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DPM denies arbitrary issuance of UNHCR card for Rohingyas

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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 29 — Malaysia will not arbitrarily issue the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) card to the Rohingyas who have sought refuge in the country, said Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. Ahmad Zahid, who is also Home Minister, said this was to avoid Malaysia and its people from being overburdened with a flood of Rohingyas fleeing the ethnic clashes in Myanmar. The decision to deny arbitrary granting of the refugee card to the Rohingyas had the cooperation of the UNHCR itself, he said to reporters after handing over sacrificial cows for Aidiladha in his parliamentary constituency of Bagan Datuk, here, today. “Our priority is our people and their welfare. It is not that we are not being humanitarian. I think the international community should show concern for the plight of the Rohingyas,” he said. Ahmad Zahid also asked Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi to restore the image of her country tarnished by the clashes in Rakhine, a state in Myanmar. He said the international community had repeatedly asked Yangon to resolve the humanitarian issue, but it had not been done up to now. “I hope serious attention will be given to this matter. There should be no double standard because of religious differences. Do not make this humanitarian issue a religious and political issue,” he said. He also said that the matter should be settled because Malaysia did not wish to be the receiving country, which had to face an influx of Rohingyas whenever they had problems in Myanmar. — Bernama

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Home Ministry seeks info on refugees from UNHCR for vaccination

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The Home Ministry has requested the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to hand over a list and information on refugees in the country for Covid-19 vaccination.

Its minister Hamzah Zainudin said at present, there are 178,715 UNHCR cardholders but there is no further information on where they are located.

“If UNHCR can provide us with detailed information, it will facilitate the government’s effort to achieve herd immunity to contain the spread of Covid-19 in the country,” he told a press conference on standard operating procedures (SOPs) compliance under the movement control order in Putrajaya today.

Hamzah said the ministry has identified almost 2.5 million foreigners in the country who held various documents issued by the government or third parties such as UNHCR, including prisoners and Immigration detainees, for Covid-19 vaccination.

He said he will work together with National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme Coordinating Minister, Khairy Jamaluddin, to ensure that the foreigners receive their vaccination.

“I wish to explain that Malaysians must understand that for the country to reach herd immunity, every foreigner in Malaysia must be vaccinated,” he explained.

For foreigners who do not have valid documents and want to return to their country of origin, Hamzah said they could do so through the Return Recalibration Programme, which was introduced last year. - Bernama

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Czechs vote in knife-edge presidential run-off

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PRAGUE: Czechs returned to the polls Saturday for the second day of voting in a presidential run-off pitting pro-Russian incumbent Milos Zeman against liberal pro-European rival Jiri Drahos that promises to go down to the wire.

The election has polarised Czech society, particularly around the issues of immigration and the foreign policy orientation of this former communist NATO and EU member state.

Bookmakers have given veteran populist Zeman the edge, but recent polls have shown the two candidates neck and neck. About 10% of voters remained undecided but polls show they too are split down the middle.

"This is a showdown between two completely different candidates representing two parts of a rather split society," political analyst Tomas Lebeda told AFP.

Known for his pro-Chinese and anti-Muslim stance, the populist Zeman took pole position in a field of nine candidates in the Jan 12-13 first round vote, garnering 38.56% of the ballot. Drahos, a former head of the Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS) and a newcomer to politics, scored 26.60%.

A seasoned politician, Zeman represents poorer and rural voters with lower education, while political newcomer Drahos appeals to wealthier, well-educated urbanites.

East vs West

Drahos underscored his concerns about possible Russian meddling in the campaign, saying that "for (Russian President) Vladimir Putin's regime, NATO is the biggest enemy and we are part of NATO."

Zeman meanwhile has called on the EU to lift its sanctions on Russia over its 2014 takeover of Crimea from Ukraine.

Voter Daniel Hajek said he would choose Zeman "because he's opening the door to economic cooperation with countries like Russia and China.

"It's important for us, for jobs; our country is at the heart of Europe — we can't go in just one direction," he told AFP in Prague.

Europe's fifth-biggest carmaker is dependent on auto exports, mainly to the eurozone, and its economy is expected to expand by 3.4% this year.

The run-off vote comes amid a wider political crisis as billionaire populist Prime Minister Andrej Babis is fighting police charges of EU subsidy fraud that are hampering his ability to form a government.

Smear campaign?

Zeman's stance on the European Union echoes other populist EU politicians at odds with Brussels over mandatory refugee quotas and various rules which they see as attempts to limit national sovereignty.

Even though the country of 10.6 million people has only received 12 migrants under the EU quota system, migration was a key campaign issue.

Zeman once called the 2015 migrant crisis "an organised invasion" of Europe, claiming Muslims were "impossible to integrate".

Billboards across the Czech Republic sought to appeal to voters with anti-migrant messages: "Stop immigrants and Drahos. This is our country. Vote Zeman!"

Running under the slogan "Decency is a strength," Drahos, a 68-year-old professor of chemical engineering who is a newcomer to politics, could not be more different.

A mild-mannered centrist whom critics have branded "wishy-washy", Drahos wants Prague to "play a more active role in the EU" and backs joining the eurozone.

He is also a critic of the migrant quota system but insists the Czech Republic is strong enough to accept its allotted 2,600 refugees.

Drahos has had to fight off allegations of pedophilia and having been a communist police agent, suggesting the accusations were a smear campaign by Russian intelligence with links to Zeman.

For Prague voter Zdenek Smrcka "The main issues are decency, humanity, getting rid of this rudeness" adding that "the next president should be a man who will create harmony in society".

The president's role although largely ceremonial is influential. He can name the prime minister and government, central bank board members, judges and university professors, and sign bills passed by parliament into laws.

Polling stations were set to close at 1300 GMT, (9pm Malaysia), with partial results expected to begin rolling in shortly after. — AFP

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Mapim to hand over memorandum to PM on refugee issues

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SHAH ALAM: The Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organisations (Mapim) will hand over a memorandum to Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin urging the government to address the issues of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia, based on the Islamic approach.

Its president Mohd Azmi Abdul Hamid (pix) said the memorandum would be handed over to the prime minister next Monday.

“The memorandum, among others, contains how Malaysia, as an Islamic country, should manage refugees in the country according to the Quran.

“We also urge the authorities not to allow any attempt to instil hatred and mistreatment against the refugee,” he told a press conference, here today.

Mohd Azmi called on relevant agencies to issue a directive to help prevent any abuse against refugees and understand their plight.

Mohd Azmi also called on the government to hold a dialogue with religious groups to find the best way to address the refugee issue in Malaysia.

“Even though Malaysia has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, as a Muslim nation, it is our responsibility to help defend the rights of the oppressed.

“We need to speed up efforts to outlining a policy and formula as well as to forge international cooperation to find solutions to the issues,” he added. - Bernama

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Muslim nations to heap pressure on Myanmar over Rohingya

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KUALA LUMPUR: The world's main pan-Islamic body is expected to pile pressure on Myanmar over a bloody crackdown on Rohingya Muslims when it meets for a special session in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday.

Nearly 70,000 Rohingya have fled the northern part of Rakhine state since October when the Myanmar army launched "clearance operations" to root out insurgents accused of deadly raids on police border posts.

Arriving in neighbouring Bangladesh, the displaced Rohingya have recounted allegations of widespread military abuse including rape, extrajudicial killings and the burning of villages.

The treatment of the Rohingya, a stateless group denied citizenship in Myanmar and reviled as illegal immigrants by the majority Buddhist population, has become a lightning rod for anger across the Muslim world.

Diplomats from the 56-member Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) will join Thursday's special session to debate the issue.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak has taken a lead role in condemning the Myanmar crackdown.

Analysts say that is at least in part down to a desire to burnish his international image after a damaging graft scandal at home.

On Wednesday Malaysia's Foreign Minister Anifa Aman upped the ante ahead of the meeting, calling for "unimpeded access" for humanitarian aid to reach the Rohingya.

He is expected to spearhead an effort within the OIC to raise cash and open aid routes into areas in western Rakhine state which remain locked-down.

"The OIC meeting is expected to call on the Myanmar government to help end the violence against the Rohingya Muslims," a Southeast Asian diplomat familiar told AFP.

"The OIC foreign ministers are also expected to provide assistance in cash or kind for the Rohingya."

Buddhist-majority Myanmar refuses to recognise the Rohingya as one of the country's ethnic minorities.

Instead it describes them pejoratively as Bengalis – or illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh – even though many have lived in Myanmar for generations.

Suu Kyi criticised

The latest chapter of a crisis that has festered since riots broke out in Rakhine in 2012 has once more drawn in regional neighbours.

Bangladesh is struggling to cope with the fresh arrivals, while Malaysia has for years housed thousands of Rohingya refugees – many arrived during a 2015 exodus that saw boatloads of Rohingya stranded at sea.

The plight of the Rohingya has put Myanmar's democracy champion and de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi under immense international pressure.

She has been criticised for failing to speak up robustly in defence of the Rohingya, while analysts say the latest crackdown suggests she lacks leverage over Myanmar's still powerful military.

Premier Najib's intervention in the crisis has angered Myanmar which considers the violence in Rakhine state an internal matter.

It also uprooted diplomatic convention among the regional bloc, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), a grouping long used to turning a blind eye to internal rights transgressions among member states. — AFP

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KL Summit 2019 might just be the same old, same old

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COMMENT | If Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019 is a lesser or an ad hoc version of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), an event summoned immediately due to extraordinary circumstances affecting the Muslim world, the organisers have unwittingly enhanced the "Muafakat National" of Umno and PAS.

These two entities have nothing to contribute to national and international issues except to prey on the religious and racial sentiments of Malays and Muslims and by extension, the Islamic world.

Thus, what is ostensibly a summit to augment the geopolitical standing of Pakatan Harapan on "Islamic" issues have, ironically and paradoxically, given "Muafakat Nasional" a second and third breath of life.

While empowering the opposition is indeed a noble idea in a democracy, as all democracies do need a challenger to serve as a check and balance, but "Muafakat Nasional" is misguided as it aims to manipulate the views of Malays and Muslims. They don't need any assistance, if at all. If anything, they need an immediate intellectual put down.

ADS

With global Muslim leaders such as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (below), Indonesian Vice-President Amir Maaruf Amin, and Emir of Qatar Sheikh Amir Al Hamad Al Thamrin and Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan converging in Kuala Lumpur from Dec 17-18, the summit seems to be a strategic event too.

But if the Kuala Lumpur Summit is to become an effective amplifier of all the issues of war, peace and Islamophobia that affect the Muslim world, more thoughts have to be given to ensure their agenda are not wrongly hijacked by nationalist-religious groups. Thus, there is a need to focus on tangible actions that can unite the Muslim world as an alliance of Muslim Nations rather than mere public-relations choreography.

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Top Muslim and non-Mulsim scholars such as Professor Cemil Aydin, with a PhD in Middle Eastern and Japanese Studies from Harvard University and now based at the University of North Carolina, should be listened as well as Professor Ho Eng Seng, a world-class expert on Yemini issues, who interestingly hails from Malaysia.

The list can include Georgetown University Professor John Esposito at and London School of Economics Professor Fawaz Gerwez, who have devoted their academic lives to understanding the weaknesses of the Muslim world. Even Professor Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former member of the Council of Eminent Persons, who has written on Islamic revivalism in the 1980s, should be kept in, rather than left out completely.

A summit is as good as the "mind melt" that comes during and after the meeting, not the mere completion of the stand-alone event which makes it a one-off catharsis.

KL Summit 2019, as this is written, also seems to ignore the lessons accumulated at the Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) at the United Nations. AoC was pioneered by Spain and Turkey between 2002-2015.

A co-sponsor of KL Summit would have to be found in the future. Although one would hope that President Hassan Rouhani of Iran would also revive the importance of the "Dialogue of Civilizations” that was pioneered by his predecessor President Ali Khamenei too, which again can come under the Kuala Lumpur Summit.

Indeed, the Muslim World, if KL Summit is supposed to be a microcosm of it, it is lacking the right depth to talk to each other bilaterally or multilaterally. If the high dialogue is confined to Malaysia, Indonesia, Qatar, Iran and Pakistan to make the Muslim world more dynamic, all-round trade must still be emphasised first to ensure high-quality interaction.

