

ASEAN and Myanmar's Rohingya Challenge: Assessing Policy and Response

Vishwa Janak Khatri

The violence in the Rakhine region and the subsequent exodus of the Rohingya community to neighboring states has commanded the world's attention due to the humanitarian crisis it represents. Thousands of Rohingyas reside in sub-standard refugee camps with limited access to education, employment, local integration, and security. As the crisis has originated in one of the member-states of ASEAN with its consequences spreading to other ASEAN states, ASEAN as an institution is being pulled into the emerging debates on the appropriate response to the Rohingya crisis. Association of Southeast Asian Nations' response or the lack thereof to the Rohingya issue has been at the center of international condemnation. In the absence of a collective refugee protection framework, each state within ASEAN follows its own domestic legal processes in terms of dealing with refugee flows. While the countries receiving the most number of refugees in ASEAN are engaged in peace talks, the overall effort remains uncoordinated and fragmented. The recent months have also witnessed a flurry of international diplomatic activity surrounding the Rohingya crisis with pressure being put on ASEAN to be involved in resolving the issue. The paper examines the approach of the Myanmar government to the violence within its territory. It examines the established laws and the policies the governments of Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia have adopted in dealing with the incoming refugees. It concludes that in the light of the recent refugee crisis, the current approach is unsustainable. The treatment and protection of refugees should be formalized within the broader ASEAN framework with collective responsibilities for all member states. A structured, rights-based approach is required to address the need of refugees and to put pressure on the Myanmar government to resolve the crisis.