
Options sought for Rakhine problem

- **Tama Salim**

As ASEAN member countries have their hands tied with the nonintervention principle preventing them from directly dealing with the Rohingya crisis, another regional grouping is offering a fresh approach on how to deal with the matter.

The Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM), an expert group recognized by the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crimes, told senior officials from Indonesia and Australia that they should trigger a consultation mechanism that allowed for fast communication and coordination in emergency situations.

“Activating the consultation mechanism could achieve several objectives,” said Steve Wong of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia, one of four convening organizations of the ADFM.

It would ensure there was an honest broker with authority and legitimacy to share information and coordinate policy responses in the region, Wong said following a recent meeting in the Philippines, as quoted in a statement on Sunday.

In March 2016, foreign ministers under the Bali Process pledged more agile and timely responses to urgent irregular migrations, initiated as a result of the Bali Process’ failure to effectively respond to the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis, in which almost 25,000 stateless Rohingyas took to boats to escape persecution from Myanmar’s Buddhist government. This mass migration flow caused a crisis across Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Indonesia and Australia are cochairs to the Bali Process, of which Myanmar is also a member.

“Stepping up could make a huge difference to the region’s most vulnerable people and give other regional structures such as ASEAN confidence to take appropriate action,” Travers McLeod CEO of the Australia-based Center for Policy Development said in the release.

Nearly a month into the humanitarian crisis on the borders between Myanmar and Bangladesh, there has yet to be a sign of a robust regional response that can effectively address the massive movement of Rohingya refugees fleeing violence and

persecution.

Tensions in Myanmar's northern Rakhine state escalated on Aug. 25 after Rohingya insurgents and the Myanmar military exchanged disproportionate blows that resulted in fatalities on both sides and forced at least 410,000 Rohingyas into overwhelmed Bangladesh.

Denouncing any overt criticism, Myanmar shuttered itself from humanitarian aid inflows until Indonesia helped reopen access to international organizations, also cutting a deal for ASEAN to be involved in the distribution of aid.

Even then, ASEAN has not been able to respond effectively, with one source familiar with behind-the-scenes interactions saying Naypyidaw is blocking consensus.

The regional grouping uses consensus-based decision-making and heeds the principle of noninterference, preventing member states from meddling in another's domestic affairs.

Previously, hopes were high that the crisis could be tabled during the annual convening of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York, however Myanmar government leader Aung San Suu Kyi canceled her trip there to focus on domestic woes.

Faced with a barrage of criticism from abroad for not stopping the violence, Suu Kyi is due to make her first address to the nation on the crisis on Tuesday.

Previously, Foreign Minister Retno LP Marsudi said top diplomats of ASEAN's 10 member states would convene on the sidelines of the UNGA to discuss the Rakhine crisis.

Jose Tavares, the ministry's director general for ASEAN affairs, said Indonesia would try to push ASEAN to be more involved in the Rakhine crisis. "But it would be up to the Myanmar government to involve ASEAN," he told *The Jakarta Post* on Sunday.

Retno became the first foreign minister to enter Myanmar, visiting Naypyidaw earlier this month for talks with Suu Kyi and her military counterparts, who remain in full control of security policy, which includes the military campaign in Rakhine state.

Separately, Dewi Fortuna Anwar of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) argued that ASEAN centrality would be meaningless if the bloc remained silent and impotent in the largest regional crisis to date.