Yet, none of the five countries above trade widely. And if Iran is brought into the picture, one is confronted with international sanctions it still faces, putting a kink into the whole process of the KL Summit. Indeed, as recent as a month ago, Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed confessed that Iranians living in Malaysia are now pressured by external forces not to be given the basic privilege of even having a credit card or bank account in the country. Such sanctions confront any Muslim or non-Muslim countries that want to trade with Iran.

Can the Kuala Lumpur Summit address such a complex issue across the Mulsim world? One would have to assume not right now, as the list of attendants in the Kuala Lumpur Summit did not include anyone from the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia, let alone the Kingdom of Oman, especially representatives who can speak on behalf of Sultan Al Qaboos. The latter has done an excellent job of balancing Sunni-Shia rivalry despite being caught in the middle of the Sunni-Shia quagmire.

ADS

The Kuala Lumpur Summit seems to have included Rachid Al Ghanouchi, who believes in the concept of a "Muslim Democrat" in the Ummah - not unlike the noticeable absences of PKR president Anwar Ibrahim or Home Minister Muhyiddin Yassin. But the very inclusion of Rachid Ghanouchi of the Ennahda Party in Tunisia also clashes with President Mohammed El Sissi of Egypt.

Therefore, the key is not to stage the whole summit as a diplomatic theatre without further forethought in future. Otherwise, the whiplash effect can be another "Maruah Melayu" (Malay dignity) congress which alienated non-Muslims in Malaysia who felt completely left out from the whole event if not insulted since a majority of non-Muslims had backed Harapan to be the government.

As things stand the Kuala Lumpur Summit appears to be an event that seeks to strengthen the relationship of Malaysia, Indonesia, Qatar, Turkey, Pakistan and Iran, not excluding some central Asian republics such as Turkmenistan, where Petronas wants to consolidate its commercial relationship in oil and gas exploration. But nothing more than talk and more talk will emerge if the summit does not first acknowledge that trade between and within Muslim countries remain low.

This would then be a rehash of the problems of the Muslim world and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) since 1967.

As of today, the entire Muslim world only contributes five percent to the global gross domestic product (GDP). If one removes oil and gas from the trade matrix, the figure will go down to as low as less than three percent.

The Kuala Lumpur Summit may try to be the Helsinki of Asia, as the late Nordin Sopiee at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) once called it, but it must be genuine and not staged just for the sake of staging it.

In conclusion, if Kuala Lumpur Summit can point towards a direction to trade more and fight less, especially in fields and sectors that are not in the sunset industries, the event will be a pivotal success.

One will have to see how the summit's organiser, the Malaysian government, avoid the trappings of previous failures. Not forgetting, even Helsinki itself was eclipsed by the great power rivalry between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato).

One wonders if the organiser of the Kuala Lumpur Summit would in future understand, not merely the complexities of the Muslim world alone but also concerning the non-Muslim community too.

At the very least, the Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019 must be able to talk about the problem of Uyghur Muslims in China, Rohingya refugees trapped in Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh and the growth of Hindu nationalistic fascism in India. It is a long list and a tall order.

Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019, as all summits dictate, must come up with real solutions and not lofty rhetoric anymore. Perhaps, the summit may surprise all by coming out with resolutions that are pragmatic and workable solutions. You will never know.

But as it stands now, it looks more like a gathering for an end of the year party amongst a few selected friends!

RAIS HUSSIN is president / CEO at Emir Research, an independent think tank focused on strategic policy recommendations based on rigorous research.

The views expressed here are those of the author/contributor and do not necessarily represent the views of Malaysiakini.

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Home Minister: 179, 383 UNHCR card holders in Malaysia according to gov't figures

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PUTRAJAYA: There are 179, 383 UNHCR card holders in Malaysia according to Home Ministry records, says Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainudin (pic). nan The Home Minister said the number of card holders has spiked since 2013, as only 140, 983 refugees were recorded then. nan "We will work together with the Foreign Ministry and UNHCR to solve the influx of refugees in the country," said Hamzah. nan "I feel that the majority of Malaysians do not agree with the huge number of refugees, who made Malaysia their destination of choice as it might lead to various social ills. nan We have to find a credible solution as we are a sovereign nation with its own laws" he added at a special press conference on Wednesday (June 9). nan He was commenting on recent attempts by refugees to enter the country via sea in the northern part of the country, the latest being attempts by the Rohingya to enter Malaysia last week. nan "I am perplexed why there is a survey by the opposition media which advocated for the government to give protection to refugees despite their numbers significantly increasing," said Hamzah. nan He said that the survey supposedly showed that many opposed actions by the authorities in turning away refugees at sea. nan "They should have done research, asking Malaysians whether they want such refugees to be turned away as it might lead to social problems in the country," he said. nan Hamzah said the problem could be solved when all parties hold a discussion with the relevant parties, especially his Ministry. nan "We will discuss the matter and study the effect on the country a decade from now if we are still accepting refugees," Hamzah said.

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DPM’s visit to Rohingya camp proves Malaysia’s commitment

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COX’S BAZAR (Bangladesh), Oct 20 ― During Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi’s visit to the Rohingya refugee camp on Monday, he was surrounded by a large number of journalists, a scenario that caught this writer by surprise. Apart from the Malaysian media, scores of local and international journalists including media representatives from some of Asean countries were at the Kutupalong Camp to cover Ahmad Zahid’s visit. An officer of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at Kutupalong Camp was of the view that the presence of a big number of media representatives covering Ahmad Zahid’s visit was because not many key leaders of a country would come to see the situation at the Rohingya refugee camp, whereas Malaysia was sending its number two leader. Ahmad Zahid’s visit and presence was also giving a clear message to the world that Malaysia was serious about the issue and desired a long-term solution to the ethnic persecution in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. During his one-day visit, Ahmad Zahid met the refugees and witnessed the condition around the camp, which he described as most deplorable compared to other refugee camps he had visited, apart from visiting other facilities provided such as schools and clinics. Ahmad Zahid also announced that Malaysia would build a field hospital to enable more refugees to receive better healthcare. The RM3.5 million field hospital would be built by the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) Medical Corps and assisted by the Ministry of Health within a month, once the project met the requirements set by the Bangladesh government. He also wanted the National Security Council (MKN) to coordinate the humanitarian aid efforts – from governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media organisations or any individuals - that would be channeled to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Therefore, all assistance can be streamlined including for the purchase of essential items that are not only limited to food and medical aid. “In terms of food, I saw the United Nations World Food Programme is already there, IOM (International Organisation for Migrants) medicine is also available. So the MKN can think of the other forms of assistance needed,” he told a press conference at Kutupalong Camp. Additionally, he also announced the proposal for Malaysia to place a MKN humanitarian and welfare attache in Bangladesh to implement the government's commitment to help the Rohingya refugees in the camp. Ahmad Zahid said he would submit the proposal during the Cabinet meeting next week so that it could be implemented immediately. This is to ensure that all assistance would reach the target, and to determine the type of assistance that the refugee needed, and when implemented, this will be the first time for Malaysia to place any humanitarian and welfare attache in any country. For a Rohingya refugee, Musa Khalil, 27, Ahmad Zahid’s visit attracted the refugees’ attention as Malaysia was one of the countries that often helped them in the camp here, as there would be some provision that arrived from Malaysia daily. “Many of us here are looking to find a job in Malaysia, but do not realise that as a refugee, we cannot legally work in Malaysia,” said Musa, who could speak in Malay after working in Malaysia from 2009 to 2014. The humanitarian crisis has been steadily escalating in the Rakhine state as more and more ethnic Rohingya fled to Bangladesh daily that resulted in more refugee camps being erected. The actual number of refugees has yet to be ascertained but many parties claimed it has exceeded one million people. For the record, there are only two official refugee camps for the Rohingyas, namely Kutupalong and Nayapara, however, dozens of temporary camps have been erected by the refugees themselves and that number kept increasing daily. ― Bernama

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New Suhakam chief backs legal status for refugees, stateless people in Malaysia; calls for govt to be 'benevolent'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 13 — Putrajaya needs to find a balance between immigration concerns and human rights to resolve issues related to refugees and those who are stateless in the country, the new chairman of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) said in an interview. Speaking with news portal Malaysiakini, Prof Datuk Rahmat Mohamad suggested that proper documentation of the refugees and stateless people in the country would be the first step for them to access education, healthcare and hold legal jobs to contribute to the economy. According to the law expert, the core problem stems from Malaysia not ratifying the United Nations Refugee Convention. "But I have this to say, even if we do not ratify the Refugee Convention, that does not mean the government cannot be benevolent. "After all, these people have been here for how many years, so we are also guilty, we give them work but they do not have passports or documents. "So, I think what needs to be done is to legalise and provide the necessary documentation. These are some of the things that are well within the jurisdiction and obligation of the state,” he was quoted saying in the interview published today. Rahmat said that he understands why the Immigration Department adopts a very strict stance against foreigners. "The ones who have been here for years have not [had their issues resolved] and then there are still people coming,” he was quoted saying. He also reportedly said it is understandable why certain segments of Malaysians may view refugees and the stateless with xenophobia. "We are basically a peace-loving country, but when people come to our country suddenly and invade our privacy, we’d also feel uncomfortable. "It’s here where we have to find a formula. What is the best way to have the assurance that these people will work, and that is why the first thing we must do is to give education to these people so that they become more responsible,” he told the news portal. He indicated that education is the way forward to dealing with refugees so they would not have to resort to crime, which adds to negative perception of certain Malaysians towards them. "I think we must be more positive, rather than looking at the negatives. "After all, economically, it is good for the country because when these people work, they contribute [to the country]. "[It is possible] with the proper documentation and scheme, the proper contributions, but all the parties must be willing to do it,” he was quoted saying. Rahmat sees Suhakam as being the intermediary to ease tension between Malaysians and refugees, such as by disseminating relevant data to raise public awareness on the matter. He said can help address concern among those Malaysians who fear the refugees are "grabbing" their jobs. "So, it is important to tell the public that they are not disturbing the peace, they are not a threat,” he told Malaysiakini.

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Twins separated at birth share the same passion

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GEORGE TOWN: After their reunion seven years ago, a pair of identical twin sisters who share the same passion for serving the less fortunate, could end up working for the same organisation next year. nan nan nan Nurse Eliza Chang, 32, could be joined by her sister Grace Loo at Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), the international medical humanitarian organisation also known as Doctors Without Borders. nan Chang treating patients in Sierra Leone. — photo provided nan nan nan Born at Hospital Kuala Lumpur in 1988, the twins were given away at birth by their biological parents due to financial constraints, with Chang being sent to a family in Raub, Pahang, and Loo to a family in Singapore. nan The sisters reconnected after Loo tracked Chang down via Facebook in 2013. nan Today, the twins are closer than ever and share the same dream of helping the less fortunate. nan Chang is currently on a nine-month stint with MSF, serving as a nursing activity manager in South Sudan. nan “Grace is waiting for her graduation ceremony in Australia, having just completed her degree in international aid and development, and community development. nan “If all goes well, she will be joining MSF next year, ” Chang said in a statement issued by MSF. nan Coincidentally, the twins shared the same passion of serving the disadvantaged, long before they met each other. nan “We have promised each other that we will join MSF together and be the legit ‘Twins Without Borders’, ” Chang quipped. nan On her work with MSF, she said she has been enjoying the challenges of working in remote places with poor access to healthcare. nan “It motivates me to push on with my humanitarian goals. nan “While all patients are the same, I find myself yearning to serve those deprived of healthcare. nan “I find a greater purpose in life and joy through participation in medical missions and making connections with the locals, ” she said. nan Chang described her first field-work duty with MSF in the West African nation Sierra Leone as a unique experience. nan She said although she grew up in a multiracial country, dealing with people from different countries and cultures was still “very challenging”. nan “Things that seem natural or appropriate to us may not be the same for others or vice versa. nan “So I’ve learned to be more outspoken, share what I have in mind, and never expect someone to be able to read my mind, ” she said. nan Chang also related the challenges of her regular visits to different clinics and outreach activities, travelling on stony and muddy roads. nan “Sometimes, the path was only accessible by motorcycle. nan “I had a lot of muscle aches and bruises from the clinic visits and outreach activities, which could take up to four hours or more, back and forth, ” she said. nan Despite the arduous journey, Chang was determined to reach the community after witnessing how the villagers had to walk for hours to get to the nearest medical facility. nan “Not all of them made it on time to receive care. It made me realise how fortunate I am to be born in a country with easy medical access. nan “It brought home the saying, ‘things that you take for granted, someone else is praying for’, ” she said. nan On being away from her family during the holiday season, Chang said as a healthcare worker, this was not the first time she experienced this. nan “I get video calls from my family, so I can still virtually participate in the celebrations, ” she said. nan MSF is made up of tens of thousands of health professionals, logistics and administrative staff who participate in the social mission of providing medical assistance to people affected by conflict, epidemics and pandemics, disasters, or exclusion from healthcare. nan It has been in Malaysia since 2015 to fill in the gaps in healthcare services for refugees and asylum-seekers.

