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Md Rizwanul Islam, for The Straits Times

Dim the destination allure for boat people



Migrants who were found at sea on a boat waiting to be repatriated across the Myanmar-Bangladesh border in the sub-township of Taung Pyo, Maungdaw, in Myanmar's state of Rakhine on Monday. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

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THE response to the perennial problem of human trafficking from Myanmar and Bangladesh is, at best, peripheral and, at worst, futile or sporadic and trivial.

While members of Asean as well as many other regional powers with clout over Myanmar have been keen to do business with the military junta in Myanmar, and appreciate the gradual movement towards democracy, they have almost never exerted any real pressure to end the systemic persecution of the Rohingya minority, and recognise them as citizens of Myanmar.

Comparing the attention of Asean member states to disputed territories in the South China Sea to that to the persecution of the Rohingya, the lack of concern for the latter is stark.

Even during the latest meeting of diplomats and observers in Bangkok last month, official statements were full of rhetoric, and empty on concrete measures to engender meaningful pressure on Myanmar. Even worse, they were devoid of any direct reference to the Rohingya.

It is also simplistic and disproportionate to treat the problems of the Rohingya as an issue of human trafficking or smuggling - their persecution merits status as refugees.

No matter how tough the stance on human trafficking or smuggling may be, hapless Rohingya have little choice but to opt for the perilous journey by sea. When death in their homeland looms on the horizon on a routine basis, dying at sea may not be a more daunting prospect.

Thus, the international community, particularly the regional powers and member states of Asean, must take an unequivocal stance against the persecution of the Rohingya by the authorities in Myanmar.

True, geopolitical considerations may make such a prospect of a unified voice a long shot. But this is where Asean leaders can pull their weight. While the Asean way of refraining from taking a public stance on "internal affairs of a member state" may have served it well so far, a regional group forging the Asean Economic Community - set to be created by the end of this year - may not be so non-committal to an issue that is an existential threat to many people within the region and to its overall peace and stability.

While the number of people from Bangladesh being trafficked by sea may be only a fraction of the number of Rohingya taking this route, this is a serious issue. Much has been said about the failure of the Bangladeshi authorities in curbing the flow of illegal migrants taking a desperate route to their "dream lands", and, surely, much of that criticism is warranted.

However, comparatively much less has been said about the pull factors in the destination countries - mainly Malaysia and Thailand - particularly, the beneficiaries of the toil by undocumented workers in those countries.

It is quite probable that many victims of human trafficking or smuggling are lured by the belief that they have brighter prospects in their intended destinations. Some may have been forced to engage in outright criminal activities.

However, it would seem that the majority work in legitimate workplaces. And it is implausible that the authorities in these countries are totally in the dark about this. And to have a lasting impact, the employers of these workplaces must be dealt with.

A parallel can be drawn with the fact that sex workers exist because there is a demand for their service. As long as the authorities in the destination countries turn a blind eye, it is futile and disingenuous to cast entire blame on undocumented workers or their source countries.

While hard numbers are unavailable, it is commonly estimated that more than one million undocumented foreigners live in Malaysia. Seemingly, there are more undocumented economic migrants than refugees - according to the United Nations' refugee agency UNHCR, as of end-April, there were around 152,830 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with the organisation there.

Indeed, newspaper reports indicate that illegal entrants take shelter in places where people from their own communities have a sizeable presence, which in turn suggests that the movements of these people are driven by an expectation of support within the destination countries.

In a destination country like Malaysia, the occasional campaigns against illegal workers generally have been led by the desire to appease public concern, stemming from specific incidents sparking hostility towards illegal workers - and not by any systemic policy.

Sporadic sprees of arresting undocumented foreigners and, sometimes, their employers too, have not sufficiently addressed the core problem. By making the hiring of unskilled foreign workers more expensive, the authorities in Malaysia may have unintentionally made the recruitment of undocumented foreigners even more enticing.

Instead, a better policy response would be to make the employment of unskilled foreign workers less expensive, which would encourage employers to hire through official channels. This would cater to the market

reality in the destination countries - which is that they need foreigners in unskilled jobs, no less than the foreigners need jobs.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

The writer is an assistant professor at School of Law, BRAC University, Bangladesh