, forced migration will have permanent and intensifying negative impacts on countries in our region and globally.

Experts around the world have [begun advancing ideas](#) for new migration pathways for those in humanitarian need, in addition to refugees. By September, plans for more robust architecture on forced migration will need to be more advanced. Countries in our region must not rest on their laurels.

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