



Rohingya refugees who entered Bangladesh by boat walking towards refugee camps after landing in the Bangladeshi district of Teknaf on Tuesday. Upon reaching the overcrowded camps in Bangladesh, many children die from malnutrition and some have even gone missing in an area rife with human trafficking and criminal networks. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Asean must do more to prevent conflict, protect refugees

Grouping needs an envoy on Rakhine and frameworks for conflict prevention and management of displaced people

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For *The Straits Times*

At next week's Asean-UN Summit in Manila, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will address Asean heads of state. While there will be much to celebrate and commend in terms of Asean's progress and development, this year's summit also takes place in the shadow of the massive Rohingya refugee crisis that has rapidly turned into what the Secretary-General warned it could – a humanitarian catastrophe.

The crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine State has seen over 600,000 Rohingya flee to Bangladesh, the fastest refugee exodus anywhere in the world since the Rwanda genocide of 1994. The terrible humanitarian consequences of the Rakhine crisis have revealed two things: First, that Asean lacks effective mechanisms to prevent conflict and protect those affected

by conflict, including internally displaced persons and refugees; and, second, that development gains cannot be taken for granted and can be lost especially quickly in situations of conflict, displacement and insecurity that undermine the very foundations that make sustainable development possible at all.

Asean was born out of regional security concerns and, by and large, has succeeded in maintaining inter-state peace in the region, becoming a dynamic hub of economic and social prosperity. It is time that we learn that our shared development gains must be defended through the upholding and protection of basic human rights for all, and that the region must work together to quickly address conflict that can rapidly spiral out of control and across borders, undoing years of hard work of development and regional cooperation.

The suffering that the survivors have endured is horrific and heartbreaking. Women and girls as

young as nine years have been raped by soldiers with impunity. Mothers have lost their babies and children their grandparents while carrying them for days across rivers and mountains after fleeing from violence, burning villages and hunger. Upon reaching the overcrowded camps in Bangladesh, many children still die from malnutrition and some have even gone missing in an area rife with human trafficking and criminal networks.

We need to understand who these victims are – the vast majority of Rohingya refugees who have fled northern Rakhine State to Bangladesh are women, children and elderly persons. These survivors are highly vulnerable and have been almost entirely dependent on remittances sent from their male relatives who had earlier fled to countries like Bangladesh, Malaysia, India and Saudi Arabia to seek safety and survival, working, if they are lucky, in precarious jobs without proper documents.

Thus, we are witnessing

simultaneously the way protracted statelessness and denial of rights, such as the Rohingya have long faced in Myanmar, can leave communities increasingly fragmented and less resilient over time, and how acute crises such as armed conflict leave the vulnerable even more destitute than ever without community structures to protect them, exposing them to violence, human rights abuse, multiple health and safety risks, desperation, dependency and further exploitation. There is also the risk that the ongoing deprivation will deepen cycles of hatred and vengeance, and fuel radicalisation, jeopardising regional stability. These are all threats to our vision of a people-centred Asean that prioritises community well-being and resilience as the core of our nations and region.

Asean must face its own responsibility for not doing enough to prevent this catastrophe from unfolding. In our failure to prevent the deterioration of the Rakhine

crisis, the burden has fallen on Asean's neighbour Bangladesh to host hundreds of thousands of refugees almost overnight, and on the United Nations, international donors and wider international community to provide emergency aid as well as quick and sustained funding for that aid. Inside Rakhine, humanitarian access remains restricted and trust between the international community and Myanmar has been badly damaged.

In its statement earlier this week on Rakhine, the United Nations Security Council referred to the importance of Asean action. There are three priorities for Asean to address the current crisis and to be prepared to prevent such crises from deepening in the future.

First, it can appoint an Asean envoy on Rakhine with a mandate to negotiate for the opening up of immediate and unfettered humanitarian access in Rakhine State and to assist in finding long-term solutions, including helping Myanmar get back on track with its stated intention to implement the recommendations of the government-appointed Rakhine Advisory Commission, led by Mr Kofi Annan.

Second, Asean needs to develop a framework for conflict prevention, including mechanisms for early warning, diplomacy, conflict management, and mediation. We must develop ways of working together in difficult times to rebuild trust, to create and maintain dialogue so that we can prevent conflict from taking root and proliferating. We also need to engage a wide range of institutions across the region, including education, religious and social, to embrace a culture of peace, prevention, tolerance and pluralism, and to stand against violence together. The role of young people in this latter approach is especially important.

Third, Asean should start developing its own framework to manage displacement, including the protection of internally displaced people and refugees. This should be done in the spirit of the imminent Global Compact on Refugees, due to be signed at next year's UN General Assembly, which emphasises the importance of responsibility-sharing, of adopting a "whole of society" approach that engages and supports all actors from host governments to local communities to private sector, building self-reliance of refugees and supporting conditions for safe and dignified return to countries of origin. Some countries in the region, including Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, have already made progress on this front, and could take the lead in the formulation of such a regional framework.

The 50th anniversary of Asean is a time to celebrate our joint development progress. It is also a time for stock-taking and for renewal to build an Asean Economic Community based on a people-centred Asean. Critical to this is the urgent need for Asean to prioritise regional cooperation to prevent conflict and protect people affected by it.

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