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Malaysia prepares to deport Myanmar asylum seekers and detainees despite outcry

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LUMUT, Feb 23 — Malaysia began bussing asylum seekers and other detainees from Myanmar to a port where ships were waiting to take them back to their strife-torn homeland, even as rights groups made a late legal bid to stop their deportation, saying lives were at risk. The 1,200 detainees are scheduled to leave on Tuesday afternoon in three navy ships sent by Myanmar's military, which seized power in a Feb. 1 coup, sparking weeks of protests from pro-democracy activists. Refugee groups say asylum seekers from the minority Chin, Kachin and non-Rohingya Muslim communities fleeing conflict and persecution at home are among those being deported. Malaysia has said it would not deport Rohingya Muslims or refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The UN refugee agency has said there are at least six people registered with it that are also set to be deported and that there could be more. It has not been allowed access to the deportees. Buses and immigration department trucks were seen taking the detainees to the western Malaysian port of Lumut, where the Myanmar ships are docked at a naval base. Rights groups Amnesty International and Asylum Access sought a court order on Monday to stop the deportation, saying three people registered with UNHCR and 17 minors who have at least one parent in Malaysia were among the deportees. "If Malaysia insists on sending back the 1,200 individuals, it would be responsible for putting them at risk of further persecution, violence and even death," Katrina Maliamauv, Amnesty Malaysia director, said on Monday. The court is set to hear the request at noon. Malaysia has not responded publicly to critics or Reuters queries over the deportation of the asylum seekers and those registered with the UNHCR. Concerns over deportation of unregistered asylum-seekers also persist as the UNHCR has not been allowed to interview detainees for over a year to verify their status, amid a crackdown on undocumented migrants in Malaysia. The US and other Western missions have been trying to dissuade Malaysia from proceeding with the deportation and urged the government to allow the UNHCR to interview the detainees. They also say Malaysia is legitimising the military government by cooperating with the junta. — Reuters

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Malaysia could send Rohingya detainees back out to sea, say sources

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KUALA LUMPUR, June 18 ― Malaysia is considering a plan to send nearly 300 Rohingya Muslim refugees detained after arriving on a damaged boat back out to sea once the ship has been fixed, two security sources told Reuters today. Muslim-majority Malaysia has been a favoured destination for ethnic Rohingya fleeing persecution in Myanmar and more recently, refugee camps in Bangladesh, in search of better prospects. But Malaysia has said it will no longer accept Rohingya refugees after tightening border controls to rein in the spread of the novel coronavirus. Malaysia had earlier asked Bangladesh to take back 269 Rohingya refugees, who were detained upon their arrival on June 8, but Bangladeshi officials had rejected the request. Authorities have now drawn up a plan to send the detainees back out to sea after the boat has been fixed, two Malaysian security sources said. They declined to be identified due to the sensitivity of the matter. “That is the current plan but no decision has been made yet,” one of the sources said. The boat would be supplied with food and water if the plan to push them out to sea was approved, the source said. The Malaysian government's National Taskforce on migrant issues, which includes the maritime agency, navy, police and immigration, did not respond to an emailed request for comment. Nor did Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's office. The body of one Rohingya woman was found on the boat but rights groups say more had died while others were left starving after being stranded at sea for months before being rescued. The Arakan Project, a non-profit group focusing on the Rohingya crisis, urged Malaysia not to send the refugees back out to sea. “This would amount to refoulement and would be completely inhumane as passengers already died aboard this boat before it was rescued,” Chris Lewa, the group's director told Reuters. Refoulement means the forced return of refugees to a place where they risk persecution in contravention of international humanitarian and human rights laws. “Rohingya need protection and cannot be pushed off from one country to another, let alone back to sea.” In recent weeks, Malaysia has turned away at least two boats and detained hundreds of Rohingya already in the country, as well as other undocumented migrants. The action comes amid heightened public anger towards foreigners in Malaysia, who have been accused of spreading the coronavirus and being a burden on state resources. At least one boat with as many as 300 Rohingya refugees on board remains at sea, according to rights groups. Some of those on board are believed to be sick. Its location is not known. ― Reuters

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Dozens of Rohingya found in Perlis after perilous sea journey

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KUALA LUMPUR, March 1 — Thirty-four Rohingya were found on a beach in Malaysia today, police said, the first of the Muslim minority group thought to have arrived in the country by sea for almost a year. About 740,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar for Bangladesh after a military clampdown in August 2017, joining huge numbers already confined to camps. Local police officer Nahar Jalaluddin told AFP the Rohingya were discovered on an isolated stretch of coast in the northern state of Perlis. “They were tired, weak and hungry,” he said. “The refugees, who included men, women and children, are now in the custody of the immigration authorities.” The official said he suspected they had been ferried into Malaysian waters from neighbouring Thailand by people smugglers under cover of darkness, and dumped close to the shore. The New Straits Times newspaper reported that villagers found the Rohingya on the shore covered with mud, and many were crying. It is the first time since April 2018 that Malaysian authorities have found a group of Rohingya who made it to the country by sea. It was not clear whether they had started their journey in Myanmar or Bangladesh, where huge numbers of Rohingya are living in squalid refugee camps. Bangladesh security forces have stopped repeated attempts by smugglers to transport Rohingya to Malaysia by boat. Authorities fear many are seeking to make the crossing before the start of the monsoon season at the end of March. Relatively affluent, Muslim-majority Malaysia has long been a favourite destination for Rohingya, where they are a source of labour in low-paying industries such as agriculture and construction. — AFP

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Perak’s Raja Permaisuri urges against discrimination of refugee kids

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IPOH, Sep 6 — Children of refugee families here should be given the same treatment and opportunities as Malaysian youths, said Raja Permaisuri Perak Tuanku Zara Salim. She said the children were blameless for their current predicament and should not be further victimised. “They have to be treated equally and fairly especially when it comes to education opportunities and health care facilities,” she said in her speech at the Malaysian Paediatric Association annual congress in Ipoh Convention Centre here. She noted that Malaysia has about 150,000 refugees from Burma, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Iran, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Of these, around 25,000 are minors but only a third have access to education, she added. “We need to ensure that all the children have equitable access, especially to health care at our public hospitals at affordable fees and adequate access to our educational facilities,” she added. Zara said socioeconomic support for the marginalised children in Malaysia still lagged behind those in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries. She added that becoming a developed nation should not only be measured in terms of wealth, but also for how the country treats the less fortunate.

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As security challenges rise, Malaysia leads — Najib Razak

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NOV 9 — World leaders from the 21 members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meet this week in Vietnam. It is clear that the first part of this year’s theme – “Creating new dynamism” – cannot be achieved without placing a firm emphasis on the second – “fostering a shared future.” The future we share just within APEC encompasses 40 percent of the world’s population, 54 percent of global GDP and 44 percent of world trade. Given its scale, this grouping is ideally positioned to enhance the well-being of our citizens, both in the economic and social realms. And also to address the many challenges the world currently faces – that threaten not just the future but the present. For we face huge challenges in Asia Pacific: from rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula, to the scourge of Daesh and its regional affiliates in Southeast Asia, to the suffering and persecution that has caused unprecedented mass migration in the Andaman Sea and in neighbouring countries. A gathering of world leaders, such as this one, must take advantage of being together to consider what we all collectively can do to take action. For Malaysia’s part, we have been consistent in our strong condemnation of the series of nuclear tests that have been conducted by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). An escalation that could lead to nuclear catastrophe, with the consequent deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not millions; the radioactive fallout, devastating long-term illnesses and mass displacement of people – this is something we simply cannot contemplate in the 21st century. Any conflict, particularly one involving such weapons, would be catastrophic not just for the Korean peninsula but for the region and beyond. Nuclear armageddon was a threat that blighted far too much of the second half of the last century, and we must take all steps necessary to avoid these dark clouds shrouding the first half of the current century. Earlier this year, Malaysia faced an intolerable violation of our territorial sovereignty when Kim Jong-nam was assassinated on our soil with banned chemical weapons. We took immediate action, sending back the DPRK diplomatic officers who were in Malaysia, and are conducting a broader review of our links with North Korea including diplomatic, political and economic relations, as well as the possibility of closing our embassy in Pyongyang. More broadly, we have long advocated for the DPRK to fully comply with all relevant UN Security Council resolutions and for the six party talks framework to be resumed. A peaceful conclusion to the tensions on the Peninsula would be a greater prize for the whole world, and as such, we welcome President Donald Trump’s statement that “it makes sense for North Korea to come to the table and make a deal”. We hope that his efforts, and those of President Xi Jinping, may lead to a more constructive path forward and we strongly support a peaceful future in Northeast Asia. In terms of Daesh, we have not been spared the shadow of a barbarity that has wrought such wicked havoc in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, in June last year, there was the first Daesh-linked attack in Malaysia. Although several were injured, mercifully no one died. It is only thanks to the heroic efforts of the Royal Malaysia Police that 16 attacks on Malaysian soil have been foiled, including two during the Southeast Asian Games closing ceremony and our National Day celebrations at Merdeka Square. But we cannot, and will not, let our vigilance lapse. On the international level, we are proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with so many other nations in the Global Coalition Against Daesh. At home, the Government has introduced a raft of counter-terrorism legislation over the past few years, so we have not found ourselves – as some other countries have – in the position of not having the appropriate laws to deal with this scourge. For when we see what happened in Marawi City in the Philippines recently, it is clear that this is a threat that is real and present in our region. Nobody should underestimate it, and I will never apologise for putting the safety and security of the Malaysian people first. But this challenge needs to be dealt with in a number of ways: not just by prevention, but also by battling radicalisation and working to rehabilitate those who have been falsely lured away by criminals who blaspheme the name of Islam. Our efforts to promote the concept of wasatiyyah, and the example set by our Global Movement of Moderates initiative, have been widely recognised and taken as a model by other countries. This was confirmed earlier this year by the establishment in Malaysia of the King Salman Centre for International Peace – a wonderful endorsement by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. Religion should be about peace, brotherhood and mutual respect. Alas, that has not been the case in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, where it is plain for the world to see that a campaign of ethnic cleansing has taken place against the Rohingya, a community that has suffered such terrible atrocities that a substantial proportion of them have fled the land they call home. Such persecution not just leads to refugee influxes for neighbouring countries, but also incites radicalisation and regional instability. Malaysia was one of the first countries to call for action. It was Malaysia that successfully proposed the meeting of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers in Yangon last December. We hosted the Extraordinary Session of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Council of Foreign Ministers to discuss the plight of the Rohingya in January this year. And we have led numerous humanitarian initiatives, sending goods and establishing a field hospital to help Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. I was glad to see that after we raised the issue with President Trump during my visit to the White House in September, his administration has been taking an increasingly tough line on the tragedy that has unfolded in Myanmar. Faced with all these security challenges, we cannot stand by and do nothing. The Malaysian Government will always push for efforts to ensure peace, stability and security in Asia Pacific. We must all contribute to “fostering a shared future”, and I hope and pray that after the APEC summit and subsequent ASEAN and related summits, we will have made strong progress in doing so.

