

In the lead up to World Refugee Day, Southeast Asian countries should reinvigorate dialogue for a comprehensive regional response for Rohingya refugees

14 June 2023 – DHAKA, Bangladesh: Almost six years after the mass displacement of Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh, a comprehensive regional response is long overdue. There are 1.6 million Rohingya who have sought safety across Asia, but they live in precarious conditions, without legal status, with limited access to services, and with little hope for their future.

“With the 2021 military takeover in Myanmar and continued persecution of Rohingya living in Myanmar, safe and voluntary return is not an option for the foreseeable future,” said Paul Vernon, Regional Specialist at the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform. “Rohingya will continue to move in search of safety and a better life, which the camps in Bangladesh do not offer.”

In Southeast Asia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand host the largest numbers of Rohingya. None of these governments have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. Instead, responses remain primarily guided by immigration policy and national security concerns, and maintain costly, ineffective, and punitive deterrence measures.

Indonesia and Thailand have national refugee regulations, but these are still relatively new. Malaysia, which hosts more than 100,000 Rohingya, continues to use indefinite immigration detention in the futile hope of deterring new arrivals.

Countries hosting Rohingya in Southeast Asia should take the lead to improve protection of this stateless refugee community. Existing regional efforts, whether led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the Bali Process, are inadequate. A coordinated regional response is needed to ensure Rohingya refugees can access temporary legal status, healthcare, education, livelihoods, and alternatives to detention.

“Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand should work towards joint or coordinated pledges at the Global Refugee Forum later this year,” said Lilianne Fan, Co-founder and International Director of the Geutanyoë Foundation, “A comprehensive regional response initiated by these countries will spur donors to increase their support, and for resettlement countries to potentially expand pathways for Rohingya.”

About research project:

The Protecting Rohingya Refugees in Asia (PRRIa) project, funded by the European Union’s Civil Protection & Humanitarian Aid Operations was launched in mid-2021 to address protection risks and needs of Rohingya refugees in Southeast Asia.

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