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1. Michael Gordon: The asylum debate we have to have

Tony Abbott has damaged Australia's standing in the region, over-simplified the refugee crisis and sent an ominous warning to Labor on border protection.

The Age
May 23, 2015 - 12:15AM
Michael Gordon

With a handful of carefully crafted sound bites, Tony Abbott has damaged Australia's standing in the region, over-simplified the refugee crisis in south-east Asia and sent an ominous warning to Labor on border protection.

As the Prime Minister describes it, the unfolding crisis is the result of an "outbreak of people smuggling in Burma and Bangladesh" and the most appropriate and effective way to respond is to "stop the boats".

"Frankly, the only way to stop the boats is to be prepared to turn them around," he said, two days before his "nope, nope, nope" response to any idea that Australia might share the burden of resettling rescued asylum seekers who are found to be refugees.

Then came the familiar rhetoric about using the front door, not the back door; a reference to these people wanting "a new life in a Western country"; and a re-statement of the principle underpinning the Coalition's punitive border-protection regime.

"If we do the slightest thing to encourage people to get on the boats, this problem will get worse, not better," Abbott declared. For the "slightest thing", substitute anything that suggests sympathy, empathy or compassion towards those stranded at sea.

Finally, to join all the dots, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton emerged to warn that Labor leader Bill Shorten, if he became prime minister next year, would "side with the people smugglers" and dismantle the Coalition policies that had stopped the boats.

So let's begin by unpacking the Abbott statements, starting with the assertion that the catalyst for this crisis was "an outbreak of people smuggling in Burma and Bangladesh". Not quite, Prime Minister.

What triggered the crisis was a crackdown on people smuggling by the Thai military after that country was downgraded to the lowest tier on the US State Department's people trafficking survey last year and a mass grave was discovered at a smuggler's camp on May 1.

The crackdown prompted smugglers and traffickers to abandon thousands of Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Myanmar and probably as many Bangladeshis seeking jobs who were already on rickety boats in the Andaman Sea.

When those boats sought refuge in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, they were turned away, prompting a humanitarian crisis and international condemnation that, in turn, forced the three countries to think again.

Turning back the boats has clearly been an effective tactic in Abbott's Operation Sovereign Borders, but encouraging other countries to adopt it in this case was a recipe for folly on a grand scale. This was Abbott's second regrettable statement.

A third was to assume that the Rohingyas and Bangladeshis were intent on transiting in the south-east Asian countries en route to "a new life in a Western country". Much more likely, they were seeking refuge or work as soon as possible.

As for the "nope, nope, nope", Abbott could have brushed aside the question of whether Australia would share the resettlement burden by pointing out that it is utterly premature. Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia have agreed that they will provide temporary shelter for up to a year, and there are many issues to be confronted before the resettlement question even arises. The biggest is whether international pressure can persuade Myanmar to stop the persecution of Rohingyas that began in the 1970s.

But Abbott wanted to make a point to his domestic audience and the Labor Party – that there will be no departure from a border protection policy that is based totally on the deterring people from getting on boats to Australia by punishing those who tried to come.

The skewed priority is reflected in a foreign aid budget that gives more to a single province in Papua New Guinea (which houses the Manus Island detention centre) than to an entire south-east Asian country, Laos, and quarantines Cambodia from budget cuts because that country has agreed to take our refugees from Nauru.

But the opportunity cost is that Australia's standing as a model citizen in the region is diminished, along with this country's capacity to influence a discussion that tackles all the dimensions of the problem – the criminal, humanitarian, economic and political.

"The policy of deterrence just means pushing the problem back on to somebody else to fix," is how Richard Towle, the UN refugee agency's representative in Malaysia, expresses it. "The lesson here is that this approach irritates relations between states and exposes people to greater danger."

One potential upside from this crisis is that Labor is up for a debate about whether there is a better way. The opposition's immigration spokesman, Richard Marles, has spent most of his time in the portfolio in a kind of wishy-washy safe haven: criticising the government when embarrassing revelations surface, but refusing to spell out a Labor alternative. That might be about to change. Marles was in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia as the crisis unfolded. He saw horrifying images of the skeletal state of some who were rescued, heard first-hand responses to Abbott's turn-back remarks and came away with what he describes as an appreciation of the complexity of the challenge.

"Is Labor just as strong as the Coalition in dealing with people smuggling and trans-national crime? Absolutely. No doubt," Marles tells me. "But to fail to see the question of displaced people around the world and in our region as having a humanitarian dimension is to choose not to be a civilised and progressive modern global player."

"Building a deterrence network as the centrepiece of a philosophy, which is all about putting a wall around Australia and saying 'we don't want to have anything to do with the problems of the world', is terrible policy. Why? Because we live at a time in history where we are seeing the largest numbers of displaced people on the globe since the Second World War. For a country like Australia to take that view is just unacceptable."

Clearly, Marles has a mountain of work to do in crafting a policy that applies these sentiments to all aspects of asylum seeker policy, and reconciles them with Labor's commitment to the detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island.

One indication of his progress will come when the ALP debates asylum policy at its national conference in Melbourne in July. While there are plenty of grounds for scepticism, Marles gives the distinct impression that he is aiming for something better.

"The challenge for us is getting the debate onto a better footing on both sides and actually having a proper understanding of what's going on – rather than having a debate in which both sides are shouting at the converted. That is really terrible."

Who could disagree?

Michael Gordon is political editor of The Age.

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-asylum-debate-we-have-to-have-20150522-gh7jat.html>

2. Tahmima Anam: The Rohingya crisis is not an isolated tragedy – it's the shape of things to come

With sea levels rising around the world, the refugees adrift in the Andaman Sea are the heralds of a future age of migration

The Guardian
Tahmima Anam
Wednesday 20 May 2015 00.01 AEST

In 1971 Ravi Shankar and George Harrison organised a concert in New York City's Madison Square Gardens to fund relief efforts for war-torn Bangladesh. The album featured the image of a starving child on the cover, which became a symbol of an impoverished country emerging out of the rubble of war. Forty-four years later, another image is now associated with Bangladesh: that of the abandoned refugees who float on the Andaman Sea with no hope of rescue.

We've all seen the photographs of these refugees. We've seen them hanging their emaciated limbs off the sides of their boats. We've seen the scars on their backs, earned in fights over scarce food and water. We've read their harrowing stories of their being abandoned at sea, rejected by one government after another.

It is estimated that up to 8,000 refugees are marooned in the sea between Bangladesh and Malaysia. Most of them come from Rakhine state, in Burma, where as members of the Rohingya community they are denied the basic rights of citizenship. The rest are economic migrants from Bangladesh.

I remember when the Rohingya refugees first started arriving in Bangladesh. It was in 1982, after the Rohingya had been stripped of their rights by a Burmese law that refused to recognise them as one of the 135 "national races" of the country. Faced with state-sanctioned persecution, they began to flee across the border.

In the years since then, they have been evicted from their lands, been the victims of arbitrary taxes and forced labour, and been banned from travelling or getting married without a permit. It is illegal for them even to have more than two children. In a cruel irony, the Burmese government has now taken to calling the Rohingya "illegal Bangladeshis", though generations of their people have lived in Burma.'

There are now 30,000 documented Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, but the UNHCR estimates that up to 200,000 more are living in villages along the border between Bangladesh and Burma. Bangladesh pleads lack of resources: as a poor country, we just don't have the means to support an influx of refugees. But we could do much more to support our neighbours. Worse, western governments have been so enthralled with Aung San Suu Kyi that they have ignored her shameful stance on this minority community. The Burmese authorities are known to have refused to attend any event in which the word "Rohingya" is uttered. For their part, the Malaysian and Thai authorities have refused to take in any refugees, putting paid to any notion there may have been of a shared community of south-east Asian countries.

But blaming Bangladesh or Burma, or indeed the countries that are refusing to send rescue vessels, can take us only so far. The only way the Rohingyas' condition will improve is if there is a concerted international, multilateral pressure on all the countries of the region.

The time has come for us to take a global view on migrants. There are more displaced people in the world today than at any other time since the second world war. People fleeing persecution, poverty and conflict are risking their lives to find refuge. The Rohingya refugees, 25,000 of whom have taken to the seas this year, say they would rather take their chances with people-smugglers than remain in Burma to face certain death.

The truth is, we are entering an age of migrants, and we must adjust our sense of fairness and morality, and even our concept of national borders, accordingly. Climate change is about to force upon us a refugee crisis that is unprecedented in all of human history. Already in Bangladesh 50,000 people migrate to the capital city every month because rising sea levels have made their villages uninhabitable and have destroyed their arable land.

The floating refugees are giving us a glimpse into our collective future. In this future, perhaps it will be the already unfortunate countries, such as Bangladesh, that first fall victim. But soon, even wealthy countries will begin to suffer from extreme weather conditions and rising sea levels. We still don't know exactly how climate change will affect each of our countries. Given this uncertainty, we need to take a radically new approach to our shared resources.

I may dream of such a future, but I know it will not come readily. Many thousands of boat people will have to perish before we make sweeping, transnational changes to the way we approach refugees.

We are poorly prepared for what is about to hit us. We have neither the political will nor the moral courage nor the sense we need of a collective fate to face the challenges of the future. Let the images of these people be our clarion call.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/19/rohingya-andaman-sea-refugees-migration>

3. Mathew Davies: Rohingya and our rule-bending arrogance

Australia's "stop the boats" policy has helped to unravel global norms around refugees, which is now contributing to Rohingya refugees being bounced around the oceans of South-East Asia, writes Mathew Davies.

ABC The Drum

By Mathew Davies

Posted Mon 18 May 2015, 10:30am

In 2003 Bill Clinton, in a speech at Yale University, suggested that American foreign policy should try "to create a world with rules and partnerships and habits of behaviour that we would like to live in when we're no longer the military, political and economic superpower in the world".

It is a long way from the carefully tended quads of New Haven to the leaky boats full of Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar, currently being bounced around South-East Asia as Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia refuse them entry into their territorial waters. Yet the same concerns that shaped Clinton's speech back then should today shape Australia's approach to the question of refugees.

What Clinton meant was that America, a superpower that could see its own decline, faced a choice. It could revel in the Indian summer of its power, violating the laws and norms that it had helped create because it was powerful enough, for now, to do so. Or it could make harder but more long-sighted decisions, foregoing short-term success for the more important goal of helping to bed down an order where its values would be best preserved when it was no longer in a position to materially force their realisation.

Australia too faces this choice - and the Rohingya illustrate the human cost of this decision.

The Government's policy of "turning back the boats" has been one of its few political success stories - first in opposition when it bludgeoned the Gillard government with it, and then in power when it militarised the issue, authorised the tow-back of incoming boats and crafted elaborate offshore processing systems. The victims have remained largely faceless, stripped of their identity in the press and safely kept away from the cameras.

But in crafting this policy Australia weakened both the international refugee regime as a set of rules and norms that should shape how states deal with such refugee flows and helped along a regional trend that has questioned the international regime as never before.

To be clear, Australia has in no way caused the Rohingya crisis nor has its policy alone been the impetus for South-East Asian states' current policy. The current crisis could not have been predicted when the Australian Government's policy to "stop the boats" was being designed and implemented.

However, Australia's actions have helped contribute to a general questioning of international norms on the question of refugees arriving by sea and a weakening of received practice - that states would accept these refugees as they arrived. It is not that Australia's actions in this area are unprecedented in the region - Thailand in particular has a reputation as a bad citizen. Likewise, Malaysia has long cracked down on what it labels illegal migrants.