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Conditions worsen for Rohingya in Rakhine state

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ABOUT a month after the International Court of Justice’s historic ruling ordering Myanmar to protect its Rohingya people from genocidal violence, conditions in Rakhine state, where most of this minority live, have only become grimmer. nan nan nan While airstrikes and landmines used in the bitter war between Myanmar military and ethnic Rakhine Arakan Army are imposing a heavy civilian toll, a government-imposed blackout on mobile Internet coverage is hampering aid and preventing locals from accessing information needed to protect themselves, say organisations monitoring the situation. nan nan nan Heavy restrictions on Rohingya movement within Rakhine state, as well as bleak conditions in the refugee camps of Bangladesh where more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees live, have bred despair. nan nan nan The situation is also prompting more to attempt to smuggle themselves abroad, landing them in the clutches of human traffickers. nan nan nan “There was a slowing of trafficking of Rohingya in the years following 2014 and again following the (Rohingya militants’ attacks in Myanmar) in 2016 and 2017. This year has had far more activity,” says Kyaw Win, executive director of London-based Burma Human Rights Network who coordinates research from Myanmar-based teams. nan nan nan “The (trafficking) networks are not being thwarted as often by the authorities in Bangladesh and Burma,” said Kyaw Win, referring to Myanmar by its former name. nan nan nan “The demand is far higher now due to the massive population increase in the refugee camps and a widespread sense of hopelessness among many of the refugees who have no idea when they will have a place they can live freely.” nan nan nan On Feb 11, at least 15 Rohingya drowned after an overloaded boat on its way to Malaysia sank off Bangladesh. nan nan nan The next day, 48 Rohingya on a similar journey were detained by the Myanmar navy in the sea. nan nan nan In an urgent statement issued on Tuesday (Feb 18), independent experts appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council sounded the alarm about the mounting civilian death toll and displacement caused by fighting between the military and the Arakan Army. nan nan nan This came amid the information blackout caused by the suspension of mobile Internet services in huge swathes of Rakhine state as well as neighbouring Chin state. nan nan nan “We are gravely concerned that children are being killed and injured, and that reports suggest weapons are being used indiscriminately, and precautions are not being taken to protect civilians and civilian objects such as schools and monasteries, in violation of international humanitarian law,” the experts said in the statement. nan nan nan “We note that the International Court of Justice ordered the provisional measures in relation to the Rohingya minority and they must be followed.” nan nan nan Rohingya Muslims, rejected in Myanmar as colonial-era interlopers from present-day Bangladesh, cannot travel freely around Rakhine state and the country, which severely limits their access to health facilities, education opportunities and livelihoods. nan nan nan In 2017, Rohingya insurgents attacked security bases, triggering a brutal crackdown by the Myanmar military likened to ethnic cleansing which forced more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. nan nan nan Last year, the mostly Muslim African nation Gambia lodged a case with the International Court of Justice alleging that Myanmar committed genocide. nan nan nan While the case may take years to conclude, the court last month ruled in favour of Gambia’s request for provisional measures to require Myanmar to protect the Rohingya from more harm. nan nan nan Myanmar has acknowledged that war crimes took place, but insisted there was no genocide. nan nan nan Myanmar’s Ministry of Transport and Communications, citing “security requirements and public interest”, suspended mobile Internet services in Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Rathedaung and Myebon in Rakhine State and in Paletwa in Chin State on Feb 3. nan nan nan The suspension widened an Internet blackout that already applied to four other townships in Rakhine state. nan nan nan Since then, the experts noted, at least seven civilians have been killed, including three Rohingya in Buthidaung, and up to 50 injured. nan nan nan Those injured included 21 children who came under fire while at their school in Buthidaung. nan nan nan More than 660,000 of around 850,000 people identified by the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in need of humanitarian assistance this year live in Rakhine state. nan nan nan UN agencies face mounting hurdles trying to provide emergency food aid, primary healthcare services and education support in Rakhine state. nan nan nan “Access to people in need is often constrained due to insecurity or bureaucratic issues, which complicates efforts to carry out assessments, provide assistance and monitor impact,” the UN told The Straits Times. nan nan nan Meanwhile, restrictions on movement mean that the Rohingya are less likely than other groups to get the help they need. nan nan nan “It’s been getting worse these two years,” said Hla Tun, 35, a Rohingya living in Maungdaw, in a phone interview. nan nan nan “When the Rohingya get caught in the crossfire, we don’t even have the chance to send injured villagers to the hospital on time.” – The Straits Times/Asia News Network nan nan nan nan nan Article type: metered User Type: anonymous web User Status: Campaign ID: 1 Cxense type: free User access status: 0 nan Subscribe now to our Premium Plan for an ad-free and unlimited reading experience!

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Refugees provide freshly cooked meals for frontline staff in Ampang Hospital

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PETALING JAYA: A group of refugees has gathered to cook for the Ampang Hospital medical workers who are in the frontlines of the fight against the Covid-19 disease. nan The refugees, who are from Syria, Palestine, Yemen and Iraq, are doing so as a way of thanking the frontliners. nan The food for 20 people will be delivered to the hospital from Monday (March 23) until March 31, with a different chef everyday for 10 days. nan The initiative is a collaboration between the Al-Hasan Volunteer Network and Beyond Borders Malaysia. nan The Al-Hasan Volunteer Network is made up of refugees while Beyond Borders Malaysia is a refugee rights non-government organisation. nan On Monday, Palestinian Eman Mfleh, 62, got the initiative rolling by cooking fried noodles for the staff. nan She has been in Malaysia together with her husband, daughter and four grandchildren for the past five years. Her son died in the war in Syria. nan "This is an opportunity for me to give back to Malaysia who have welcomed us warmly. We love this country and the people. nan "The doctors, nurses and everyone in hospitals are doing so much hard work to keep us safe. This is the least we can do for them," Eman told the Star. nan Beyond Borders founder Mahi Ramakrishnan said the refugees were using their own pocket money to prepare the food for the medical staff. nan "It's their way of contributing back to the country and society. They also want to show their gratitude and appreciation to the medical workers who are putting their lives at risk for us," she said. nan Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol and lacks a legal or administrative framework regulating the status and rights of refugees in Malaysia. nan Considered to be undocumented immigrants under the Malaysian Immigration Act, refugees here are at risk of arrest, detention and deportation. nan As of February this year, there are 178,990 refugees and asylum seekers registered with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Malaysia.

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'101 East' team facing unprecedented level of attack, says Al Jazeera

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INTERVIEW | Having been based in Kuala Lumpur for 14 years, international broadcaster Al Jazeera's '101 East' weekly current affairs programme team is no stranger to challenges in reporting from the region.

The latest series of attacks that follow its 'Locked up in Malaysia’s Lockdown' episode is however unexpected, according to Al Jazeera English Channel's managing director Giles Trendle.

"The ‘101 East’ team has covered some tough stories in the past," Trendle said in a phone interview from Al Jazeera's head office in Qatar.

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"We did a film called ‘Murder in Malaysia’ about the murder of the Mongolian woman [Altantuya Shaariibuu] and one of our journalists was deported from Malaysia before that episode went out.

"There have been issues in the past but nothing at this level that we are currently facing," he said.

Trendle was referring to Australian journalist Mary Ann Jolley who was abruptly deported in 2015 after the Home Ministry deemed her activity as having a "potential negative effect on the image of Malaysia".

Al Jazeera English was set up in 2006 as an extension of its Arabic language programming and Trendle said Kuala Lumpur has been the right location for its ‘101 East’ production team which covers "untold stories" from the Asia-Pacific region.

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At the same time, he cited Al Jazeera's concerns over rapidly shrinking media freedom, particularly on the criminalisation of journalism.

"Yes, we are concerned about media freedom in Malaysia. We are concerned with journalists being treated as criminals. One of our slogans is journalism is not a crime," said Trendle.

Seven Al Jazeera staff (below) were summoned to Bukit Aman for questioning earlier this month and Trendle said the management is still waiting for an update on the status of the case.

"We are concerned that journalists are called in for a criminal investigation. We don't believe we have done anything wrong. We are ready to stand up and say that our journalism is fair, balanced, and impartial," he said.

Since the release of 'Locked up in Malaysia’s Lockdown', some netizens have taken to social media to call out alleged misrepresentation of facts in the report, with demands for the reporters to be deported.

Aside from online attacks and a police probe, Al Jazeera is also under the scrutiny of the Communications and Multimedia Ministry, with the National Film Development Corporation (Finas) recently declaring a licence is required for the production of its show.

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Amid backlash over licensing requirements under the Finas Act 1981, Communications and Multimedia Minister Saifuddin Abdullah yesterday affirmed government’s commitment to media freedom and individual rights on social media.

Comments section disabled

Meanwhile, Trendle cited the ongoing contempt of court trial against Malaysiakini and editor-in-chief Steven Gan as the reason behind Al Jazeera's move to disable the viewer comments section on the July 3 episode.

"Al Jazeera was criticised for not enabling comments on the website of the film page but we disabled the comments because of Malaysiakini's case.

"We do not want to be liable for any offensive or racist comments that might be seen as being critical and therefore be in a situation like Malaysiakini is at the moment," he said.

Overall, he reiterated Al Jazeera's commitment to "fair, impartial, and balanced" journalism, including efforts to contact relevant authorities and ministries, despite being "rejected or ignored".

Aside from being open to clarifications from any local authorities, Trendle noted that he also prepared for a pre-arranged interview with national news agency Bernama yesterday but was later told it had been cancelled.

"I had agreed to speak to them. I was very happy and everything was set up but we learned not too long ago that the interview was not going to happen," he said.

On the safety of sources, Trendle said Al Jazeera's procedure would be to always get their consent first on the way they would be filmed, either on record or with their identity hidden.

In this case, he said Bangladeshi migrant Md Rayhan Kabir had consented to be interviewed on the record but the "witch hunt" against him was regrettable.

Following the outcry, the Immigration Department announced a search for Rayhan, 25, and later moved to revoke his work permit.

Public sentiment against refugees and migrants have intensified since the movement control order (MCO) was imposed in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, with hateful comments proliferating on the Internet.

NGOs said the crackdown by the authorities against undocumented foreign citizens during the MCO, some of whom had contracted the disease due to living in closed quarters, has also exacerbated negative sentiments against refugees and migrants.

Migrant who gave interview to Al Jazeera arrested

'Requiring newsrooms to have Finas licence violates press freedom'

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Yemeni refugee group conveys memorandum to UNHCR

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KUALA LUMPUR: More than 40 Yemeni refugees gathered peacefully in front of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), here, on Wednesday to submit a memorandum demanding their rights.

The memorandum was submitted to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi by Yemeni activist Leena Al-Mujahed through the Deputy Representative of UNHCR Maja Lazic.

Al-Mujahed, who is also a refugee, said the group represents about 7,000 Yemeni refugees in Malaysia to obtain their rights including financial aid, health insurance, and job opportunities.

According to Al-Mujahed, the Yemeni refugees’ situation at this time is unsatisfactory because their basic rights as refugees are neglected and UNHCR has failed to play its role.

“Through today’s gathering, UNHCR Malaysia has informed us that a meeting will be held to discuss the issues raised by our community.

“We will wait, and we expect positive feedback from them as soon as possible,“ she told Bernama after the hour-long gathering and submission of the memorandum.

Al-Mujahed said the gist of the memorandum include the right to placement to a third country, basic educational and vocational rights, and health insurance rights and employment programmes for refugees.

According to the UNHCR website, a refugee has the right to safe asylum.

“Refugees should receive at least the same rights and basic help as any other foreigner who is a legal resident, including freedom of thought, of movement, and freedom from torture and degrading treatment.

“Economic and social rights are equally applicable. Refugees should have access to medical care, schooling and the right to work,“ added the statement on the website.

Meanwhile, the Yemeni Refugees’ community leader, Waleed Al-Fakih, said today’s rally was held to urge UNHCR to take a stand and strive to solve the Yemeni refugees’ problems in the country.

“We have been living in Malaysia for the past eight years and have only UNHCR cards without being granted refugee rights ... our application for relocation to third countries is also frozen.

“We are facing a difficult life without a permanent home and without work to support our family,“ he said.

As of the end of May this year, there are about 173,700 refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia.

Of these, about 93,000 are ethnic Rohingya, 24,000 (China), 9,700 (Myanmar Muslims), 4,000 (Rakhine & Arakan) and 23,300 from countries like Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Palestine and Syria. — Bernama

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Nearly 200 Rohingya refugees land in western Indonesia

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PEUREULAK: At least 184 Rohingya refugees, including many women and children, landed in Indonesia's westernmost province on Monday, officials said, after they were dropped at sea by boat and made to swim ashore.

