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Rohingya crisis, human trafficking and voluntary repatriation require a greater regional response

Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration Co-Chairs call for ongoing, coordinated action

The Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) concluded its sixth meeting in Sydney, Australia, this week ahead of the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit. The meeting focused on the humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh and Myanmar; efforts to address human trafficking, forced labour and modern slavery; and principles for sustainable and protection-sensitive repatriation and reintegration pathways.

Following the discussions, ADFM Co-Chairs have called for governments across the region to make greater use of the mechanisms available to them to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh and Myanmar and plan for a more coordinated response if the situation deteriorates further.

“Bangladesh has been incredibly generous, as have international agencies, but we are seriously concerned about the situation on the ground and how it could get much worse over the coming months. The monsoon season will put even more lives directly at risk and could generate a public health emergency in the camps.”

More than 670,000 people have fled Myanmar for Bangladesh since violence broke out in Rakhine State on 25 August 2017, bringing the overall Rohingya population in Cox’s Bazar to 884,000 and the number of people in need in Cox’s Bazar to 1.2 million.

ADFM participants recognised the huge and unsustainable impact of the refugee influx on Bangladesh.

“The international humanitarian response has dramatically increased but has been outpaced by the scale of humanitarian need. Uncertainty remains about whether the return arrangements agreed between Bangladesh and Myanmar can be implemented. Conditions for sustainable and protection-sensitive return do not yet exist.”

“A more robust regional response is required for what is a regional crisis. Countries in the region must work together and make greater use of the mechanisms available, especially through ASEAN and the Bali Process.”

“Indonesia and Australia, the Co-Chairs of the Bali Process, should be commended for activating its emergency Consultation Mechanism last year and bringing Myanmar and Bangladesh senior officials to the table in a constructive way. They should now focus their efforts on alleviating pressure on Bangladesh and working constructively with Myanmar, who must be part of any response.”

“The Co-Chairs can also elevate planning for possible future scenarios, including the acute risk of onward movement and a threat assessment of human trafficking in the camps, and consider how the August 2018 Bali Process Ministerial Meeting can best assist with a long-term regional response.”

“Speed is of the essence to ensure this crisis does not become a protracted one”.

On the issue of human trafficking, ADFM participants were heartened by progress made to advance action on human trafficking, forced labour and modern slavery, including through the Bali Process Business and Government Forum, proposed legislation on modern slavery in Australia in 2018, and the implementation of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, including Women and Children (ACTIP).

ADFM Co-Chairs welcomed Australia’s announcement of further investment into the Australia-Asia Program to Combat Trafficking in Persons, to focus on supporting the implementation of ACTIP. The ADFM were



pleased to bring together the leads of the respective ASEAN and Bali Process working groups on trafficking, along with the Bali Process Government and Business Forum, to consider how they can catalyse greater regional collaboration on trafficking in persons.

“ASEAN and the Bali Process are well positioned to leverage accelerating regional momentum on tackling trafficking in persons. Closer collaboration between the two bodies, particularly through their respective working groups on trafficking, could deliver significant benefits to the region, including in the implementation of ACTIP, capacity building, and awareness-raising.”

“We believe there is further scope for innovative anti-trafficking partnerships with business. The Bali Process and ASEAN can lead the way on sector-specific industry cooperation, working closely with willing industry peak bodies to identify and prevent exploitation, improve supply chain transparency, develop ethical employment standards and bolster complaints and redress mechanisms.

ADFM members discussed regional experience in facilitating sustainable and protection-sensitive repatriation and reintegration of forcibly displaced people, once they no longer need international protection. We identified further work to be done to refresh repatriation as a viable and accessible solution.

“Repatriation and reintegration can be incentivised and sustained by empowering those displaced to prepare for their own return, as well as the preparation of receiving communities. There is great potential in thinking creatively about graduated pathways to return, including intermediate, temporary steps at which returnees can build the resources, skills and knowledge they need to reintegrate into their countries of origin.”

“The Bali Process Return Working Group, to be reconvened in April 2018, can provide a platform to establish guidelines, share good practice, remove barriers to return and build capacity in the region. What is learned can be invaluable for Bangladesh and Myanmar as they endeavour to create conditions for the sustainable and protection-sensitive return of displaced persons to their homes.”

The ADFM is a Track II regional forum for independent and inclusive policy development on forced migration. The ADFM was formed in August 2015 and is co-convened by policy institutes in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Australia. Meetings have been held in Melbourne, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Manila and Sydney. The next meeting will be held in Bangkok.

The agenda, participant list and papers are available on the CPD website (www.cpd.org.au).

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