But Australia's actions are the largest, most organised and most publicly trumpeted and have changed the scale of the critique against the refugee regime. And both the Abbott and previous Rudd/Gillard governments have participated in this.

The dangers of weakening international norms when politically expedient to do so has long been understood. We can choose to break the fragile web of laws and norms that shape our world when it is politically expedient to do so, especially when we are powerful. But even then, we cannot control the consequences of that transgression in terms of the precedent we set and the lessons others learn from our actions.

The consequences of Australia's actions in the past are coming home to roost today, and it is some of Asia's most vulnerable people who are suffering as a result.

It is impossible for Australia to criticise those who do what we have with such a fanfare of self-congratulation. Prime Minister Tony Abbott has defended the rights of Southeast Asian nations to prevent the boats making landfall despite the human cost of this policy potentially being the lives of thousands on the ocean right now. This is in stark contrast to US Secretary of State John Kerry's call for regional states to accept these refugees to avoid a humanitarian disaster.

For a country that values its commitment to human rights as does Australia, our position in the face of Rohingya suffering is a humiliating moment; a realisation of what happens when our policies and our professed beliefs no longer march in step. We are left advising Europeans to tow boats back to the civil and political turmoil of Libya or ignoring the lives of the Rohingya in favour of a "tough on people-smuggling" rhetoric that we are now trapped in regardless of the human cost.

The price of living in a world of rules and norms widely shared is that you do not get to pick and choose which of those rules apply to you and which only apply to others. For a superpower like the US, facing its own mortality, these decisions were global in nature - questions of military adventurism, respect for sovereignty and pluralism, relations with the non-Western world.

For Australia they are no less fundamental; do we want to craft a regional order where our values have wider resonance because we follow them even when politically costly? Or do we want to jettison all notions of common governance in the name of self-interested politics?

The short-term electoral benefits of stopping the boats have been clearly illustrated - now we move into a different phase, the consequences of those decisions so willingly adopted.

Sadly it is not us who bear the costs of those decisions. As almost always happens, it is those most vulnerable, most persecuted and most needy who experience the consequences of our arrogance.

This article was originally written for New Mandala.

Dr Mathew Davies is a fellow and senior lecturer researching international relations, ASEAN and human rights at the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, The Australian National University.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-18/davies-rohingya-and-our-rule-bending-arrogance/6477148>

4. Michael Gordon: Tony Abbott abdicates leadership on refugee crisis with negative new slogan

The Age
May 22, 2015 - 5:30AM
Michael Gordon

Tony Abbott has a new three-word slogan, crafted in response to appeals for Australia to resettle some of the thousands of refugees facing death in the Andaman Sea: "Nope, nope, nope."

Its fatal flaw is that it assumes the Bay of Bengal refugee crisis is identical to the one he faced when he came to power – and can be handled with the same unsustainable tool of deterrent and the same resort to simplistic "front door/back door" language. It can't.

Like John Howard's Pacific Solution, it sees every aspect of asylum seeker policy through the prism of whether a green light will be flashed at people smugglers. It misses the bigger picture and an opportunity to help forge a better way.

To understand the biggest difference, all you need is a map that shows the escape route of the desperately poor and perennially persecuted (and the two groups are not mutually exclusive).

They are fleeing Bangladesh and Myanmar to neighbouring Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia by any means available, not seeking transit on the way to "life in a Western country". They don't know the difference between the back door and the front door and it is not just people smugglers who prey on their plight, but human traffickers too.

Rather than encourage other countries to ape Australia's punitive approach, it's time to talk seriously about a regional framework that reconciles treating people humanely with putting smugglers and traffickers out of business.

The Prime Minister did not have to immediately join the United States and announce a willingness to help resettle those who are found to be refugees or assist in the repatriation of those whose protection claims are rejected.

But he did have the opportunity to signal Australia's willingness to explore all the issues, from the immediate challenge of rescuing those who face death at sea to addressing the reasons why people fled their homelands.

Instead, his only message was for the domestic political audience and the people smugglers.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-opinion/tony-abbott-abdicates-leadership-on-refugee-crisis-with-negative-new-slogan-20150521-gh6xuq.html>

5. 'They hit us, with hammers, by knife': Rohingya migrants tell of horror at sea

Up to 8,000 are believed to be stuck off Thai, Indonesian and Malaysian coasts, and those who made it to shore describe violence and starvation

The Guardian
Kate Lamb in Langsa
Monday 18 May 2015 00.59 AEST

Crowded under tarpaulin tents strewn with rubbish and boxes of water, the Burmese and Bangladeshi migrants speak of horrors at sea: of murders, of killing each other over scarce supplies of food and water, of corpses thrown overboard.

"One family was beaten to death with wooden planks from the boat, a father, a mother and their son," says Mohammad Amin, 35. "And then they threw the bodies into the ocean."

Amin, an ethnic Rohingya Muslim, first boarded a boat from Burma three months ago. Now he is among 677 migrants who are being housed in a makeshift camp by the harbour in Langsa, Indonesia, after spending months in the Andaman Sea.

Getting to the camp was an epic struggle. As governments around the region have refused the migrants entry, and their navies have pushed them back, it was eventually down to Acehese fishermen to rescue the boat on Friday, towing it to shore in Langsa.

But at least now they are on dry land. Between 6,000 and 8,000 more are believed to still be stuck off the coasts of Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, with limited water and food, in a situation the UN has warned could fast become a "massive humanitarian crisis" because no government in the region is willing to take them in.

Mohammad Rafique, 21, says that when the boat he was on first floated into Indonesian waters last week, the navy gave them provisions of food and water. "After that they asked us, 'Where you go now?'" he explains, "We said, 'We are going to Malaysia.' The Indonesian navy said, 'Go to Malaysia,' and they take us to the Malaysian border."

In Malaysia they were met with the same response.

Out back in the hospital wing in Langsa, a row of men lie on stretchers with their emaciated limbs hooked up to intravenous drips. The back of one shirtless man is marked with deep red lashes.

"They hit us, with hammers, by knife, cutting," says Rafique, recalling onboard violence between the different groups of migrants. He presents his only possession – a Rohingya identity card from the United Nations high commission for refugees in Bangladesh.

Many of those on the ships are from northern Burma's persecuted Rohingya minority, who are denied citizenship and voting rights, even though many have lived in the country for generations.

In the majority Buddhist nation, the Rohingya have continued to flee sectarian violence and poor conditions in refugee camps.

In Langsa, Amin, a former farmer in Burma, tells of how his village was set alight in a violent attack several years ago. His mother, he says, was burned to death because she was too old to escape.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/17/they-hit-us-with-hammers-by-knife-rohingya-migrants-tell-of-horror-at-sea>

6. 'We helped out of solidarity': Indonesian fishermen come to aid of boat migrants

While governments have refused to receive migrants stranded in Andaman Sea, Aceh villagers have stepped up to fill humanitarian void

The Guardian

Kate Lamb in Langsa

Monday 18 May 2015 22.09 AEST

When Myusup Mansur, a fisherman from the small island village of Pusung, first caught a glimpse of the boat in the distance in waters off North Sumatra, it was dark and impossible for him to make out the hundreds of migrants huddled on the deck.

It was only when two other fishermen pulled up and told him what they had seen that he realised what was happening: scores of people were jumping from the boat into the sea.

They headed in the direction of the boat while radioing in for rescue reinforcement on the way. "We helped them because they needed help," said Mansur, 38. "What is more human than that?"

Some 677 migrants were brought ashore late last Thursday by Mansur and his fellow fishermen. While governments around the region have refused to receive what is thought to be thousands of migrants from Burma and Bangladesh stranded and starving in the Andaman Sea, the fishermen of Indonesia have stepped up to fill the humanitarian void.

More than 1,350 migrants, a mixture of ethnic Rohingya from Burma and migrants from Bangladesh, have landed on the shores of Aceh, Indonesia, this week and in each case it has been the fishermen who had come to their rescue.

Mansur and the other two fishermen's small boats could take only about 30 people each but there were many more migrants waiting to be rescued. "I was lost for words," he said. "I was panicked, because I have never seen so many people in the water like that. I kept pulling them from the water one by one, I couldn't count how many, but my boat was full. After that I couldn't take any more and there were still people crying for help.

"I didn't understand their language. I couldn't ask them anything, and I couldn't understand what they were asking," he added. "They just kept calling to me for help."

Nearly two hours passed before six large fishing boats that had also been out at sea arrived to help. The fishermen laboured together, pulling the migrants from the sea and transferring them from boat to boat. Finally Mansur linked his small turquoise and orange boat to the migrant vessel to collect the women and children who had remained on board. He said he would do the same again if faced with another similar situation.

Suryadi, who only uses one name, from the fishermen association in Langsa, Aceh, said: "We helped out of solidarity. If we find someone in the ocean we have to help them no matter who they are. The police did not like us helping but we could not avoid it. Our sense of humanity was higher. So we just helped with the limited resources that we had at the time."

Over recent weeks boats full of migrants have been pushed back and forth between the navies of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, with no country willing to take them in. The United Nations estimates that up to 8,000 more are languishing at sea.

Those who have been rescued and brought to land have recounted horrific stories of murders over the last supplies of water and food during almost a month stranded at sea.

Andreas Harsono, from Human Rights Watch in Jakarta, said the fishermen were offering assistance that official channels had failed to provide. "The fact that these fishermen are helping these people shows that they have a better humanitarian understanding than government officials in Jakarta," he said.

Harsono said that in Aceh, a province that in the past was wracked by a decades-long separatist conflict, people understood suffering and the value of compassion. In Mansur's village a 45-minute boat ride away from the Langsa temporary camp where the 677 migrants are now being housed, that observation resonates.

When Mansur collected 30 women and children at sea and made the six-hour journey back to Pusung, the migrants were greeted with open arms. "We bought them a big bunch of bananas and water and they all bathed in our homes," said Saipul Umar, 54. "They were so weak, especially the small children. They were traumatised."

The migrants were given food, water, coffee and cakes, and a place to wash. "We treated them like family," said Sulaiman, 76. Others asked questions about their stories, about why they were fleeing their countries.

After learning about the treatment of the ethnic Rohingya in Burma, where they are persecuted and denied citizenship, one village resident said that perhaps the migrants should have stayed in Pusung.

"They wanted to live here," she said, "They didn't want to go."

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/18/solidarity-indonesian-fishermen-boat-migrants-aceh>

7. Indonesia sends three warships and a plane to turn away migrant boats

Navy patrols stepped up to prevent migrant vessels entering territorial waters as thousands are still thought to be stranded at sea

The Guardian
Agence France-Presse
Monday 18 May 2015 17.12 AEST

The Indonesian navy prevented a suspected migrant boat from entering the country's waters at the weekend after the arrival of hundreds of Rohingya and Bangladeshi people and has stepped up patrols in the area, the military said Monday.

Four warships and one plane were now patrolling off the coast of Indonesia's western province of Aceh to stop migrant boats from entering, up from one warship and a plane about a week ago, an Indonesian armed forces spokesman, Fuad Basya, said.

Nearly 3,000 migrants have swum to shore or been rescued off Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand over the past week, about half of whom have arrived in Aceh.

The three nations have sparked outrage by turning away some overloaded vessels, and thousands of migrants are still believed to be stranded at sea after a Thai crackdown disrupted long-established people-smuggling and -trafficking routes.

The migrants who have made it to shore in Indonesia have mostly been rescued by fishermen, and grim tales have emerged of deadly fights on board and harsh treatment by people smugglers.