Thousands of the mostly Muslim Rohingya, heavily persecuted in Myanmar, risk their lives each year on long and expensive sea journeys, often in poor-quality boats, in an attempt to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

Locals in the East Aceh town of Peureulak alerted police Monday morning after discovering the group that officials said included 94 men, 70 women and 20 children.

“There was no boat on the beach when they arrived,“ Nasri, the head of Peureulak subdistrict who, like many Indonesians, has one name, told AFP.

“There are some refugees who look weak, they probably have not been eating for days.”

At least five were taken to hospital, while others were taken to a mosque compound for shelter, food and medical treatment, he said.

An official from East Aceh social affairs agency, Saharani, confirmed the same arrival total to AFP.

A United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) spokesperson said it was still gathering information on the new arrivals.

According to one of the passengers, they were dropped offshore and told to swim to land by the boat's captain.

“After that, the ship we were on immediately left,“ Rohingya refugee Ali told state news agency Antara. The refugees were trying to reach Malaysia from Myanmar, Ali said.

Local officials are in talks with the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration about shelter for the refugees.

More than 2,000 Rohingya are believed to have attempted the risky journey to Southeast Asian countries in 2022, according to the UNHCR.

The agency estimated nearly 200 Rohingya died or went missing attempting hazardous sea crossings last year. - AFP

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Gov’t firm in blocking entry of Rohingya refugees

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The government is firm in its stand to stop the entry of Rohingya refugees into the country, said Senior Minister (Security Cluster) Ismail Sabri Yaakob.

He said the government is maintaining its stand that the best solution is to send them back and the Foreign Ministry has been told to discuss ways to realise the matter.

“We also told the Foreign Ministry to discuss with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as many countries in the world that talked about humanitarianism are not accepting them.

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“If they are really fighting for humanitarianism, I am challenging them to take the Rohingyas in Malaysia as they have questioned and criticised us,” he told reporters at Felda Chini 3 today.

Ismail Sabri also did not rule out the possibility of good treatment by Malaysia earlier had resulted in the country being the choice of Rohingya refugees.

He said the problem with the estimated 200,000 Rohingya refugees in the country would be resolved if developed countries which have been vocal in criticising Malaysia would help take in some of the refugees into their respective countries.

“We have treated them well from the humanitarian aspect, in fact, we are among the best in the world. If there are disasters in other countries, we are quick to extend contributions and assistance.

“Nonetheless, do not take advantage of our good intention as the whole world has pushed the Rohingya issue to Malaysia to solve,” he said.

Apart from that, Ismail, who is also the defence minister, also gave the government’s assurance to continue tightening the country’s border.

- Bernama

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Rights groups seek Malaysian court order to stop deportation of Myanmar detainees

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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 22 — Rights groups Amnesty International and Asylum Access sought a court order today to prevent Malaysia deporting 1,200 Myanmar nationals, fearing their lives could be put at risk. Officials and refugees say Malaysia is set to deport the Myanmar citizens, including asylum-seekers, tomorrow on three navy ships sent by Myanmar’s military, which seized power in a Feb. 1 coup. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has said at least six people registered with it are among the immigration detainees being sent back. The Malaysian chapters of Amnesty International and Asylum Access said in a statement they had filed for a judicial review at the Kuala Lumpur High Court, based on information indicating asylum seekers and refugees were among those being deported. The filing, they said, included the names and details of three UNHCR document holders and 17 minors who have at least one parent still in Malaysia. “Separating children from their parents is an extremely inhuman practice that places these minors at grave risk and goes against the best interest of the child,” Amnesty Malaysia executive director Katrina Jorene Maliamauv said. The Malaysian government, Home Affairs Ministry and Director-General of the Immigration Department were named as respondents in the suit, the groups said. The respondents did not respond to requests for comment. Malaysia has said it will not deport Rohingya Muslims or refugees registered with the UNHCR. But concerns over deportation of unregistered asylum-seekers persist as the UNHCR has not been allowed to interview detainees for over a year to verify their status. The deportees include people from Muslim and Chin communities fleeing conflict and persecution at home, refugee groups have said. The UNHCR said it had not yet received an official response to its request to access detention centres before the deportation, and could not confirm details of those being deported. — Reuters

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Home minister: Are NGOs going to pay us to keep deportees here?

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Home Minister Hamzah Zainudin said Malaysia would continue deporting undocumented migrants in accordance with national laws.

Hamzah (above) questioned the NGOs criticising the government over the issue if they are willing to bear the government’s daily cost of keeping them in detention centres.

“We will send back foreigners who have been found guilty when the time comes. What else is there to do after arresting them? I don’t understand NGOs asking not to deport them. Why?

“If they love (undocumented migrants) so much they can pay their cost… they can even live in a hotel,” he told a press conference today.

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The minister added there is no reason anyone would stop the deportation of undocumented migrants who wished to return home.

“If they want to go back, why would anyone stop them from going back?” he said.

On Feb 23, the Immigration Department had deported 1,086 Myanmar nationals despite the Kuala Lumpur High Court ordering the exercise to be on hold.

The lawsuit was filed by Amnesty International Malaysia and Asylum Access Malaysia over concerns that there are asylum seekers and minors with parents in Malaysia among the deportees.

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This is in view of the ongoing violence in Myanmar following a military coup in February and persecution against the Rohingya community.

The Immigration Department claimed no refugees were being deported, but the NGOs want the UN High Commission for Refugees to be allowed access to the deportees to verify the claim.

The UNHCR had been denied access to all immigration detention centres since August 2019.

The court later extended protection to another 114 Myanmar nationals still detained in Malaysia while the legal dispute continues.

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Hamzah: Refugees have no rights to state demands from Malaysian government

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PUTRAJAYA: Rohingya refugees have no status, rights or basis to state demands from the Malaysian government, said Home Minister Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainudin. nan He said any organisation which claims to be representing the Rohingya here was illegal under the Registrar of Societies Act. nan “The Home Ministry made checks with the ROS and found that no organisation with the name Rohingya was registered in Malaysia. nan “Any organisation which claims to be representing the Rohingya is illegal under the ROS Act and legal action can be taken. nan “Rohingya nationals who are holders of the UNHCR card have no status, rights or basis to make any claims, ” he said yesterday. nan Recently, statements whygjuhere made by individuals from the Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organisation in Malaysia, demanding things such as equal rights, jobs, access to healthcare, and education. nan The demands have triggered unprecedented negative sentiment among some members of the community against Rohingya refugees, with many urging the government to repatriate all Rohingya and to stop accepting them. nan According to records, as of March, there are 179,521 UNHCR cardholders in Malaysia, of which 101,584 are Rohingya. nan Hamzah said the ministry was aware of concerns over issues involving Rohingya here. He pointed out that Malaysia is not a party to the Refugee Convention 1951 or its Protocol, hence there is no legal or framework to oversee the rights of refugees here. nan “The government does not recognise their status as refugees but as illegal immigrants holding United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) cards, ” he said.

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Museum entrance fees should be reviewed: Minister

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KOTA KINABALU: Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister, Datuk Mohamaddin Ketapi said museum entrance fees in the country need to be reviewed since it is relatively low compared to other countries.

He said when compared to museums in other countries, entrance fees for museums in the country were too low at only RM5 compared to entrance fees of up to 15 dollars in foreign countries.

“Therefore, I think the entrance fees should be increased slightly for example RM10 and consider it as a contribution to further upgrade museums in the country,“ he said after officiating the International Museum Day 23rd national celebration at the Sabah Museum Complex here.

Mohamaddin said the occasion provided a platform for further cooperation between museums in the effort to spread knowledge about the country’s cultural heritage.

“This celebration is also a recognition of the role of museums in the shaping of communities and countries, as well as strengthening cooperation networks among museums across Malaysia,“ he said.

Mohamaddin said the achievements and efforts of the museum institutions in the digital age should be upgraded to change the perception of the community on heritage and culture.

He said museums needed to be a cultural hub capable of blending heritage and technology through a dedicated mechanism that is solid in preserving the country’s culture and heritage for the continuity of tradition.

“As a cultural hub, museum activities need not only rely on collections alone, but society should be the essence towards achieving excellence in the museum institutions. Museums should creatively incorporate ideas together with the community in drafting programmes according to current trends.

“Museums should also be able to highlight current issues through organising various programmes not only in the form of exhibitions, but also dialogues, forums and so on,“ he said.

He said the museum not only serves as an institution that preserves heritage treasures in the form of artifacts and documentation, but it also extends its role as an agent capable of creating awareness among the public about the importance of the museum as a hub in understanding the culture and traditions of a society. - Bernama

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‘Let them apply for legal jobs’

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SELAYANG: Rohingya refugees in Malaysia should be given leniency to apply for legal jobs in the country, said pro-Rohingya non-governmental organisation Humanitarian Aid.

Its advisor Rafik Shah Mohd Ismail said many of the refugees left their homeland in Rakhine State, Myanmar, without bringing adequate possessions to survive in their destination countries.

"The Rohingya entered Malaysia without any official travel documentation. They have to do odd jobs for survival, and earn RM1,000 a month if they are lucky," he said.

"The amount is not a luxury. They have commitments to their family, and have to pay rent. How can they survive if they are not given job opportunities?" he told theSun.

Being a non-signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention, Malaysia has no obligation to provide jobs, education and other basic necessities to more than 50,000 documented Rohingya refugees.

However, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed had recently announced that a pilot project is underway to allow UNHCR card holders to work in specific sectors in the country.

Meanwhile, Asia Rohingya Centre executive director Dr Mohd Helmi Ibrahim said opening our borders fully to allow more Rohingya to enter is not the right way out from the crisis.

"We have to allow them in under humanitarian grounds, but it will not solve the matter completely. It will only provide victory to the Myanmar government, which is systematically trying to chase the Rohingya out of the country," he said.

He said the international community must be unified in pressuring Myanmar to recognise the rights of the Rohingya.

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‘Be transparent with refugee card system’

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia would need to be transparent if it plans to proceed with its own refugee card system, says United Nations Special Rapporteur on Myanmar Tom Andrews. nan He also said there needs to be a willingness to engage in discussions about policy on how refugees are being treated. nan “Working in concert with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for example, and making sure these policies are clear, consistent, transparent and accountable are really important steps. nan “Obviously this is a Malaysian government decision and I respect that, but I also believe in the importance of there being a level of transparency and openness to partner with those who very sincerely want the best for those who are here due to no fault of their own,” he said. nan Home Minister Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainudin had announced the government would issue its own refugee cards for those seeking asylum in Malaysia. nan Speaking on the situation in Myanmar, Andrews described the situation there as a “human rights catastrophe”. nan “They are refugees in the true meaning of the word, seeking safety beyond their own borders, for an uncertain future, including in Malaysia. nan “What is clear to me is the extreme vulnerability of refugees in Malaysia. It is this very vulnerability that exposes them to further abuses,” he said.

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Rohingya groups apologise, claims Zafar not their leader

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A coalition of 17 Rohingya-linked groups based in Myanmar and Malaysia have distanced their community here from purported statements made by the president of the Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organisation Malaysia, Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani.

According to their joint statement, the groups issued an apology to the Malaysian government and Malaysians in general for statements attributed to Zafar (photo) which had sparked "unprecedented negative sentiments among some Malaysians" against Rohingya refugees here.

"We, the Rohingya refugees, have never elected Zafar Ahmad as our president, he is not our leader. We have no leader in Malaysia and he has no right to issue statements on our behalf.

"Therefore, all Rohingyas are against such unrealistic and irresponsible statements," said the groups.

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They did not refer to any specific remarks allegedly made by Zafar, although they urged that Malaysian authorities take action against him.

Among the undersigned groups include the Rohingya Association in Malaysia, the Rohingya Islamic Society in Malaysia, and Rohingya Youth Care Malaysia.

One of the contact person named in the statement, Muhammad Islam, later insisted that their only ties with Zafar were as a fellow Rohingya.

"We don't have any other ties with him. We don't support him at all," said Muhammad, a Rohingya refugee based in Malaysia since 1992.

