

THAILAND: NGO proposed to raise Rohingya issue at the 14th ASEAN Summit

Thursday, 05 February 2009

This statement was issued by the People's Empowerment Foundation (PE), an independent non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Bangkok, Thailand. PE has been working on the Rohingya boat people issue since their first immigration to Thailand in 2006 and have collaborated with local networks for the past three years to monitor their displacement.

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We are deeply saddened by the fate of the Rohingya people, who are deprived of basic rights to live and grow due to the absence of democracy, a lack of freedom of thought, and religious intolerance in their "Arakan" home territory.

No longer able to tolerate the oppression of the Burmese military government, they have been forced to uproot and hopelessly abandon their homes for refugee camps in Bangladesh.

Economic problems have aggravated their situation and pushed them to risk their lives in a land of strangers.

The relocation and arrival of the Rohingya boat people is part of a current trend in human trafficking in which agents reap the profits of transporting laborers to Malaysia. I

In Thailand, Rohingya people are considered illegal immigrants. As Thailand is not a contracting state of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and has no policy that grants asylum for refugees, the landing of the Rohingya boat people on Thai territory causes operational problems.

The practice employed by the Thai state is detention, followed by deportation back to Burma. In the past two years, Rohingya people have been driven back on a land route. This year, they have been sent back by sea.

It is still unclear whether the claims that Thai state officers destroyed the boat engines, towed the Rohingya people back out to sea, and threw them into the ocean are true. As there is no concrete evidence supporting such claims, they cannot be confirmed.

The military, however, must provide an explanation about their procedures of operation and be open to a public investigation. At this stage, it is believed that the Rohingya people were arrested and detained with their hands bound behind their backs. There is no reason to believe, though, that Thai soldiers threw them into the ocean with their hands and feet tied.

With regard to the stance of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), we recommend that they meet and consult with the Thai government. They should mutually agree on operational practices for the future before asking to intervene and investigate at Koh Had Sai Dang and before accusing Thailand of human rights violations.

The issue of the Rohingya boat people is a complex one that Thailand cannot solve on its own. The root cause of the problem is the misery experienced by those inside Burma, which pushes them to migrate to Bangladesh. Continued poverty and hopelessness in the refugee camps of Bangladesh then drive the Rohingya people to flee further in search of jobs in Malaysia, with Thailand serving as the transit route.

Clearly, the Rohingya issue is a complicated one related to statelessness, migrant labor, human trafficking, and refugees. Thus, the solution to the problem requires collaboration from Burma, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia, with participation from the UNHCR as an international refugee agency.

Most importantly, the Thai government must be clear about the status of the Rohingya people in order to implement appropriate procedures. They must decide - Are they illegal immigrants or victims of human trafficking?

People's Empowerment Foundation believes that the Rohingya people are victims of human trafficking. In their search for a better life, they are transported and traded as migrant workers for receiving countries. Thailand is only their temporary shelter before being transferred to such countries.

The handling of the recent incidents should be appropriate, with trafficking agents and implicated state officers decisively punished. The international community must also assist Thailand in unraveling the complex issue. Thailand needs collaboration and constructive participation, not condemnation.

The root causes of the problem are a non-democratic government and religious intolerance in Burma. Rohingya people's traditions, economic problems, and misery in the refugee camps are additional factors that induce the incessant migration.

Attention towards the issue of the Rohingya boat people may be toned down in the next few days because of the imminent monsoon season, but without any long-term solution, similar events will occur again next year and for years to follow.

We propose that ASEAN put the issue of the Rohingya boat people into the agenda of the 14th ASEAN Summit, discuss the issue in the Politico-Security Community Blueprint, and collectively agree on a solution to the problem.