On Sunday the Indonesian navy stopped a boat from entering its waters after the vessel was spotted heading across the Malacca strait from the direction of Malaysia, Basya said.

After radio communication with the boat, it turned back from Indonesia, he said, adding it was not physically pushed back. Basya said it was believed the boat was carrying more migrants, although he was not sure how many.

"It was heading to Indonesian waters from Malaysia and was denied entry," Basya said. "It was intercepted, and we stopped it from passing."

A week ago the navy stopped a boat carrying hundreds of migrants from entering Indonesia, and the military insisted it would help only vessels in distress.

"The boats are forbidden from entering Indonesia," Basya said.

On Friday fishermen rescued hundreds of migrants from a sinking boat off Aceh, on the huge island of Sumatra. Fighting had erupted on board between the Rohingya, a persecuted Muslim minority from Myanmar and the Bangladeshis, and many leapt or were thrown overboard.

South-east Asian nations are under growing pressure to take action to stem the influx of people, and Malaysia, which is the current chair of regional grouping the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, on Sunday pressed Myanmar to engage in talks on the issue.

Malaysia's foreign minister, Anifah Aman, is also due to host talks with his Indonesian and Thai counterparts this week.

However, Malaysia also said last week it would turn away boats bearing desperate migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh unless they were in imminent danger of sinking, following in the footsteps of Indonesia.

Meanwhile the families of Rohingya on board one of the boats were growing worried because they had not been able to contact their loved ones since Saturday, Chris Lewa of the Arakan Project, which monitors migrant journeys across the Bay of Bengal, said.

The boat is believed to be carrying about 350 people, including dozens of women and children, and was thought to be cast adrift by a Thai smuggling gang who fled the vessel after disabling the ship's engine this month.

Lewa said the project and relatives had been able to reach migrants on board the boat via mobile phones but the numbers have been dead since Saturday evening.

It is not clear whether that boat is the same vessel spotted by journalists on Thursday last week.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/18/indonesia-sends-three-warships-and-a-plane-to-turn-away-migrant-boats>

8. Indonesian military warns more asylum seeker boats on the way ahead of talks with Malaysia, Thailand

ABC News Online

By Indonesia correspondent George Roberts

Posted Mon 18 May 2015, 2:05pm

The Indonesian military understands there are many more suspected asylum seekers heading towards the nation, after another boat was spotted off the coast on Sunday.

Indonesia's military spokesman, Fuad Basya, said a navy patrol ship spotted a boat coming from the direction of Malaysia late yesterday.

He said the boat turned around, which he suspected happened after they saw Indonesia's warships.

Indonesia now has four navy patrol ships in the area, to prevent asylum seekers and migrants entering.

It comes as several thousands of migrants and refugees have been rescued or have swum to shore in Indonesia and neighbouring Malaysia and Thailand in recent days.

The three countries are all refusing to allow boats carrying asylum seekers to make landfall, and Malaysia and Indonesia have both admitted to turning boats around.

International immigration groups suspect thousands of people are consequently at sea in the region with nowhere to go.

Despite the policy, about 1,100 people have landed in Malaysia, and at least 1,350 people rescued and brought ashore by fishermen from Aceh province in Indonesia.

The ABC understands that representatives of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia are meeting in Malaysia to discuss the issue this week.

Myanmar has reportedly refused to join the meeting.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-18/indonesian-military-warns-more-asylum-seeker-boats-on-way/6478208>

9. Burma's boatpeople 'faced choice of annihilation or risking their lives at sea'

Thousands of members of the Rohingya, a Burmese minority group, are now adrift in the Andaman Sea, with aid groups fearing 'boatloads of corpses'

The Guardian

Emma Graham-Harrison

Sunday 17 May 2015 09.05 AEST

They were carried or staggered ashore, some paralysed by malnutrition, others little more than walking skeletons, burnt and dazed from weeks at sea on boats the UN has called "floating coffins".

Manu Abudul Salam, 19, had watched her brother die when desperate fighting broke out after the captain of their wooden boat fled on a speedboat, leaving more than 800 passengers adrift with dwindling food and water. "If I had known the boat journey would be so horrendous, I would rather have just died in Myanmar [Burma]," she told journalists shortly after being towed ashore by Indonesian fishermen, one of a few hundred allowed to land.

Salam, a Rohingya from northern Burma, was not exaggerating in her depiction of that grim choice, judging by a report from researchers at Queen Mary, University of London, which warns that her people are facing state-sponsored genocide.

“The Rohingya are faced with two options: stay and face annihilation, or flee,” said Professor Penny Green, part of a group that recently completed several months’ research in the Rohingya’s home state of Rakhine. “If we understand genocide to be a process, that is what this is. Those who remain suffer destitution, malnutrition and starvation; severe physical and mental illness; restrictions on movement, education, marriage, childbirth, livelihood, land ownership; and the ever-present threat of violence and corruption.”

Since 1982 the group has been refused citizenship by the Burmese government, which denies their existence. Officials will not attend events, at home or internationally, where the word Rohingya is used, and last week threatened to boycott a summit on the escalating migrant crisis which had been called by Thailand.

“If they use the term Rohingya, we won’t take part in it, since we don’t recognise this term. The Myanmar government has been protesting against the use of it all along,” Zaw Htay, an official from the president’s office, told Reuters on Saturday. Instead it insists that a group with its own language and a history in Burma that goes back many generations must be called Bengalis, and describes them as illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. That alienation has led to a vast chain of “refugee” camps which Green says are more like prisons, home to more than 100,000 Rohingya who require permission to leave them.

In the regional capital of Sittwe, once a thriving mixed city with dozens of mosques, a few thousand Rohingya still live in a ghetto with seven heavily guarded entrances. The number of mosques still standing is in single figures and they are deserted, occupied by government forces. A trickle of food aid into the camps keeps people alive but hungry on a meagre diet of rice and lentils, while in the city’s markets there are bags of food aid apparently siphoned off by officials with little care for the camps’ inhabitants. “They live the barest of existences,” Green says. “People were begging us for food. You walk around and see blank eyes.”

The government also tolerates Islamophobia and screeds of hatred in the media, Green said, fostering an ugly atmosphere that easily flares into violence. More than 200 Rohingya were killed in attacks in 2012 for which no one has been tried or even arrested. “We asked why there were no prosecutions or investigations, and the prosecutor said it was because it happened at night, so no one could see what happened.”

It is this living death that the Rohingya have been trying to flee for years, some across the border into Bangladesh, but thousands by sea, even though they know the smuggling trade is vicious and predatory and the journey could cost their lives.

The pace of departures has picked up, with up to 25,000 setting off from the Bay of Bengal between January and March, double the levels in 2013 and 2014, a UN report on “irregular maritime movements” in the region found. More than 300 migrants died of starvation, dehydration and beatings by boat crews, survivors told the UN. It is possible that others died unrecorded deaths as they set off in ships no more seaworthy or less crowded than those that frequently founder in the Mediterranean.

“A few interviewees also told of entire boats sinking, but there was no way to verify such reports or if, and how many, lives were lost,” the UN said in a report on the sea traffic.

Many of the women endure rape or other sexual violence on the boats or while waiting to travel, and many others are forced into marriage with men who pay for their journey. Mothers travelling with children are also particularly vulnerable to starvation, as young travellers are given no rations so women often go hungry to ensure that their sons and daughters can eat. This desperate exodus has been going on for years, largely unnoticed until regional governments that had been taking in the migrants started turning away men, women and children who had spent weeks at sea.

There are perhaps as many as 8,000 people now adrift in a hellish maritime limbo, refused permission to land by the Indonesian, Malaysian and Thai governments after being handed basic provisions of food and water, unlikely to last out their uncharted journeys.

“The situation is very grave,” Joe Lowry, a spokesman for the International Organisation for Migration in Bangkok, told Reuters. “They have no food, no water and are drinking their own urine. This is a game of maritime ping-pong with human life. We expect governments in the region to find a solution rapidly ... or we will be finding boatloads of desiccated corpses floating around in the Andaman Sea in coming days.”

Earlier in the week about 2,000 people were allowed to land; it was not clear how officials were deciding who should receive assistance and who were sent on their way. Turning the boats away was “incomprehensible and inhumane”, the UN’s top human rights official warned, as other UN organisations begged the governments to take them in and promised to help with food and transport costs. “In the name of humanity, let these migrants land,” said William Lacy Swing, director general of the International Organisation for Migration, which has already offered \$1m in funding.

Pushing the desperate migrants back out to sea may also be illegal, as it violates obligations enshrined in global maritime law, according to the International Chamber of Shipping. “It’s a well-honoured maritime tradition for ships to rescue anyone in

distress at sea, but coastal states also have an obligation to come to the rescue, and we expect them to honour this, including taking migrants ashore," said ICS spokesman Simon Bennett.

The countries turning migrants away are apparently worried about their capacity to absorb a fast-growing number of poor, uneducated arrivals. But critics say they share responsibility for the current crisis by shying away from dealing with the root cause of the migration – policies in Burma that rights groups say amount to state-sponsored ethnic cleansing.

"Regional countries are reaping what they have sown for their policy of denial for years, and even with boatloads of desperate people in their waters they're refusing to act," said David Mathieson, senior researcher on Burma for Human Rights Watch.

"They are tantamount to co-conspirators in the repression of the Rohingya for years, because of their weak response to the export of Burma's discriminatory policy to a stateless minority that has evinced more hatred than mercy throughout Asia."

In its first official response to the crisis, the Burmese government denied any of the people stranded at sea were its citizens. "We cannot say the migrants are from Myanmar unless we can identify them," a government spokesman, Ye Htut, told the Associated Press. "Most victims of human trafficking claim they are from Myanmar; it is very easy and convenient for them."

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/17/rohingya-burma-refugees-boat-migrants>

10. Tony Abbott defends other countries turning back asylum-seeker boats

Thousands of Rohingya from Burma are feared stranded at sea as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand turn away their rickety boats

The Guardian
Australian Associated Press
Sunday 17 May 2015 17.49 AEST

The prime minister, Tony Abbott, says he won't criticise countries turning back asylum-seeker boats to stop people smuggling.

Thousands of Rohingya from Burma and Bangladeshi migrants are feared stranded at sea with Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand turning away their rickety boats.

Abbott said on Sunday he was not critical of efforts made by other nations to stop people smuggling in the region.

"I don't apologise in any way for the action that Australia has taken to preserve safety at sea by turning boats around where necessary," he said.

"And if other countries choose to do that, frankly that is almost certainly absolutely necessary if the scourge of people smuggling is to be beaten."

If that meant taking "more vigorous" action on the high seas or closer to Burma, so be it, he said.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/may/17/tony-abbott-backs-other-countries-turning-back-asylum-seeker-boats>

11. Sarah Hanson-Young says boats not stopped, but stranded

Boats not stopped, but stranded: Greens

AAP / news.com.au
Saturday May 16, 2015 6:17PM

The migrant boats have not stopped, despite what the Australian government says, says Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young.

In the past week, 2000 Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants have been rescued off Indonesia and Malaysia, while activists estimate there are another 8000 stuck in harrowing conditions out at sea in Southeast Asia.

"The boats haven't stopped, they are marooned out on the high seas and people are starving to death," Ms Hanson-Young told reporters on Saturday.

"(They are) being used as human ping-pong balls, pushed from one country's borders to another."

Ms Hanson-Young has called on the Australian government to send out search and rescue crews and resettle refugees, many of whom are fleeing persecution in Myanmar (Burma) and poverty in Bangladesh.

But Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand have been turning away stricken boats filled with starving asylum seekers.

The waves of weak, hungry and dehydrated migrants who arrived on Friday were the latest to slip into countries that have made it clear they are not welcome.

Thailand has announced a regional meeting on the crisis for May 29, but Myanmar - which refuses citizenship to its Rohingya minority - indicated it would stay away.

Federal opposition finance spokesman Tony Burke said the Australian government should respond by joining in a regional approach.

"The response ... is an acknowledgement that only a regional approach is an approach that would work," he told reporters on Saturday.

"We need to make sure, as Labor has always viewed, we want people who are in a genuine desperate situation to be able to be given a place, a safe haven.

"But to make sure in finding a safe place for them to live they are not using methods of getting there that cause them to lose their lives on the way."

Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla defended his country's unwillingness to accept refugees, telling the BBC that it sent aboard engineers to tend to migrant boats so they could reach their intended destinations.

"These refugees, the target is not Indonesia," he said.

"In Indonesia it is not easy to have work. Usually they are going to Australia or Malaysia - it's easy to have a job there. The target is not Indonesian waters.

"If their target is other countries, we give them supplies."

<http://www.news.com.au/national/breaking-news/boats-not-stopped-but-stranded-greens/story-e6frku9-1227357402027>

12. Breakthrough in Asian migrant crisis as Indonesia and Malaysia agree to help

Two countries agree to offer temporary shelter for thousands of refugees and economic migrants who have been trapped on boats on south-east Asian seas

The Guardian
Agence France-Presse
Wednesday 20 May 2015 15.00 AEST

Indonesia and Malaysia have agreed to provide temporary shelter to thousands of migrants stranded at sea in the first breakthrough in the humanitarian crisis confronting south-east Asia.

The announcement was made on Wednesday by the Malaysian foreign minister, Anifah Aman, after a meeting with his counterpart from Indonesia and Thailand to address the plight of the migrants.

Most of them are the long-persecuted Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar and others are Bangladeshis fleeing poverty.

Anifah said the two countries agreed to give the estimated 7,000 stranded migrants temporary shelter "provided that the resettlement and repatriation process will be done in one year by the international community".

"I urge all NGOs, of all races and religions to step forward to volunteer to help these Rohingya migrants," Malaysia's home minister, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, said.

"Even though they are a migrant community that is trying to enter the country illegally, and breaking immigration laws, their wellbeing should not be ignored."

The breakthrough came as hundreds more starving people were rescued off the Indonesian coast on Wednesday and Burma for the first time offered to help in the crisis which has been blamed in part on its treatment of the ethnic Rohingya minority.

Following appeals by the UN chief, Ban Ki-moon, and Washington last week for the Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants to be rescued, Pope Francis also issued his first comments on the issue on Tuesday, likening the plight of the "poor Rohingya" to that of Christian and ethnic Yazidi people brutalised by the Islamic State group.

About 3,000 people have already swum to shore or been rescued off Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand over the past 10 days after a Thai crackdown disrupted long-established smuggling routes, prompting some of the gangs responsible to abandon their human cargo at sea.

A total of 426 migrants believed to be from Burma were rescued in the early hours of Wednesday off Aceh in Indonesia, local officials said.

"Their condition is very weak. Many are sick, they told me that some of their friends died from starvation," said Teuku Nyak Idrus, a local fishermen involved in the rescue.

Those saved in the Malacca strait between Malaysia and Indonesia's Sumatra island included 30 children and 26 women, he added.

With food and water supplies running low, some boats have drifted back and forth as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand refused to accept them, drawing international condemnation.

Burma also has come under growing pressure to help stem the outflow of Muslim Rohingya, who are fleeing their homes in the country's western Rakhine state after years of violence and discrimination at the hands of the Buddhist majority. Most head for Muslim-majority Malaysia.

Burma state media quoted a foreign ministry statement on Wednesday saying the government "shares concerns" expressed by the international community and is "ready to provide humanitarian assistance to anyone who suffered in the sea".

That marked the most conciliatory statement yet from the Burmese government, which considers Rohingya to be foreigners from neighbouring Bangladesh and disavows all responsibility for them.

Burma has previously said it may snub Thailand's call for a regional summit on the issue, and was not present at Wednesday's meeting of foreign ministers in Malaysia.

In a mass at the Vatican, Pope Francis compared the Rohingya to those victimised in the Islamic State group's brutal jihad in Syria and Iraq.

"We think of the poor Rohingya of Myanmar. As they leave their land to escape persecution they do not know what will happen to them," he said.

The UN's refugee agency told AFP on Tuesday it had received reports that at least 2,000 migrants had been stranded at sea for weeks on boats near the Burma-Bangladesh coasts.

They are being held on board amid horrid conditions by human traffickers who are demanding payment from the passengers to release them, a spokeswoman said.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/20/hundreds-more-migrants-rescued-off-indonesia-as-pope-calls-for-help>

13. Malaysia, Indonesia agree to provide temporary shelter to boat people

The Straits Times

Published on May 20, 2015 1:46 PM

By Shannon Teoh, Malaysia Correspondent In Kuala Lumpur

Indonesia and Malaysia on Wednesday agreed to allow an estimated 7,000 migrants still adrift in the Andaman Sea to come ashore but on condition that the international community resettles or repatriates them within a year.

Speaking after a four-hour meeting with his Indonesian and Thai counterparts, Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman said no specific locations for "temporary shelter" had been agreed, but he called on the rest of the world to provide the necessary support, "particularly financial assistance", for the "humanitarian assistance to the irregular migrants currently at risk".

"Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to continue to provide humanitarian assistance to those 7,000 irregular migrants still at sea. We also agreed to offer them temporary shelter provided that the resettlement and repatriation process will be done in one year by the international community," he said.

The migrants, mainly stateless Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar and some Bangladeshi nationals, have been adrift at sea for weeks after being turned away by the three countries.

An initial group of 1,100 had been allowed to land on Malaysia's resort island of Langkawi on May 10, while another 1,400 arrived in Aceh, Indonesia, last week.

But the countries' subsequent refusal to accept more boat people triggered mounting international condemnation as a wave of starving migrants sought to reach their shores.

"The towing and the shooing (away of boats) is not going to happen," the Malaysian foreign minister said at a joint press conference with his Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsudi.

The talks in Malaysia had also included Thai Foreign Minister Tanasak Patimapragorn but he did not attend the news conference.

<http://www.straitstimes.com/news/asia/south-east-asia/story/malaysia-indonesia-agree-continue-humanitarian-aid-boat-people-20150>

14. Malaysia orders search for migrants stranded at sea, ministers hold talks in Myanmar

ABC News Online / AFP / Reuters

By Indonesian correspondent George Roberts, wires

First posted Thu 21 May 2015, 8:40pm

Updated Thu 21 May 2015, 11:58pm

Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak has ordered the navy to conduct search and rescue missions for thousands of migrants adrift at sea.

South-East Asia is battling a migrant crisis that has seen hundreds of asylum seekers, mostly Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar and Bangladeshi migrants, pushed back out to sea by Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

"I have further ordered @tldm_rasmi (navy) and APMM (Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency) to conduct search and rescue efforts on Rohingya boats," Mr Najib tweeted.

"We have to prevent loss of life," he said, adding that humanitarian aid would be delivered by land and sea.

The rescue order is the first proactive official move to save the thousands of persecuted Muslim Rohingya and Bangladeshi economic migrants believed to currently be adrift.

It comes a day after Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand said they would stop turning boats around and instead offer temporary shelter to about 7,000 migrants.

The three countries want international aid for resettlement and repatriation within a year, and for the source countries like Myanmar to address the reasons why people are fleeing.

For decades, ethnic minority Rohingya have suffered from state-sanctioned discrimination in majority-Buddhist Myanmar and are denied citizenship.

Delegations led by the Malaysian and Indonesian foreign ministers are travelling to Myanmar for talks on the crisis.

However, Indonesia's foreign ministry spokesman, Armanatha Nasir, said Indonesia would not put pressure on Myanmar.

"We will continue to encourage Myanmar in their process of reform and democratisation," he said.

"Because in the end we believe it will create an environment conducive for the Rohingya."

Thai PM tells critics to 'migrate' to sea themselves

The Myanmar government has said this week that it shares the concerns of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

The country also said it had begun its own search and rescue operations a week ago, even before the UN expressed fears for the safety of some 2,000 people believed to be stranded on boats in its waters.

Pressure is building for greater action however, with EU politicians passing a resolution Thursday saying Myanmar "must change policy and end the persecution and discrimination" of its Rohingya.

Thailand said it would stop towing boats back to sea but refused to provide shelter to migrants stranded at sea.

Junta chief Prayuth Chan-ocha dismissed criticism of that stance by saying critics could "migrate" to sea themselves, or take migrants into their own homes.

"Anyone who supports this idea [of accepting boatpeople], please contribute one baht a day or take them to your home when their case has been processed," the former army chief, who took over in a coup a year ago, told politicians during a speech on the budget.

"Or you migrate out to the sea and bring them to live here instead."

The Thai leader added that his country was already home to more than 900,000 refugees from decades of regional turmoil.

Thailand has called a regional conference on the issue in Bangkok for May 29.

Abbott rules out resettling Rohingyas in Australia

Mr Nasir said Australia was obliged to help as a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention, but Prime Minister Tony Abbott has flatly refused to consider the option.

Mr Abbott said those seeking a better life needed to come through the "front door".

He said while Australia stood ready to assist in other ways, there was no way any of those fleeing would be allowed to settle in Australia.

"Nope, nope, nope," he said.

"If we do the slightest thing to encourage people to get on boats this problem will get worse, not better.

"Australia will do absolutely nothing that gives any encouragement to anyone to think that they can get on a boat, that they can work with people smugglers to start a new life."

The United States, Philippines and Gambia have also offered assistance or possible resettlement the migrants.

State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said the US is "prepared to take a leading role in any UNHCR organised multi-country effort to resettle the most vulnerable refugees".

US deputy secretary of state Antony Blinken was due to raise the plight of the Rohingya in his meeting with Myanmar officials, including the president Thein Sein, in Naypyidaw.

More than 3,000 migrants have been rescued by locals or come ashore in Indonesia and Malaysia this month.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-21/malaysia-orders-rescue-of-migrant-boats/6488376>

15. Tony Abbott rules out resettling Rohingyas in Australia, Indonesia says it is obliged to

ABC News Online

By Indonesia correspondent George Roberts and political reporter James Bennett

First posted Thu 21 May 2015, 10:11am

Updated Thu 21 May 2015, 2:40pm

Australia is obliged to resettle Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, Indonesia's foreign ministry says, despite Prime Minister Tony Abbott flatly refusing to consider the option.

International migration observers estimate there are thousands of people at sea in South-East Asia attempting to flee persecution or poverty, including at least 2,000 people trapped for more than 40 days on boats off Myanmar without food or water.

Yesterday Malaysia and Indonesia bowed to international pressure and said they would no longer turn away migrant boats, offering instead to take in a wave of asylum seekers provided they can be resettled or repatriated within a year.

They want other countries to help with resettlement but Mr Abbott said those seeking a better life needed to come through the "front door".

He said while Australia stood ready to assist in other ways, there was no way any of those fleeing would be allowed to settle in Australia.

"Nope, nope, nope," he said, shaking his head.

"If we do the slightest thing to encourage people to get on boats this problem will get worse, not better.