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Quizzed on the reason behind their joint statement, Muhammad claimed that Zafar could have been "receiving advise" from certain parties when speaking up on issues concerning the rights of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.

The father-of-four, who married a Malaysian, also alluded to social media posts falsely attributed to Zafar which had gone viral.

He indicated no knowledge of Zafar's reported denial of the fake posts, saying instead: "Zafar can deny it himself."

On Friday, it was reported that Zafar has been forced to deactivate his Facebook account due to death threats and verbal abuse received, following the circulation of fake social media posts linked to him.

The fake posts quoted him as calling the Malays "stupid", demanding equal rights and Malaysian citizenship for Rohingya refugees.

He was also accused of questioning the Malaysian authorities over their refusal to accept boats ferrying Rohingya refugees.

On April 16, the Malaysian authorities prevented 200 Rohingya in a boat from entering the country illegally, although food was provided to all on humanitarian grounds.

They were detected 70 nautical miles west of Langkawi, 11 days after another group of over 200 Rohingya refugees landed on the island and kept in Covid-19 quarantine centres for 14-days.

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On Monday, Umno deputy president Mohamad Hasan warned that receiving Rohingya refugees amid the Covid-19 pandemic could open the floodgates for more vessels carrying refugees to encroach Malaysian waters.

The navy's latest move to prevent more entry of Rohingya refugees had sparked a wave of xenophobic and racist comments against the community as a whole.

Also, there is an ongoing online petition campaign urging the government to ignore tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees affected by the movement control order.

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Plans for own refugee card

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PUTRAJAYA: There is a plan by the Home Ministry to issue its own refugee card instead of allowing the one by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), says its Minister Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainudin. nan “We are looking for a way to only accept refugee cards issued by agencies under the Home Ministry, not by the UNHCR. nan “Who’s to say these cards issued by UNHCR are even valid?” the Home Minister told reporters yesterday. nan Hamzah said the power to provide asylum to Rohingya refugees in the country should only be given to Malaysian authorities, not other third-party agencies. nan He said many Rohingya refugees in the country claimed they were registered by the UNHCR, but the authenticity of their claims was questionable. nan “The sole registration agency in the country is the National Registration Department (NRD), led by its director-general Datuk Ruslin Jusoh. He is the most legitimate registrar of individuals in the country. nan “Why should there be a different entity registering individuals in our country?” said Hamzah at the press conference at the ministry. nan “It is Malaysia who should have the sole authority to decide if an individual can live in the country legally through cards issued by its own agency.” nan He said the status of Rohingya refugees in the country was a long-standing issue and currently, about 150,000 were already registered with the UNHCR. nan He said the people of this country need to understand that the government did not detain individuals seeking asylum entering with valid documents. nan “Those who fled Syria or Afghanistan and entered our country with valid passports, we do not detain them and put them in depots. nan “But those who enter illegally, they are breaching our immigration laws. If someone breaks into your house without invitation, are they committing an offence? Or do you just let them in? nan “But if someone you know seeks shelter and asks to stay at your place because they are fleeing from someone, you would be fine to allow them in. nan “This is a simple analogy that the people need to understand before criticising the government for rounding up illegals. We do it because they broke our laws,” said Hamzah. nan In the April 20 incident where 528 detainees rioted and broke out of the Relau immigration detention centre, Hamzah said there were 61 individuals still on the run. nan On calls by residents in the nearby Sungai Bakap area for the government to close the depot due to security concerns, Hamzah said it would be looked into.

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Pilot project to allow Rohingya UNHCR card holders work legally to begin from March: Zahid

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PUTRAJAYA: The pilot project initiated by the government to allow Rohingya refugees to work legally in Malaysia will begin on March 1.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said the project would allow 300 Rohingya United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) card holders to work in stages.

He said the selected refugees would have to pass security and health screening before being allowed to enter the country's workforce.

"The refugees would be assigned to selected companies in the plantation and manufacturing sectors to provide them with the skills and a source of income before they are relocated to a third country," he said.

Ahmad Zahid said this in a statement after chairing the high level committee meeting on issues related to the UNHCR at Perdana Putra here.

He also said the National Security Council (NSC) is in the midst to improve its Order no. 23 to ensure a smoother and more organised handling of UNHCR card holders currently residing in Malaysia.

NSC Order no. 23 deals with the mechanism to manage illegal immigrants which outlines measures to reduce the number of illegals in Malaysia.

"The government is always looking for the best approach to manage UNHCR card holders despite the country not being a member to the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol," he said.

Ahmad Zahid also announced the formation of a joint task force to manage issues pertaining to refugees effectively.

"The task force would involve the cooperation of six ministries with the UNHCR to ensure the validity of the UNHCR cards issued," he said.

Ahmad Zahid said currently there were a total of 149,474 documented UNHCR card holders from 62 countries in Malaysia.

From the total, 133,517 or 89% originated from Myanmar, with more than 55,000 refugees of Rohingya ethnicity, he added.

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27 Rohingya nationals spared the cane, judge says refugees in need of protection

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ALOR STAR: Twenty-seven male Rohingya refugees were spared the cane after the High Court here set aside the sentencing by the magistrate’s court.

The 27 accused were among 40 Rohingya refugees who were charged on June 18 for entering Malaysia illegally via Langkawi on March 18.

The 40 Rohingya were found guilty by the magistrate’s court in Langkawi for entering Malaysia without a valid travel document during the height of the movement control order in March; at the same time that Malaysia was enforcing a lockdown to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

They were all sentenced to seven months imprisonment for illegal entry while 27 of them were additionally given three strokes of the rotan.

They would later be released into the custody of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) upon serving their sentence.

Justice Dr Arik Sanusi Yeop Johari, in reviewing the earlier penalty, said the 27 persons were refugees in need of international protection due to the persecution they faced.

“In line with the international principle of non refoulement, they cannot be returned and in this regard, the court took judicial notice of the current situation in Rakhine, Myanmar,“ Arik Sanusi said.

The judge also ruled that the refugees were not habitual offenders, they did not commit any violence and therefore it is inhumane for them to be imposed with a sentence of whipping.

Furthermore, the refugees had also registered themselves with the UNHCR.

“The decision is laudable as it demonstrates the promotion and protection of human rights by the High Court,” said defense counsel Colin Andrew.

Under the Immigration Act, those who enter the country illegally are liable for a RM10,000 fine, up to five years imprisonment and six strokes of the rotan.

Before the court proceedings began here, several human rights organisations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, had pleaded for the refugees not to be caned.

Andrew also disclosed that six Rohingya teenagers, who were part of the 40 serving jail were be released immediately to the UNHCR.

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Shouting match in Parliament after Mat Sabu speaks about Malay supremacy, corruption

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KUALA LUMPUR: A shouting match erupted in the Dewan Rakyat on Monday (July 27) after Mohamad Sabu (PH-Kota Raja) spoke about Malay supremacy and corruption during his speech on the Royal Address. nan The issue began when Mohamad, fondly known as “Mat Sabu”, spoke about how it is dangerous when one particular race is championed without limits, drawing parallels with the United States. nan “What happened in the United States is the best example of white supremacy. It started during the George Washington and (Abraham) Lincoln period, but the peak took place during Donald Trump’s era because his administration was responsible for igniting racial issues. nan “Then chaos happened in the entire United States and even though we are facing a pandemic, the people are still going out to demonstrate, ” said Mohamad, who’s also Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) president. nan Mohamad then claimed that the concept of white supremacy is the same as Malay supremacy. nan “We don’t see the danger now. It’s still at an early stage. What took place in the United States manifested for over hundreds of years and finally, we see that white supremacy has brought about never-ending chaos that is spreading across the world.” nan Ahmad Fadhli Shaari (PAS-Pasir MAS) subsequently interjected, saying that the former defence minister may have misunderstood the issue as white supremacy and Malay supremacy are two different phrases. nan “Malay supremacy is about rights enshrined in the Constitution, no different than that. That’s it, ” he said. nan Mohamad said he agreed with Ahmad while stating that Muslims leaders should not be supported if they are embroiled in corruption. nan He said support should be given to Muslims with integrity regardless of which party they are from, adding that support should not be given to corrupted Muslim leaders. nan Mohamad’s remarks appeared to have irked Tan Sri Noh Omar (BN-Tanjong Karang), who stood up and said that the Kota Raja MP’s remarks on corruption and the Malays were too general. nan “I feel slighted because I’m a Malay. I support the struggle for Malay rights but to relate them with corruption, it is too general. nan “If you are really fighting for the Malays and Islam, why did you jump from PAS to Amanah? PAS fights for Islam, what is the difference? nan “Who is corrupted here? Do you have evidence? Don’t be so general. YB, you are a Malay, don’t insult the Malays lah. nan “We must have our pride. Don’t insult our race, ” said Noh. nan Mohamad denied that he was insulting the Malays, as he was merely declaring support for more Malays with principles and integrity. nan In response, Noh said he supported Mohamad’s remarks but maintained that corruption should not be associated with Malays. nan “Don’t bring down Malay dignity. YB, you are a good Malay, you are not corrupted. Don’t be like that, ” he said. nan A shouting match subsequently erupted between Noh and several Amanah leaders who came to Mohamad's defence. nan Khalid Samad (PH-Shah Alam) claimed that Noh was particularly incensed when corruption was mentioned by Mohamad. nan Noh subsequently shot back at Khalid, pointing out to the former federal territories minister that his political secretary was investigated by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC). nan “He is just being investigated, not charged yet, ” said Khalid in response to Noh. nan Deputy Speaker Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said subsequently intervened and ended the debate session, where she proceeded to allow Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal (Warisan-Semporna) to deliver his speech on the Royal Address. nan Earlier during Mohamad’s speech, the former defence minister also raised concerns over the way the government had handled the refugee crisis in the past. nan He cited the discovery of mass graves in Wang Kelian, Perlis, as an example. nan “Whoever killed those refugees, it really shamed Malaysia at an international level, ” he added.

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Sewing a better future

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HELPING communities should not just be about donating goods. nan While short-term help is necessary, community engagement is needed if the objective is to transform lives, said International Medical University (IMU) Community Engagement dean Prof Khoo Suan Phaik. nan The varsity’s community engagement efforts, she said, are increasingly being designed to create more sustainable outcomes for various communities impacted by health inequalities and poverty. nan “One should not go in with one’s agenda of what constitutes giving or engaging without focusing on the real, broader issues such as accumulative health issues arising from inaccessible health services. nan “Community engagement provides experiential learning for students and we need to do more. We must enable communities to be proactive, empowering them to create or seize opportunities,“ she added in a press release. nan As part of the varsity’s community engagement efforts through its IMU Cares platform, the Kachin community in the country was gifted with 10 sewing machines during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. nan More recently, IMU Cares has teamed up with Uniqlo and the Women’s Aid Organisation to establish the Digital Literacy and Entrepreneurship for Women Programme, which would help increase women’s capacity towards building resilience and financial independence. nan This is a six-month programme that will deliver a series of workshops to 20 women from refugee communities and those from shelter homes and low-cost-housing within the Klang Valley. nan Through this initiative, the Kachin women who benefited from the sewing machines will be able to pick up some information technology skills, hence enabling them to expand their skills from product making to product merchandising, Prof Khoo said, adding that this year will see the varsity continuing to focus on specific issues faced by vulnerable communities. nan Htoi San Nhkum, also known as Sam, who is a refugee from Myanmar heading the Kachin Refugee Centre, said refugees do not want to rely on handouts and want to work towards self-efficacy. nan “While we are always grateful to our host country Malaysia and have gained from so much help and support, we also want to be independent and secure a better future for ourselves. We want to prepare for our lives beyond the restrictions we now face,” she said. nan “We could start making side income from sewing now, but we really need to improve the quality of our products so we can sell. We also need help with marketing,” she added. nan During the pandemic, the Kachin women, having undergone training arranged by IMU, made 17,000 face masks, over 1,000 head covers and 75 disposable gowns, which were donated to frontliners. nan The sewing project gave the refugee women an income, which compensated for the loss of casual work during the lockdown. nan But for Sam and her community, it was not just about the immediate income, but also the potential that the 10 sewing machines promised, which enabled them to think of future projects. nan At the International Women’s Day celebration held at IMU in March, the Kachin women demonstrated their enthusiasm, while displaying an array of handmade items which were produced for the sewing project during the pandemic. nan As of last January, there were 181,510 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR in Malaysia. nan Some 155,610 were from Myanmar, comprising 103,560 Rohingyas, 22,580 Chins, and 29,470 other ethnic groups from conflict-affected areas or fleeing persecution in the country. nan The remaining individuals were 25,900 refugees and asylum-seekers from 50 countries fleeing war and persecution in countries including Yemen and Syria.