"Australia will do absolutely nothing that gives any encouragement to anyone to think that they can get on a boat, that they can work with people smugglers to start a new life.

"If you want a better life, you need to come through the front door.

"Our role is to make it absolutely crystal clear that if you get on a leaky boat, you aren't going to get what you want."

But Indonesia's foreign ministry spokesman, Arrmantha Nasir, said Australia was obliged to help as a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention.

'Burma is the culprit'

Mr Abbott last week refused to criticise Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia for turning away boats — a situation the UN described as "maritime ping-pong".

Today he said that the issue was primarily a South-East Asian one.

"This is quite properly a regional responsibility and the countries that will have to take the bulk of the responsibility are obviously the countries which are closest to the problem," he said.

He singled out Myanmar, also known as Burma — where many Rohingya live in camps, denied statehood — as the root source of the problem.

"In the end the culprit is Burma, it is Burma where there is an issue," he said.

Australia's former ambassador to Myanmar said a political approach needed to be taken to address the number of people fleeing countries in the region.

Christopher Lamb said the international community needed to work with authorities to understand why people are seeking asylum.

"We need somebody who's politically engaged, who's able to bring back advice to Tony Abbott and the Government about what they need to do to support activities that help stop people needing to travel," he told Radio National.

Mr Abbott said Australia was willing to help in other ways, noting that Australia yesterday provided additional assistance to Myanmar.

"Australia has always been a good international citizen, we want to be a good neighbour to friends and partners," he said.

"If asked to help, we're happy to do so."

A total of \$6 million will go towards funding humanitarian projects in the Rakhine state, where many Rohingya live.

'Australia should welcome them with open arms'

The Greens have called for Australia to "show leadership and compassion" by resettling some of the asylum seekers.

"Instead of turning our backs and turning back the boats we should welcome these people with open arms," Greens leader Richard Di Natale said.

"Australia can show leadership and compassion, just as it did after the Tiananmen Square massacre and the Vietnam War, by authorising special intake of refugees fleeing war and persecution."

Social Services Minister Scott Morrison, who visited Rohingya camps while he was immigration minister, said resettling them on a large scale would be impossible.

"Remember, there's a million-plus Rohingya in Myanmar," he said.

"No country is going to be resettling 1 million Rohingya, so to suggest again that resettlement is the answer to this issue I think completely fails to understand the scale and complexity of this issue.

"This is an issue that ASEAN [The Association of South-East Asian Nations] and particularly Myanmar need to drive the solutions for.

"We can work with them on that ... but the idea of Australia dictating to ASEAN and to Myanmar itself how this issue is to be managed I don't think would be helpful."

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-21/rohingyas-migrants-indonesia-says-australia-obliged-resettle/6486590>

16. 'Nope, nope, nope': Tony Abbott says Australia will not resettle refugees in migrant crisis

Sydney Morning Herald

May 21, 2015 - 11:23AM

Lisa Cox

Prime Minister Tony Abbott has said "nope, nope, nope" to Australia offering resettlement to any of the thousands of migrants caught up in South East Asia's refugee crisis.

"I'm sorry. If you want to start a new life, you come through the front door, not through the back door," Mr Abbott said on Thursday.

Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand have provoked an international outcry for pushing boats carrying Rohingya and Bangladeshi asylum seekers back out to sea.

On Wednesday, the Malaysia and Indonesia backed down from their stance and said they would temporarily allow thousands of people to come ashore – on the condition that international agencies repatriate them within a year.

At a media conference on Thursday, Mr Abbott said Australia would not be offering resettlement.

"Nope, nope, nope. We have a very clear refugee and humanitarian program," he said.

"It's a refugee and humanitarian program which has been modestly expanded because we have stopped the boats and we are not going to do anything that will encourage people to get on boats."

Mr Abbott said resettling any of the refugees would encourage the people smuggling trade.

"If we do the slightest thing to encourage people to get on the boats, this problem will get worse, not better."

He said Australia was happy to offer assistance to Australia's neighbours in South East Asia in other ways, including through humanitarian work "inside Burma because part of the problem is the difficulties that some ethnic groups face inside Burma".

But he said there was "no future for anyone in encouraging the people-smuggling trade."

"Australia will do absolutely nothing that gives any encouragement to anyone to think that they can get on a boat, that they can work with people-smugglers to start a new life.

"I'm sorry. If you want to start a new life, you come through the front door, not through the back door."

The United States has said it will take refugees as part of international efforts to deal with the crisis.

Images of emaciated and distressed Rohingya on boats and in camps in recent days have shocked the world.

Despite their having lived in Myanmar for generations, the government refuses them citizenship and other basic rights. Tens of thousands fled their homes in 2012 to escape mob attacks by Buddhists.

In a joint statement on Wednesday, Malaysia and Indonesia said there were still an estimated 7000 people stranded at sea.

Adrian Edwards, spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said earlier that the agency believes about 2000 men, women and children have been stranded on at least five boats near the Myanmar and Bangladesh coasts for more than 40 days in a humanitarian crisis that the Association of South-East Asian Nations appears incapable of addressing.

Other boats have been pushed back out to sea from Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand following a crackdown on human trafficking while the latest sighting was off the Thai resort island of Phuket, heading south towards Malaysia.

The UNHCR says that in Myanmar several hundred people have abandoned their journeys and returned to the country's western Arakan state, where 140,000 long persecuted Rohingyas are living in squalid camps.

Twenty-six international humanitarian aid and advocacy groups said in a joint statement that people in the camps need acute emergency assistance, with more than 70 per cent of them having no access to safe water or sanitation.

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said Labor supports regional resettlement as a general principle.

"But where there is an unfolding humanitarian crisis in South-East Asia, Tony Abbott's 'not my problem' approach is disappointing. There's no doubt there's terrible violence happening in parts which are affecting the Rohingya people.

He called for the government to "engage" on the issue.

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/nope-nope-nope-tony-abbott-says-australia-will-not-resettle-refugees-in-migrant-crisis-20150521-gh6eew.html>

17. 'Nope, nope, nope': Tony Abbott says Australia will take no Rohingya refugees

The prime minister says, 'To start a new life, come through the front door, not the back door', and insists Australia is 'a good international citizen'

The Guardian
Shalailah Medhora
Thursday 21 May 2015 13.09 AEST

None of the more than 8,000 Rohingya refugees caught in a weeks-long standoff at sea will be resettled in Australia, the prime minister, Tony Abbott, confirmed on Thursday.

Overnight the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to give temporary shelter to the thousands of Rohingya Muslim migrants fleeing Burma and Bangladesh. And Gambia has offered to resettle all Rohingya refugees.

Some have been stranded at sea for weeks after Thai authorities closed a well-used trafficking route out of Burma and the people smugglers jumped ship and left their human cargo to starve.

The US has indicated it is willing to take some of the refugees, and the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) has urged Australia to work with its neighbours in finding a solution.

But the prime minister has closed the door on suggestions some could be resettled in Australia: "Nope, nope, nope."

"Australia will do absolutely nothing that gives any encouragement to anyone to think that they can get on a boat, that they can work with people smugglers to start a new life."

"I'm sorry. If you want to start a new life, you come through the front door, not through the back door."

"Don't think that getting on a leaky boat at the behest of a people smuggler is going to do you or your family any good."

"We are not going to do anything that will encourage people to get on boats. If we do the slightest thing to encourage people to get on the boats, this problem will get worse, not better."

Despite the firm words, Abbott insists Australia "has always been a good international citizen".

The opposition leader, Bill Shorten, said Australia should engage more in the region.

"Labor supports regional resettlement – there is no change in that. We certainly do. But where there is an unfolding humanitarian crisis in south-east Asia, Tony Abbott's 'not my problem' approach is disappointing," he said.

Australia will be part of regional talks on people trafficking to be held next week, and the UNHCR has urged the country to cooperate with its neighbours. We hope Australia will be among countries that work towards there being a collective approach towards dealing with this," a spokesman, Adrian Evans, told ABC Radio.

"Really, the go-it-alone approach – and we've seen what's been going wrong with that in south-east Asia over the last week – that go-it-alone approach simply doesn't work."

The Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young said "turning a blind eye" is not a solution. The asylum seekers, many suffering from starvation, are in desperate need of assistance, and Australia, as a regional leader, has an international responsibility to provide leadership and provide immediate assistance," she said.

Abbott has pointed the finger of blame at Burma for letting the asylum seekers leave.

"This is quite properly a regional responsibility and the countries that will have to take the bulk of the responsibility are obviously the countries which are closest to the problem. In the end, the culprit is Burma because it is Burma where there is an issue," Abbott said.

The opposition spokesman on immigration, Richard Marles, said that classification was unhelpful.

"I think that if what comes out of this is that everyone points the finger solely at Myanmar that's not going to end up with the kind of results the global community would want to see," he told Sky News.

"There simply has to be a point at which Tony Abbott understands that he is not just a low-rent domestic politician but is the prime minister of Australia. He enters the world stage as a statesman or at least he should and that's what we need to see and hear from him."

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/21/nope-nope-nope-tony-abbott-says-australia-will-take-no-rohingya-refugees>

18. Gambia offers to resettle all Rohingya refugees

The impoverished west African nation says it is its 'sacred duty' to help fellow Muslims and will set them up in refugee camps

The Guardian
Agence France-Presse
Thursday 21 May 2015 12.18 AEST

Gambia says it will take all Rohingya refugees as part of its "sacred duty" to alleviate the suffering of fellow Muslims flooding south-east Asia to escape oppression.

The government of the impoverished west African nation asked countries of the region to send them and it will set them up in refugee camps.

"The government of the Gambia notes with grave concern the inhumane condition of the Rohingya people of Myanmar – especially those referred to as 'boat people' – currently drifting in the seas off the coast of Malaysia and Indonesia," it said on Wednesday.

"As human beings, more so fellow Muslims, it is a sacred duty to help alleviate the untold hardships and sufferings fellow human beings are confronted with."

The statement appealed to the international community to send tents, bedding, household materials and medicine to help the Muslim-majority Gambia set up "habitable camps with decent sanitary conditions".

The US has also said it would help in resettlement.

A State Department spokeswoman, Marie Harf, said the US would take a leading role in any multi-country effort, organized by the United Nations refugee agency.

"I think the Malaysians and the Indonesians have requested some help resettling people. We're taking a careful look at the proposal," Harf said. "It has to be a multi-country effort. We obviously can't take this all on ourselves. But we are prepared to play a leading role in this effort."

The announcement came after the foreign affairs ministers of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand – facing global criticism for turning away rickety boats packed with starving people – gathered for talks.

After appeals by the UN chief, Ban Ki-moon, and the US government last week for the migrants to be rescued, Pope Francis likened the plight of the Rohingya to that of Christian and ethnic Yazidi people brutalized by the Islamic State (Isis).

Nearly 3,000 people have already swum to shore or been rescued off Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand over the past 10 days after a Thai crackdown disrupted long-established smuggling routes, prompting some of the gangs responsible to abandon their human cargo at sea.

On Tuesday the UN's refugee agency said it had received reports that at least 2,000 migrants had been stranded for weeks on boats off the Myanmar-Bangladesh coasts.

The Gambian government's position on the Rohingya contrasts sharply with the professed disdain of its president, Yahya Jammeh, for the thousands of African migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

More than 5,000 migrants, many from Gambia and its neighbours, have died in the past 18 months trying to get to Europe.

Jammeh broke his public silence on the issue last week, saying in a televised address that "if these people are true Muslims ... they should equally believe that their sons and daughters could have made it at home if they were ready to invest and work".