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Death threats, hate speech turn Rohingya activist's Malaysia home into a prison

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KUALA LUMPUR, April 6 ― Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani, a Rohingya Muslim refugee and activist who fled persecution and ethnic strife in Myanmar, has called Malaysia home for nearly three decades. Now, it's more like a prison. Zafar, 51, has not left his home on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur for nearly a year, after misinformation spread online that he had demanded Malaysian citizenship, triggering a wave of hate speech and death threats against him and his family. “I'm still scared. For a year, I've not set foot outside. I've not seen the earth outside,” said the father of three. Zafar has reported the false accusations and online attacks to the police, but to his knowledge, no charges have been filed. He has denied making any demand for citizenship or the same rights as citizens for Rohingya in Malaysia. More than 100,000 Rohingya live in Muslim-majority Malaysia, long seen as friendly to the persecuted minority even though they are not officially recognised as refugees. The welcoming sentiment soured a year ago as people started saying Rohingya were spreading the then surging coronavirus. Hate speech calling for violence against Rohingya and other undocumented migrants spread widely online. A significant portion of the volume targeted Zafar, who heads a prominent Rohingya refugee rights organisation. Zafar still receives abusive calls and messages on his phone and social media accounts daily, and details and photos of his family have been circulated online, according to screenshots shown to Reuters. His Malaysian wife, Maslina Abu Hassan, said the attacks have taken a heavy toll. Their children no longer attend school due to safety concerns, and last year, Zafar was diagnosed with depression and began taking medication to cope, she said. Zafar, who is registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), applied to be moved to another country but his request was rejected after the agency said he did not meet its criteria for resettlement. A UNHCR spokeswoman in Kuala Lumpur said in an email the agency could not comment on individual cases. Resettlement decisions depend on various factors, she said, but ultimately lie with any potential host countries. Zafar said he hopes the agency will reconsider his case because he no longer feels safe in Malaysia. “I cannot relax my body, my brain, my heart. I cry asking why people are doing this to me.” ― Reuters

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Will Malaysia condemn Trump’s Muslim ban? DAP MP asks

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KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 29 — DAP’s Ong Kian Ming today questioned if the Malaysian administration is willing to denounce the United States president Donald Trump’s executive order to ban Syrian refugees and non-citizens from seven Muslim countries from entering the country. The Serdang MP said the “disturbing action” may make it harder for citizens of other predominantly Muslim countries such as Malaysia, to travel to, study in and work in the US. “Prime Minister Najib, on January 21, 2017 sent out a congratulatory message to Trump on his inauguration as the 45th President of the United States. “Will PM Najib also send a message to Trump to condemn this executive action that affects the citizens of these Muslim majority countries?” he asked in a statement, referring to Datuk Seri Najib Razak. Ong said many world leaders had criticised the order, signed on Friday, to suspend the US refugee resettlement programme for 120 days. The order also decreed all visa applications from seven Muslim countries ― Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen ― to be put on hold for at least 90 days. He said the order must be strongly condemned as it is an inhumane action especially for those Syrian refugees who have already been granted approval to travel to and seek asylum in the United States. “It is an unjustified action that affects thousands of students and employees who are studying and working legally in the United States,” Ong said.

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No decision yet on whether refugees can work, says Kula

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SUBANG JAYA: The government has not yet decided whether refugees would be allowed to work in the country, says M. Kulasegaran (pic). nan The Human Resources Minister said on Thursday (Jan 9) that a high-level committee comprising a few ministries was looking into the issue. nan "It isn't as easy as allowing refugees to work. There are a lot of other issues. Most importantly, it comes under the Home Ministry," he said during a question-and-answer session at a forum on employment on Thursday (Jan 9). nan He added that they would be convening a few meetings and discuss the issue with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). nan In November last year, Kulasegaran told the Dewan Rakyat that he believed a decision on the matter would be made between Dec 10 and 15 after a committee to discuss the matter was set up. nan "The other aspect is we haven't signed the treaties, so how do we address these issues?" asked Kulasegaran, adding that this was an important matter. nan Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol, and lacks a legal or administrative framework regulating the status and rights of refugees, who are considered undocumented migrants under the Immigration Act, and are at risk of arrest, detention, and deportation. nan He said both his ministry and the Home Ministry had been assigned to conduct a thorough study on the matter before sending it to the committee for consideration, which will then forwarded to the Cabinet for approval. nan "In essence, it is being looked into seriously, to find an answer how to overcome this issue," he said. nan As of November last year, there were more than 178,000 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia. The majority are adults aged 18-59 and males. nan While refugees are not allowed to work legally, many work in informal sectors in so-called 3D (dangerous, dirty and difficult) jobs. nan According to the UNHCR, most work in the horticulture, agriculture, construction, and cleaning sectors. nan In its manifesto for the 14th General Election (GE14) in May last year, Pakatan Harapan said that it would ratify the 1951 International Convention on refugees so that refugees arriving in Malaysia were given proper assistance.

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Khalid leaps to defence of Rohingyas after community comes under attack

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PETALING JAYA: Unfounded claims of Rohingya refugees are demanding Malaysian citizenship are shared on social media.

Pictures of Shah Alam MP Khalid Samad with Rohingya rights activist Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani then went viral. One netizen posted the photograph with the caption ‘Pakatan Harapan loves Rohingya’, drawing a response from Khalid on twitter.

“Yes, PH stands with the oppressed and abused. It’s mandatory under Islam,“ said Khalid in response.

Khalid is not alone in standing up for the Rohingya refugees. Lynette Lee who teaches refugee students at a local NGO expressed her concerns as well.

“Firstly, it’s extremely difficult for refugees to get citizenship in Malaysia. It takes years and there are alot of steps,” Lee told theSun.

“Even getting their refugee cards from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is difficult, and even when they do get it, it offers them little to no protection and rights.”

Lee said Malaysians should stop expressing hate towards refugees as they come from war-torn countries.

“Malaysians are privileged enough to come from a peaceful country with rights and education,” she said.

“The refugee children I teach don’t have such a privilege. While some Malaysian students are celebrating the fact that school is closed, the refugees I teach are begging to go back to school. “

When asked if the xenophobic rhetoric among Malaysians would affect her job as a teacher, she said she’s only worried about her students.

“The hate doesn’t affect me much as a teacher, but it affects my students and it indirectly makes my job a little harder,” she added.

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Rohingya refugees get emergency treatment after boat lands in Indonesia

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ROHINGYA refugees received emergency medical treatment after a boat carrying nearly 200 people came ashore in Indonesia yesterday, authorities said, in the fourth such landing in the country in recent months.

Each year thousands of the mostly Muslim Rohingya, heavily persecuted in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, risk their lives on long, expensive sea journeys – often in poor-quality vessels – in an attempt to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

The wooden vessel arrived around 5.30pm (1030 GMT) on a beach in Indonesia’s westernmost province of Aceh, said local police spokesman Winardy.

“One hundred and eighty-five Rohingya immigrants landed in Pidie (district). The figure consists of 83 adult males, 70 adult females and 32 children,” Winardy, who goes by one name, said in a statement.

The refugees were temporarily sheltered at a local facility, with health workers treating those who were sick, Winardy added.

Some appeared very weak and thin and were put on drips by medical staff, according to AFP journalists.

A health worker told AFP some were “suffering from severe dehydration. Some children were vomiting.”

Details on the length and conditions of their journey were not immediately available, but one young arrival said they had set off from Bangladesh.

“We came from a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh in a hope that Indonesia will give us the opportunity of education,” 14-year-old Umar Faruq said.

Marfian, a leader of a local fishing community on the scene not long after the refugees arrived, said that “some refugees landed in weak conditions”.

“When they were at the shoreline, locals helped by giving them food,” Marfian said.

He noted that in recent years some Acehnese fishermen had helped Rohingya boats come ashore but the latest boat was carried to land by the wind, as fishermen had become more reluctant to help.

Winardy underscored that authorities were coordinating on refugee response “considering their landing in Aceh has become more frequent”.

Monday’s boat landing in Aceh came a day after another vessel carrying 57 Rohingya refugees came ashore in the province after a month at sea.

In November, two boats carrying a total of 229 Rohingya landed in the same province, according to the UN refugee agency UNHCR.

Relatively affluent Malaysia is a favoured destination for the refugees, but many land first in Muslim-majority Indonesia, seen as more welcoming.

UN agencies and human rights groups have called on states in the region for urgent help after several boats carrying Rohingya were reported adrift for weeks in the Indian ocean.

The UNHCR said over the weekend that some 180 Rohingya at sea for weeks were feared dead, after relatives said they’d lost contact and presumed none on board had survived. – AFP, December 27, 2022.

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DPM: Humanitarian attache to be assigned to Bangladesh

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COX’S BAZAR (Bangladesh), Oct 17 — Malaysia will assign a humanitarian and welfare attache to Bangladesh to fulfil the government’s commitment in helping Rohingya ethnic refugees currently sheltered at refugee camps in Bangladesh. Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said he would raise the matter in the Cabinet next week to expedite the process. “The attache, from the National Security Council (MKN) will be based at the Malaysian High Commission in Dhaka. He will assist the high commission’s office not only to coordinate but also ensure that every aid reaches the refugees,” he told Malaysian journalists here, at the end of his two-day working visit to Bangladesh since Sunday. While visiting the Rohingya refugee camp in Kutupalong, about 35 km from here on Monday, Ahmad Zahid said the MKN would coordinate the process of channelling humanitarian aid to the recipients. “This is to ensure that all aid reach the target in addition to ensuring the type of assistance that the refugees need,” he said. He is confident that with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak’s commitment, the Foreign Affairs Ministry would be able to initiate the administrative appointment immediately, in a matter of 30 days. “This move will hopefully reflect the government’s commitment in easing the plight of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. This is the first time that we are assigning a humanitarian and welfare attache,” he said. He added that although there had never been any occasion where aid did not reach the recipients, it was still good to conduct constant monitoring. Meanwhile, he would discuss with the prime minister and propose to the cabinet on MKN’s role as coordinator in channelling aid to the Rohingya refugees. “It includes aid from the government to set up a field hospital, which would be built by the Defence Ministry, Health Ministry and Malaysian Armed Forces Medical Corps. “As well as cooperation with the media to collect aid for MKN to channel to Malaysian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Bangladesh and other welfare bodies concerned with the Rohingya people,” he said. He also expressed his appreciation to Malaysian NGOs that are in Bangladesh to render aid to the Rohingya refugees. Prior to the press conference, Ahmad Zahid presented six million taka (RM309,000) to the Malaysian Consultative Council for Islamic Organisations (Mapim) and two million taka (RM103,000) to Mercy Malaysia in regard to their efforts to assist Rohingya refugees. The humanitarian crisis in the Rakhine, Myanmar is worsening with more ethnic Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh daily and more refugee camps being set up. The exact number of refugees is unknown but estimated by many quarters as having exceeded one million. For the record, there are only two official camps for the Rohingya refugees, namely Kutupalong and Nayapara but dozens more have been set up by the refugees with the number increasing by the day. — Bernama

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Lawyers for Liberty urges govt to release detained migrant children

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Human rights NGO Lawyers for Liberty (LFL) has cried foul over the high number of children held at immigration detention centres.

It sought their release on human rights grounds as well as to reduce their risk of contracting Covid-19. Numerous immigration facilities have seen virus outbreaks due to their cramped conditions.

In a statement today, Lawyers for Liberty coordinator Zaid Malek pointed to the Home Ministry’s recent revelation that 756 foreign children were in detention as of Oct 26.

Of the number, 405 children were detained without their guardians, a bulk of them (326) from Myanmar.