He did not announce any proposals for solving the Mediterranean crisis but suggested that the kind of work migrants were undertaking in Europe was available in Gambia.

Jammeh, an outspoken military officer and former wrestler, has ruled the former British colony with an iron fist since seizing power in 1994.

The regime is frequently berated for human rights abuses, extra-judicial killings, torture and the muzzling of journalists.

A third of the population in the tiny nation survives on \$1.25 or less a day, according to the UN's 2013 human development report.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/21/south-east-asia-migrant-crisis-gambia-offers-to-resettle-all-rohingya-refugees>

19. Jakarta rebukes Tony Abbott for hardline refugee stance

The Age

May 22, 2015 - 12:26AM

Jewel Topsfield, James Massola, David Wroe

With Lisa Cox, Lindsay Murdoch, AFP

The Indonesian government has rebuked Australia for refusing to resettle any of the thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshi asylum seekers at the centre of the growing refugee crisis in south-east Asia.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott slammed the door shut on the prospect of Australia resettling any of the asylum seekers, declaring: "nope, nope, nope, we have a very clear refugee and humanitarian program".

"It's a refugee and humanitarian program which has been modestly expanded because we have stopped the boats and we are not going to do anything that will encourage people to get on boats," he said.

"Australia will do absolutely nothing that gives any encouragement to anyone to think that they can get on a boat, that they can work with people smugglers to start a new life.

"I'm sorry. If you want to start a new life, you come through the front door, not through the back door."

But in a further escalation of diplomatic tensions between Canberra and Jakarta, just weeks after the execution of Australians Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesman Arrmanatha Nasir said Australia could not ignore the humanitarian crisis.

"My point is this: countries that are parties to the convention on refugees have a responsibility to ensure they believe in what they sign," he said.

"I hope all the countries that signed the refugee convention address the issue ... if you believe it when you sign it, you should act upon it."

The Deputy Speaker in the Indonesian House of Representatives, Fahri Hamzah, said Mr Abbott's comments were regrettable.

"Tony Abbott should not put the blame on the asylum seekers. They went on the boats because they were forced to do that," he said.

Indonesia is not a signatory to the UN convention, but Indonesia and Malaysia have agreed to provide humanitarian assistance to 7000 Bangladeshi migrants and Rohingya refugees still stranded at sea and provide temporary shelter for up to a year.

Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand had provoked international condemnation by turning back boatloads of the asylum seekers, who are fleeing persecution, but Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur have agreed the asylum seekers can come ashore, though they must be resettled by the international community within a year.

In contrast to Australia, the United States has said it is prepared to play a lead role in resettling some of those refugees as part of a multi-country response co-ordinated by the UN refugee agency.

Mr Abbott's hardline stance drew criticism from the federal opposition and refugee groups and came as Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak ordered the Malaysian navy and coastguard to conduct search and rescue operations for boats carrying stricken migrants, including ethnic Rohingya from Myanmar.

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said Labor supported regional resettlement of refugees and that "where there is an unfolding humanitarian crisis in south-east Asia, Tony Abbott's 'not-my-problem approach' is disappointing".

"There's no doubt there's terrible violence happening in parts which are affecting the Rohingya people. I believe this government should at least engage with our south-east Asian neighbours but in terms of regional resettlement, Labor remains convinced that is the right way to go."

Amnesty's national refugee co-ordinator, Graham Thom, said Australia was one of the few nations in the world that had seen a decline in boat arrivals in recent years, but asylum seekers were now making longer and more dangerous journeys.

"It's extremely disappointing that now that Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand have said they will allow them to come ashore, that Australia as a country is unwilling to help, particularly as the US government, which is not in this region, is offering to help with resettlement," he said.

"You'd think Australia, which so often follows the US example, would want to be part of a regional response."

In South Korea, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop told Fairfax Media south-east Asian nations should abandon their reluctance to interfere in each other's internal affairs and tackle the issue of Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingyas.

She reiterated that Australia had "no plans" to take any of the Rohingyas beyond the current refugee intake.

Ms Bishop said the problem needed to be dealt with at its source, which stemmed from the denial of citizenship by Myanmar to the Rohingya minority.

Though she stressed Australia would not interfere, Ms Bishop said, "Myanmar is a member of ASEAN, and I would assume that this ... would be something that ASEAN could have on its agenda as it's a regional issue affecting a number of ASEAN countries."

Members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations, the premier regional forum, have a strict tradition of not interfering in one another's internal affairs.

Refugee Council of Australia chief executive Paul Power said he was dismayed by the Prime Minister's hardline stance after a "very clear appeal for help from Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia.

Australia was the best placed nation in the region to assist with resettlement, he said.

"Up until now he has spoken about resettlement as the proper way to do things. Now he is clearly backing away from our commitment to resettlement," he said.

Greens leader Richard Di Natale called for Australia to "step up and help huge numbers of people fleeing persecution in our region".

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/jakarta-rebuked-tony-abbott-for-hardline-refugee-stance-20150521-gh6oq1.html>

20. Greens say Government asylum seeker question change denies refugees 'opportunity for safety'

ABC News Online

By political reporter Dan Conifer

First posted Fri 22 May 2015, 4:06am

Updated Fri 22 May 2015, 7:02am

The Greens have slammed the Federal Government's asylum seeker question change, saying it tells potential refugees to "bugger off and die somewhere else".

Under a policy change introduced in March a question about whether asylum seekers have been tortured or traumatised was moved to later in the health screening process.

Fairfax Media reported 157 Tamil asylum seekers held on a customs ship for nearly a month last year were asked the question, but said under the March change it would not be asked during early encounters with officials.

The group of 157 asylum seekers was later taken to Nauru.

A spokesman for the Immigration Minister could not say how the change could affect those interviewed and processed at sea under the Federal Government's so-called enhanced screening process.

Greens immigration spokeswoman Senator Sarah Hanson-Young said if asylum seekers are not asked the question, it could deny refugees safety.

"Not even giving them the opportunity means we're simply saying 'go away, we don't care; bugger off and die somewhere else'," she said.

"It's clear that the Government's objective is to give people as little opportunity as possible to be accepted as refugees, to allow them to turn people around on the high seas, turn them back and never have to worry about them again," she said.

"Not asking those very basic questions is denying those people the opportunity for safety and the opportunity to seek protection in the most legal and organised manner," Senator Hanson-Young said.

"It increases the chance of turning refugees around — pushing them back out to sea — who have suffered torture and trauma."

The Immigration Department said the former Immigration Health Advisory Group (IHAG) recommended the question not to be asked immediately.

The department said the recommendation was made in June 2013 — before the Coalition's "turn back" policy came into force.

"IHAG considered it was more appropriate to ask the question later in the Health Induction Assessment, where more comprehensive mental health screening occurs," the department said in a written response to a Senate hearing.

A renewed wave of asylum seekers leaving Myanmar has intensified debate around refugee policy, with international migration observers estimating thousands of people are currently at sea in South-East Asia attempting to flee persecution or poverty.

Yesterday Indonesia's foreign ministry said Australia was obliged to resettle Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, despite Prime Minister Tony Abbott flatly refusing to consider the option.

The Federal Government has intercepted asylum seekers at sea since late 2013 and returned them to countries including Indonesia.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-22/greens-criticise-government-asylum-seeker-question-change/6488676>

21. Rohingya asylum crisis: Abbott shrugs off Indonesia's 'UN obligation' rebuke

'It would be utterly irresponsible of me or anyone to suggest for a second that we will reward people for doing something so dangerous,' Australian PM says

The Guardian
Paul Farrell
Friday 22 May 2015 12.09 AEST

Tony Abbott has said countries should not encourage asylum seekers to board vessels as tensions with Indonesia escalate over the fate of thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants.

More than 8,000 Rohingyas and Bangladeshis have been stranded at sea since Thai authorities closed a trafficking route from Burma.

But the Australian government has resisted calls to aid the asylum seekers, sparking a rebuke from Indonesia's foreign ministry on Thursday, which said Australia was obliged to assist them as a UN signatory to the refugee convention.

In response to questions about the comments from Indonesian officials, the Australian prime minister said on Friday: "It would be utterly irresponsible of me or anyone to suggest for a second that we will reward people for doing something so dangerous."

The crisis has sparked offers of assistance from countries around the world. Indonesia and Malaysia have agreed to give temporary shelter to the asylum seekers.

Gambia, the Philippines and the US are among those who have said they will help with resettlement.

But the Australian government is unlikely to follow suit. The events sparked a monosyllabic response from Abbott on Thursday. When asked whether Australia would take any additional asylum seekers, he said: "Nope, nope, nope."

On Friday Bill Shorten called on the prime minister to stop oversimplifying a complex issue. "What Australia should do is work with our neighbours in the region who are getting these people and see what we can do to help," the opposition leader said. "Tony Abbott shouldn't dumb the issue down to saying whether we take these people here or we do nothing.

"Australia is a smarter, more generous nation and I'm heartened by what Julie Bishop said about talking to Myanmar about what's going on there."

Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch has accused the prime minister of shirking responsibility. "This is his way of saying he wants to push back boats and shirk responsibilities to accept asylum seekers landing by boat," he told the ABC.

"They don't have not enough food, not enough water and this is an international humanitarian imperative that Australia should respond to along with its friends and allies."

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/may/22/rohingya-asylum-crisis-abbott-shrugs-off-indonesias-un-obligation-rebuke>

22. Burma military chief claims refugees pretending to be Rohingya to get aid

Min Aung Hlaing says many of the migrants arriving by boat in Malaysia and Indonesia have fled neighbouring Bangladesh and are not Rohingya Muslims

The Guardian

Reuters

Friday 22 May 2015 15.38 AEST

Burma's military commander-in-chief said some "boat people" landing in Malaysia and Indonesia this month are likely pretending to be Rohingya Muslims to receive UN aid and that many had fled neighbouring Bangladesh, state media reported on Friday.

The remarks are sure to spark concern after the United States lambasted Burma this week for failing to address the cause of the crisis, which observers say stems from the country's refusal to recognise the Rohingya, an ethnic minority group living in western Burma, as citizens.

Most of the 1.1 million Rohingya are stateless and live in apartheid-like conditions. Almost 140,000 were displaced in deadly clashes with Buddhists in the western state of Rakhine in 2012.

UN agencies have urged regional governments to protect thousands of migrants stranded on boats in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman sea with dwindling supplies.

Hundreds of migrants, including Rohingya from Burma and Bangladeshis fleeing persecution and poverty at home, have been pushed back out to sea by Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia this month. Many now face sickness and possible starvation.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing "hinted that most victims are expected to assume themselves to be Rohingya from Myanmar in the hope of receiving assistance from UNHCR" during a meeting with the US deputy secretary of state, Antony Blinken, on Thursday, the state-backed Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper reported.

He cited reports that the "boat victims" were from Bangladesh.

"He stressed the need to investigate their country of origin rather than to accuse a country," the newspaper reported.

Blinken had stressed the need for Burma to address the causes of the migration, "including the racially and religiously motivated discrimination and violence".

Many Rohingya have long complained of state-sanctioned discrimination in Burma and are denied citizenship. Burma denies discriminating against the group and has said it is not the source of the problem.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak on Thursday pledged assistance and ordered the navy to rescue thousands adrift at sea, and a Thai official said Myanmar had agreed to attend an emergency conference on the crisis.

Malaysia and Indonesia have also said they would let as many as 7,000 migrants on the seas now to come ashore temporarily, but no more.

Both countries have also said that temporary shelters would be set up to house the migrants, but Thailand, a traditional transit point for those trying to reach Malaysia for work, said it would not follow suit.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/22/burma-military-chief-claims-refugees-pretending-to-be-rohingya-to-get-aid>

23. Peter Dutton defends Government decision not to resettle Rohingya refugees amid criticism from Indonesia

ABC News Online

By political reporter James Bennett

First posted Fri 22 May 2015, 1:53pm

Updated Fri 22 May 2015, 1:57pm

Criticism of Australia's refusal to accept Rohingya boatpeople ignores the country's existing support for refugee programs, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton says.

Indonesia's foreign minister has criticised Australia for its refusal to resettle any of the thousands of Rohingya asylum seekers fleeing Myanmar by boat.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott today reiterated his opposition, saying it would be "utterly irresponsible" for Australia to do anything which may encourage people onto boats.

Asked by American network CNN what she made of Australia's refusal to accept boatpeople "through the back door", Indonesia's foreign minister Retno Marsudi said it was "not fair" to make the problem an Indonesian one.

"The cooperation should come from country of origin and country of transit and country of destination," she said.

Ms Marsudi made the comments en route to a meeting in Myanmar to discuss the crisis with her counterparts from Malaysia and Thailand.

She said that the problem required a response from countries across the region, but did not specifically mention Australia.

"We offered a solution and clearly mentioned that we need cooperation from the international community," she said.

Australia provides generous support to region: Dutton

But Mr Dutton said criticism of Australia's refusal to accept the boatpeople rescued from the Andaman Sea did not mean it was not already assisting.

"The fact is we provide, by way of donor support, the largest amount of money to the IOM [International Organisation for Migration] and to the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] in Indonesia," he said.

"We provide support to countries in the region otherwise, we provide significant support to the settlement of refugees in this country and I think people should deal in the facts and they are the facts.

"We are providing support to IOM who provide settlement services and provide support for displaced people within region we do that more so more generously than any other country in our region."

Mr Dutton also hit out at an Indonesian foreign ministry spokesman, who yesterday said that Australia was "obliged" to help resettle the fleeing Rohingya, suggesting that comment did not represent the Indonesian government's position.

"I suspect that once that person is armed with all of the facts they may well quickly retreat from their position because the support that we provide is the most significant of any donor in the region," he said.

"I think when you look at the facts you'll see that this is not a comment by the Indonesian government, it's a comment by an individual and we've answered those comments today."

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said the Prime Minister could not ignore Australia's regional responsibility.

"Tony Abbott shouldn't just present what's happening to these poor people in a part of the world as, you know, not our problem," he said.

Mr Shorten also said it was important Australia not be seen as destination country for Rohingyas, and backed the Government's move to give aid to Myanmar and put pressure on the country to improve its treatment of the Rohingya minority.

"The answer doesn't mean that we take these people here. What it does mean is, we just do as we've done in the past with other humanitarian disasters: is we provide some form of assistance," he said.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-22/dutton-defends-government-decision-over-rohingya-refugees/6490356>

24. Tony Abbott insulting Australia's intelligence on asylum seekers: Bill Shorten

The Age
May 22, 2015 - 11:30AM
Judith Ireland

Labor leader Bill Shorten has accused Prime Minister Tony Abbott of "insulting the intelligence" of Australians by refusing to offer any assistance to the thousands of asylum seekers fleeing danger and persecution.

Mr Abbott has taken a hardline stance against the plight of up to 7,000 people who have fled Myanmar and Bangladesh by boat, saying "nope, nope, nope" when asked on Thursday if Australia would respond to the crisis by resettling some refugees.

The group includes members of the Rohingya minority group in Myanmar, which the International Crisis Group recently described as "progressively marginalised from social and political life".

Mr Abbott expanded on his comments on Friday and said he would "say or do nothing" that would encourage people to get into boats.

"Any suggestion that there is some kind of special resettlement program here in Australia for people taking to the sea in boats just encourages people smuggling," he said in Tasmania.

"It would be utterly irresponsible of me or anyone to suggest for a second that we will reward people for doing something so dangerous."

Mr Shorten, speaking from Melbourne just as Mr Abbott finished his press conference, said thousands of migrants were making a "terrible choice" because they realised "they're not safe in their own homes".

"Tony Abbott is insulting the intelligence of the Australian people when he says on the one hand, it's not Australia's problem at all and [to] leave it to the government of Myanmar to sort out," he said.

"If the government of Myanmar could sort these issues out, people wouldn't be fleeing.

"On the other hand, Tony Abbott [gives the impression] the only alternative is to resettle all these people in Australia.

"That's not true and that's not necessary."

Mr Shorten said Australia should work with its countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia "who are getting these people, to see what we can do to help".

"Tony Abbott shouldn't dumb down the issue to saying either we take these people or we do nothing," he said.

"Australia's a smarter, more generous nation."

The Indonesian government has rebuked Australia for refusing to resettle any refugees, arguing Australia is a signatory to the Refugee Convention and could not ignore the crisis.

The United States and other countries such as Gambia have said they will help in the resettlement of the refugees.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/tony-abbott-insulting-australias-intelligence-on-asylum-seekers-bill-shorten-20150522-gh7996.html>

25. Why Indonesian President Joko Widodo has little regard for Australia

Sydney Morning Herald
May 22, 2015 - 3:57PM
Tom Allard

If the execution last month of Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran suggested that Indonesian President Joko Widodo has little regard for Australia, the missive from Indonesia's foreign ministry on Thursday has helped explain why.

Responding to Tony Abbott's blunt refusal to resettle any of the thousands of Rohingya asylum seekers besieging south-east Asia, the foreign ministry took only a few hours to accuse its southern neighbour of hypocrisy and selfishness.

Why were countries who are not signatories to the UN refugee convention like Indonesia prepared to welcome the Rohingyas fleeing Myanmar, while Australia was not?

"Countries that are parties to the convention on refugees have a responsibility to ensure they believe in what they sign," ministry spokesman Arrmanatha Nasir said. "If you believe it when you sign it, you should act upon it."

The comments reflect the world view of Mr Joko, a foreign policy neophyte and populist nationalist.

As the prominent Indonesia expert Greg Fealy from the Australian National University observes on The Strategist blog, Mr Joko believes rich nations have exploited developing nations.

"Wealthy nations feel able to change the world by using their power", the Indonesian leader told a summit of Asian and African leaders last month.

The outcome, he maintained, had been decades of suffering for millions of downtrodden.

"[Mr Joko] appears to regard Australia (not without reason) as much closer aligned to the US and other Western powers than it is to Indonesia and south-east Asian nations," Mr Fealy says.

"This probably means Australia, in his mind, falls into a group of nations which approach Indonesia with manipulative intent."

The US has already taken in about 1000 Rohingya this year, and pledged to take more as the humanitarian crisis unfolds. Australia, in this instance, looks even more selfish than others in the club of wealthy nations.

There are legitimate gripes about Australia's recent engagement with Indonesia and the region, not least on asylum seeker policy.

Abbott's "nope, nope, nope" refusal to help resettle some of 25,000 Rohingyas the UN says have fled Myanmar was, at best, crude and undiplomatic.

Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop's insistence that it was south-east Asia's problem to solve was not the sentiment of a friend and partner of Indonesia.

Even so, looking across the sweep of Indonesia-Australia relations, Mr Joko's assessment is harsh.

For starters, Australia played a pivotal role in Indonesia's nationhood, blockading Dutch ships during the armed rebellion by Indonesian nationalists and negotiating on behalf of the fledgling state at the United Nations.

This history is poorly understood in Indonesia (and Australia). It is unlikely Mr Joko, who famously dislikes reading, is aware of it.

Fair or not, his apparently hostile view of Australia matters. The relationship with Indonesia is one of Australia's most important.

Indonesia is a rising power - increasingly influential in the region where Australia's economic fortunes lie.

Then there is the enduring security imperatives. Any conventional military threat to Australia would have to come through, or from, the chain of islands to Australia's north.

And, as the bombings in Bali and elsewhere in Indonesia have shown, it is the region where it is easiest to target Australians with mass casualty terrorist attacks

A regional summit will take place next week in Bangkok to address the current asylum seeker crisis. Australia's people smuggling ambassador will attend, but - so far - no ministers.

Australia has long played a major role in regional responses to asylum seekers - from the mass exodus of refugees from Vietnam in the 1970s to co-founding the Bali Process forum in 2002 to combat the surge of irregular migrants heading to Australia from the Middle East.

It makes little sense to step back now. There is a desperate need for a regional framework to address the asylum seeker issue. It is in Australia's interests for one to emerge, and to restore its reputation as a force for good in the region.

Tom Allard is a former Indonesia correspondent for Fairfax Media

<http://www.smh.com.au/world/why-indonesian-president-joko-widodo-has-little-regard-for-australia-20150522-gh7ior.html>

26. Julie Bishop: Smashing people smuggling the priority due to terrorism links

The Age
May 23, 2015 - 12:17AM
David Wroe

Seoul: Destroying the people-smuggling trade remains a "national security priority" for Australia because it is being used globally to fund terrorism, Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop has said.

Ms Bishop said she was told repeatedly during a recent visit to Europe that illicit money was flowing from people smuggling and other transnational criminal enterprises to terrorists including the so-called Islamic State.

Her comments came as the Abbott government faced criticism over the Prime Minister's blunt refusal to resettle any of the thousands of minority Rohingyas or Bangladeshis at the centre of a growing refugee crisis in south-east Asia.

Ms Bishop emphasised she was not suggesting that people-smuggling networks in the south-east Asian region or networks targeting Australia were directly funding terrorism.

But she said that during conversations with European officials "they were talking about the connections between terrorist organisations across the Middle East including Da'esh [an alternative name for the Islamic State] and the people-smuggling trades".

"Australia's been in this situation before and we believe that the effort must be to disrupt the people-smuggling trade," Ms Bishop said.

"These criminal networks are not only using money to keep the networks alive, they are also being used to fund terrorism. So a national security priority for us is to prevent the people-smuggling trade from proliferating."

Europe is facing its own asylum-seeker crisis with a flood of migrants taking boats primarily from strife-torn Libya – where militants including the Islamic State have a significant presence – across the Mediterranean Sea mostly to Italy.

By contrast people-smuggling networks in south-east Asia have no known connections to terrorism financing.

But the fact that Ms Bishop cited terrorism funding as a reason to smash people-smuggling networks globally reflects the fact that the Abbott government means to continue its hardline border protection policy, which aims to dismantle the networks by depriving them of a product to sell to desperate asylum seekers.

The tough stance comes despite calls – including from Indonesia – for Australia to participate in resettling Rohingyas and Bangladeshis, the latter of whom are believed to be economic migrants escaping grinding poverty.

Ms Bishop discussed the issue on Friday with senior Indonesian diplomat Hasan Kleib during a meeting in South Korea of the MIKTA countries: Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia.

The United States has said it is willing to take in Rohingyas, regarded as among the world's most persecuted people, as part of an international effort.

The Rohingyas are refused citizenship in Myanmar and have been subject to persecution and pogroms, prompting thousands to flee.

Ms Bishop indicated on Thursday Myanmar's treatment of Rohingyas should be a focus for countries in the region.

The same day, the foreign ministers of Indonesia and Malaysia arrived in the Myanmar capital Naypyidaw to discuss the issue.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/julie-bishop-smashing-people-smuggling-the-priority-due-to-terrorism-links-20150522-gh7oez.html>

27. Julie Bishop told by Indonesia most of 7,000 people stranded are illegal labourers, not refugees

ABC News Online

First posted Sat 23 May 2015, 6:40am

By political reporter Eliza Borello

Updated Sat 23 May 2015, 8:27am

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop says Indonesian officials have told her most of the 7,000 people stranded in the South-East Asia boat crisis are illegal labourers, not refugees.

At a foreign ministers' meeting in Seoul on Friday, Ms Bishop said she was told only 30 to 40 per cent of the people stuck in camps or on boats in the region are Rohingya asylum seekers.

"They (Indonesia) believe there are about 7,000 people at sea [and] they think about 30 to 40 per cent are Rohingya, the rest are Bangladeshi," Ms Bishop said.

"They are not, in Indonesia's words, asylum seekers, they are not refugees — they are illegal labourers. They've been promised or are seeking jobs in Malaysia.

"They said the Rohingya have gone to Bangladesh and have mixed up with the Bangladeshis who are coming to Malaysia in particular for jobs."

Ms Bishop said Indonesia's director-general of multilateral affairs, Hasan Kleib, told her one boat carrying 600 people had 400 Bangladeshis aboard.

She described Indonesia's comments as "very pointed ... they said that's what their intelligence had informed them".

Labor spokesman Matt Thistlethwaite said the news validates the way Australia treats refugee claims.

"That's the reason why there's a process that's undertaken through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees so that people are assessed in accordance with the convention that Australia is a signatory to," he told Sky News.

Ms Bishop's comments come as Myanmar's navy successfully carried out its first rescue of a migrant boat on Friday, bringing more than 200 Bangladeshis ashore after discovering two boats in the nation's waters.

Posting on his Facebook page, government spokesman Ye Htut said the navy found one boat loaded with migrants and another empty vessel on Thursday while on patrol in Myanmar's waters.

Altogether 219 people were on the boat, said Ye Htut, including nine crew members and "two Bengali interpreters".

The boats came from Ranong in southern Thailand, the Rakhine state government said in a press release.

They were guided to shore before dawn on Friday in Maungdaw township, the departure point for many Rohingya boats headed south through the Bay of Bengal.

Abbott criticised for "unfair" position

Prime Minister Tony Abbott earlier this week defended the language he used in refusing to resettle any of the asylum seekers in Australia, saying it would be "utterly irresponsible" to encourage people to get on boats.

On Thursday, when asked whether Australia would take any of the refugees, he replied "nope, nope, nope".

Indonesia's foreign minister Retno Marsudi criticised the position.

In an interview with American network CNN, she was asked what she made of Australia's refusal to accept asylum seekers "through the back door".

Ms Marsudi replied that it was "not fair" to make the problem an Indonesian one.

"The cooperation should come from country of origin and country of transit and country of destination," she said.

Ms Bishop said Indonesia did not criticise Mr Abbott's remarks at the meeting yesterday.

"No one raised any questions about the Prime Minister's comments," Ms Bishop said.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-23/bishop-says-most-of-7000-stranded-people-are-labourers/6491836>

28. Myanmar navy announces rescue of stranded Rohingya

Officials say about 200 people rescued in Bay of Bengal, as UN warns of thousands more stranded at sea.

Al Jazeera English
22 May 2015 14:00 GMT

Myanmar has carried out its first rescue of Rohingya refugees stranded at sea, saving about 200 people the country's navy said.

Senior officials said patrols found two boats on Friday, amid rising international pressure on Myanmar to do more to protect thousands still at sea.

Tin Maung Swe, an official in the western state of Rakhine told the AFP news agency that those on board were "Bengalis".

"Bengalis" is a term often used disparagingly by Myanmar officials to describe the Muslim Rohingya minority, 1.3 million of whom live in the country but are not recognised as citizens.

The navy rescue was welcomed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) which said it was helping local authorities provide assistance to the migrants.

But fears remain for many more still left on boats in the Bay of Bengal.

"We hope that this recent positive development will be followed by other disembarkations in Myanmar and across the region, well in advance of the coming monsoon rains," said UNHCR spokeswoman Vivian Tan.

The imminent monsoon season, when heavy rains and cyclones lash the region, usually signal a significant drop off in regional boat migrant numbers.

But a recent crackdown on the people smuggling trade in Thailand led to scores of migrants being abandoned by gangmasters on stricken boats just as the weather is set to change.

In the Bay of Bengal, the UNHCR believes up to 2,000 migrants are still stuck on vessels controlled by people smugglers who have been unwilling to begin the journey south because of the crackdown.

A trickle of would-be migrants have recently returned to Myanmar after relatives raised funds to buy them back from smugglers.

The widespread persecution of the impoverished community in Rakhine state is one of the primary causes for the current regional exodus, alongside growing numbers trying to escape poverty in neighbouring Bangladesh.

On Thursday the foreign ministers of Malaysia and Indonesia, whose countries are destination points for Rohingya fleeing persecution, met Myanmar officials as pressures mount to stem the migrant exodus from its shores.

Earlier this week, Malaysia and Indonesia relented on a hardline policy of pushing back the boats, and said their nations would accept the migrants for one year, or until they can be resettled or repatriated with the help of international agencies.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/myanmar-navy-announces-rescue-stranded-rohingya-150522125303725.html>

29. Calls for Rohingya to be resettled underestimate problem – Scott Morrison

Australia's former immigration minister says suggestions countries in the region can resettle persecuted Rohingya miss the scale of the problem

The Guardian
Australian Associated Press
Saturday 23 May 2015 14.35 AEST

Australia's social services minister, Scott Morrison, says people who suggest countries in the region can resettle persecuted Rohingya misunderstand the scale of the problem.

Thousands of people are stranded on boats, in camps and at sea in south east Asia.

There were reports on Saturday that the foreign affairs minister, Julie Bishop, had been told by Indonesian officials that only about 30-40% were Rohingya refugees and the rest were illegal workers from Bangladesh seeking jobs in Malaysia.

Morrison, who was previously the immigration minister, said he wasn't privy to the reported discussion and could not confirm the reports.

Morrison said he had visited Rohingya displacement camps and the issue was more complex than advocates made out.

"There's a million Rohingya in Myanmar [Burma]. The suggestion that somehow resettlement is the answer to that issue, I think completely misunderstands what is happening in that part of the world," he said in Sydney on Saturday.

Bishop met with other foreign ministers in Seoul, where Indonesian officials passed on their intelligence about the stranded migrants.

"They [Indonesia] believe there are about 7,000 people at sea [and] they think about 30-40% are Rohingya, the rest are Bangladeshi; and they are not, in Indonesia's words, asylum seekers, they are not refugees, they are illegal labourers, they've been promised or are seeking jobs in Malaysia," Bishop told the Australian.

The vice president of the Bangladesh Association of New South Wales, Dr Farouk Iqbal, said it was possible some were Rohingya with counterfeit passports.

It was common for displaced people to move in and out of Bangladesh, he said.

"If somebody pays a bribe then they can get a national ID and passport easily," Iqbal, who has visited displacement camps with the UN, said.

About 3,000 people have so far been pulled ashore in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

Rohingya refugees are being offered temporary shelter for one year. It's likely most Bangladeshis will be repatriated.

Countries in the region say they'll step up efforts to help Burma stop the flow of Rohingya refugees.

The immigration minister, Peter Dutton, was forced to defend Australia's decision not to help settle those caught up in the crisis.

"There are about 20 million people who are displaced around the world. We can help some but we can't help everybody," he told Channel Nine on Saturday.

Labor's immigration spokesman, Matt Thistlethwaite, said countries had the right to remove people who were not found to be refugees under UN convention.

"That's the reason why there's a process that's undertaken through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, so people are accessed in accordance with the convention Australia is a signatory to."

Dozens of asylum seeker advocates gathered at a twilight rally in Brisbane on Friday night to call on the government to take in the stranded Rohingya.

More than 100 supporters gathered in King George Square on Friday to hear from members of the state's Rohingya community.

The Rohingyas have been subjected to the Burmese government's "systematic and ongoing persecution of minorities" for decades, spokesman Sujauddin Karimuddin said.

"The Rohingyas are stigmatised as illegal migrants from Bangladesh, although they have been living in the land for centuries," he said.

"These accusations of being illegal have opened them up to harassment and physical and verbal abuses on the streets."

The humanitarian disaster was a direct result of the persecution, he said.

He urged the crowd to put themselves in the shoes of those stranded at sea. "Every second, every moment they are living in a sea of rejection from the world."

The group called on the Australian government to end its policy of turning back asylum seeker boats and offer resettlement to the stranded.

The prime minister, Tony Abbott, flatly ruled out the possibility on Wednesday.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/23/calls-for-rohingya-to-be-resettled-underestimate-problem-scott-morrison>

30. Myanmar to deport Rohingya migrants as United Nations chief urges further rescues

ABC News Online / AFP
Posted Sat 23 May 2015, 8:37pm

A group of migrants recently rescued by Myanmar will be deported to Bangladesh, officials confirmed on Saturday, as the United Nations chief called on regional nations to prioritise saving the lives of those still stranded at sea.

More than 3,500 migrants have swum to shore or been rescued off the coasts of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Bangladesh since a Thai crackdown on human-trafficking in early May threw the illicit trade into chaos.

Myanmar has faced increasing international pressure to stem the deluge from its shores and deliver urgent humanitarian relief to thousands still trapped at sea.

On Friday the country's navy said it had carried out its first rescue of a migrant boat when scores of bare-chested men were found crammed into the hull of a wooden fishing vessel and taken to shore.

Myanmar officials say all 208 men are from Bangladesh and will soon be returned there.

"We are giving humanitarian assistance to them. After that we will deport them back to the relevant country," Zaw Htay, director of the presidential office, said.

"We have made contact with Bangladeshi border officials on the ground regarding the arrived persons."

Bangladesh's border guard force said a team would travel to Myanmar shortly.

"Our commander will go himself. The entire procedure might take up to two or three days to complete," Major Abu Russell Siddiki, a spokesman at the Teknaf border post, said.

A separate law enforcement source said Bangladesh wanted to make sure Myanmar did not send any Rohingya.

Saving lives 'top priority'

The rescue by the Myanmar navy comes as fears grow for migrants still stuck at sea at a time when the dry winter months are about to give way to the regional monsoon.

It is believed around 2,000 vulnerable migrants are stranded in the Bay of Bengal, many at the mercy of ruthless people smugglers.

Most are Muslim Rohingyas from the western Rakhine state in Myanmar, where they are not recognised as citizens.

Instead, they are referred to as "Bengalis" or illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Bangladeshis, meanwhile, are also trying to escape grinding poverty.

UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon said finding and saving the lives of those migrants should be a "top priority".

Speaking during a visit to Hanoi, he called on regional nations to tackle the "root causes" of the current exodus at an upcoming conference in Thailand later this month.

"But when people are drifting on the sea, how we can search and rescue them and provide life-saving humanitarian assistance, that is a top priority at this time," he said.

The Rohingya face daily discrimination and a raft of restrictions. Many live in displacement camps after scores were killed in 2012 as violence flared between the community and local Buddhists — an event that caused a spike in people trying to flee on boats.

Most migrants aim for Malaysia and Indonesia using dangerous and lucrative smuggling networks that criss-cross the region.

Noble Peace Prize winning opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is yet to comment on the current crisis, a silence that observers attribute to fears over alienating a swathe of the electorate just months ahead of the polls.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-23/myanmar-to-deport-migrants-as-un-chief-urges-further-rescues/6492618>