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Zaid deemed such detention as “inhumane” and questioned if any of the Myanmar children were Rohingya refugees.

“It is unfathomable as to why the authorities deem it fit and proper to detain hundreds of migrant and refugee children, most of whom are detained without guardians, in overcrowded detention centres during a worldwide health pandemic.

“The government is wilfully putting these vulnerable children at increased risk of Covid-19 infection... these children must not be treated as criminals, for they could not have entered the country on their own volition and are entirely victims of circumstance,” he said.

Since the pandemic began, immigration detention centres in Tawau, Alor Gajah, Bukit Jalil, Semenyih, Sepang and Putrajaya have experienced Covid-19 outbreaks.

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By virtue of ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Zaid said Malaysia had a duty to act in the best interests of children.

“We therefore strongly urge that the government immediately releases these children from detention into the care of their parents, guardians or the appropriate welfare authorities,” he said.

Zaid further called on the authorities to stop taking action on migrants during the Covid-19 pandemic and to release detained refugees.

Malaysiakini is contacting the Home Ministry and Immigration Department for a response.

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Malaysian court to hear bid to set aside caning for Rohingya refugees

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KUALA LUMPUR, July 21 — A Malaysian court today will hear a bid to set aside caning sentences handed down to 27 Rohingya Muslim refugees from Myanmar, lawyers said, a punishment that rights groups have decried as vicious and tantamount to torture. Muslim-majority Malaysia has long been a favoured destination for Rohingya seeking a better life after escaping a 2017 military crackdown in Myanmar and, more recently, refugee camps in Bangladesh. But Malaysia, which does not recognise refugee status, has recently turned away boats and detained hundreds of Rohingya, saying it can not take in more migrants because of a struggling economy as a result of the novel coronavirus. In June, a court on Malaysia’s Langkawi island sentenced 40 Rohingya refugees to seven months’ jail for arriving in the country by boat without a valid permit, Collin Andrew, a lawyer representing the refugees, told Reuters today. Twenty-seven men among them were also sentenced to caning, a penalty that Andrew was seeking to overturn in court tomorrow. The immigration department and the attorney-general’s office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Under Malaysia’s Immigration Act, anyone who illegally enters the country can face a RM10,000 fine, jail for up to five years as well as six strokes of a cane. Courts can choose not to hand down the caning sentence on humanitarian grounds if the migrant charged is a refugee and does not have any prior criminal history, Andrew said. “So it’s quite unusual for the court to impose caning against Rohingya in this case,” he said. The rights group Amnesty International this week urged Malaysia not to cane the refugees, saying it was “cruel and inhumane”. Lawyers have also sought a review of a case against six Rohingya teenagers, including two girls, who Andrew said had been wrongly tried and convicted as adults. This month, the court had dismissed a case against 51 Rohingya minors who were also charged for violating immigration laws, he said. — Reuters

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Activist shares info on vaccine rollout with refugees

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KUALA LUMPUR: The government’s decision to vaccinate all foreigners residing in the country, including students, refugees and undocumented migrants, is a welcomed move, says Syrian refugee Hasan Al-Akraa. nan The Co-Founder of Refugee Emergency Fund and Al-Hasan Volunteer Network noted that his vaccination appointment would be on July 8. nan “I’m very excited and really looking forward to it,” said Hasan, who has been living in Malaysia with his family for the past 12 years. nan His non-profit organisation and Asylum Access Malaysia have been working hand-in-hand to disseminate information on the vaccine rollout to refugees. nan For the past month, he said they had created a video tutorial in several languages on how refugees could reserve a spot in MySejahtera app, as well as on the vaccination programme’s official website. nan “We are encouraging them to register and soon, we are planning to conduct online workshops for refugees to come forward and ask questions that they might have about the vaccine,” Hassan said during an interview on Bernama TV Mid-Day Update programme. nan Hassan, who is also a Refugee Rights Activist, was interviewed in conjunction with World Refugee Day, which is observed on June 20. nan The Home Ministry had recently requested for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to hand over information on refugees in the country for vaccination. nan Elaborating on how Malaysians could further help the refugees living in the country, Hassan said raising awareness and getting the right information about refugees were important. nan “Start with your own circle of friends, get the right information and share possible stories about refugees’ contribution to Malaysia as well as try to make friends with the refugee community,” he said. — Bernama

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Basic care still lacking for migrants, refugees

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PETALING JAYA: Malaysia’s road to providing basic care to migrants, undocumented persons and refugees seems to be littered with a lack of commitment, although their plight has constantly been raised in the media, claim social activists.

They are subjected to human rights abuses that include not having access to education and basic facilities such as a home, electricity and water.

The long-standing issue stems from the fact that Malaysia is not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

However, the government could introduce a localised law that defines asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented persons, said human rights lawyer Charles Hector.

“Having a specific Malaysian law that identifies and defines each status will be an extension of the Federal Constitution to provide care for everyone in Malaysia.

“Once the law is introduced, Malaysia has the inherent duty of care to provide accessibilities that include births and deaths registration,” he told theSun, when responding to inquiries concerning the treatment of persons without proper documentation in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, humanitarian aid by non-governmental organisations acts as the lifeline to those living in such precarious conditions.

Social activist William Cheah from Kembara Kitchen said citizenship issues had been raised numerous times in the past.

“It is a large minefield issue on how to decide citizenship for them. This is because citizenship touches on economic challenges as well as social sentiments.

“There needs to be a political situation, rather than political will, to address their livelihood first,” he said.

Cheah, who had set up a humanitarian centre in Semporna, said it would take a communal effort to provide necessities.

“There is no one-stop solution to deal with issues involving undocumented persons,” he said.

Penang Hindu Association president P. Murugiah has called for the Sabah government to consider rezoning Kampung Mangkalinau in Sandakan, and to build decent homes for residents there.

He made the call after seeing dwellers in homes built in slums that are littered with rubbish and without access to clean water and electricity.

“Water and sanitation are basic human rights that must be guaranteed without discrimination, even for people living in slums.”

A German database company Statista noted in 2020 that there were about 130,000 refugees in Malaysia, compared with about 90,000 in 2011.

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Permaisuri Johor urges M'sian UTM grads to foster close ties with foreign peers

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JOHOR BARU: Malaysian graduates should foster close relationships with their peers from foreign countries, especially those coming from countries embroiled in conflicts and disasters, says Permaisuri Johor Raja Zarith Sofiah Sultan Idris Shah. nan Her Majesty, who is also Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) chancellor, said that this would allow the students to understand the plight of their foreign friends better. nan "To graduates from Malaysia, I urge all of you to foster close relationships with foreign students studying in UTM, particularly those coming from countries affected by war or armed conflict, such as Palestine; or natural disasters and famine, such as in Sudan. They are also normal human beings like us. nan "They are also our guests in Malaysia and in UTM. It is hoped that with this relationship, we will be able to understand them and the challenges they face better while also allowing us to appreciate our lives here in Malaysia more," said Her Majesty. nan The Permaisuri Johor said this in her speech during UTM's 65th convocation here on Saturday (May 21). nan Also present were UTM pro-chancellor Che’ Puan Besar Khaleeda Bustamam and Johor Mentri Besar Datuk Onn Hafiz Ghazi. nan The Permaisuri Johor, who is also the Royal advisor of the Malaysian Red Crescent Society, noted that she always tried to keep herself updated with the latest news about the problems faced by citizens of the world. nan "I follow the social media accounts and the websites of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). nan "These accounts will give the latest information about countries where war has broken out, serious social issues and most heart-breaking of all, to know about those who have had to flee their own homes and live as refugees in other countries for many years. nan "We must also realise that we are now part of a global community. As such, as global citizens, we must take an interest in what is happening around the world," Her Majesty said. nan The Permaisuri also gave a special address to foreign graduates who were receiving their scrolls during the convocation ceremony here. nan "To our foreign graduands, congratulations to all of you who have come from afar to study here. Today is a very special moment not only for you but for your families too. nan "At past convocations, I would address our foreign students rather briefly. However, this year, and at this particular convocation ceremony, I would like to say a little bit more. nan "Recent events must be mentioned even in an academic setting such as this. In particular, we are all aware of the war in Ukraine. nan "For us, here in the East, what has shocked us the most was the shooting of the Palestinian journalist, Shireen Abu Akleh," said Her Majesty. nan The Permaisuri also extended her condolences to Palestinian graduates who are affected by the conflict in the country. nan "To the Palestinian students, who will be receiving their doctorates this morning, I would like to offer you and the Palestinian people my deepest sympathy. nan "During Ramadan, especially during the last ten nights which those of us who are Muslims consider especially blessed, it was with much sadness, shock, and absolute horror to see video footage of the aggression targeted at those who wanted to pray at Masjid Al-Aqsa. nan "I hope I will have the chance to meet you and all the other foreign students so that you can tell me the experiences you and your families have had to go through," Her Majesty said. nan Earlier, UTM vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Fauzi Ismail said that a total of 5,672 students would be graduating during the 14-session convocation ceremony. nan "From that number, 502 of them are international graduates coming from 40 countries. nan "So far, UTM has produced a total of 211,419 graduates, including 9,507 international graduates from 98 countries," he said.

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Govt urged to continue working with UNHCR on refugee care

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Govt urged to continue working with UNHCR on refugee care

THE new government must not withdraw recognition of United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) cards for asylum seekers and refugees, said activists.

They told The Malaysian Insight the stakeholders must be consulted in policy making for these groups.

They also want the Anwar Ibrahim government to continue working with the UNHCR instead of shutting down agency in Malaysia.

Adrian Pereira of North South Initiative urged Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail not to proceed with the plan to cancel the UNHCR card.

He said the last government’s plan for refugees would cost Malaysia more while making the target groups open to exploitation.

Pereira referred to the Tracking Refugees Information System (TRIS) introduced by the former home minister in July to store the data of UNHCR cardholders.

The system issues the cardholders with a new identification document called the MyRC.

Pereira said there were fears third parties would take advantage of the process to exploit the refugees.

“Refugees have to pay RM500 to get a card issued by the Malaysian government. However, the UNHCR card is issued to qualified refugee groups for free,” he said.

The new card is unnecessary because the Malaysian government should leave the job of determining the status of refugees to the UN, he said.

“The UNHCR’s job is to determine who is a refugee before issuing a refugee card,” he added.

In addition, he said, the new system could also be corrupted.

“Considering the history of corruption in our government system, we should avoid the process of issuing new refugee cards altogether,” Pereira said.

“Saifuddin should talk to refugee welfare groups before taking any new steps.”

He also urged the Malaysian government should sign the UN refugee convention and release all the refugees and asylum seekers who were locked up.

“Refugees and asylum seekers should not be in detention. Release them and give them appropriate assistance at once,” he added.

Activist Alex Ong of MigrantCARE said efforts to replace the UNHCR card with the TRIS system are a waste of time and money.

He said Malaysia needed better control over the illegal migration.

He said the TRIS refugee card is not recognised by other countries.

Refugee activist James Bawi said Malaysia should adhere to international norms when dealing with refugees.

He said the issue of a new refugee card should not have been a unilateral decision.

“The matter should have been debated in parliament and recognised through an act of law instead of being decided by a single ministry.

“The new government should retain the UNHCR issued card and establish better cooperation with the agency to improve the lives of refugees,” he said.

Hamzah has said in July that Malaysia did not need to recognise the UNHCR card and international protocols because it is not a member of the UN convention for refugees.

The TRIS card would ensure that only refugees identified by the government can stay in the country, he had said.

Hamzah had also proposed for the UNHCR to be closed down in Malaysia, saying the country could manage refugee issues on its own.

Suaram executive director Sevan Doraisamy said it is important for the new government to keep UNHCR in Malaysia.

“Refugees and their welfare, including their children’s education, are important issues that need immediate attention from the current government and it must work closely with UN bodies, including UNHCR, to address them,” he said.

“It is important to meet with the stakeholders immediately to discuss these and other alarming issues in relation to refugees in Malaysia.

“By doing so, the new government can develop better checks and balances for refugee management and also resolve many longstanding issues related to refugees in Malaysia.” – December 16, 2022.

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Survey: Migrant workers, refugees in M'sia fear speaking up on injustices

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In 2018, a Somali refugee boy had walked down from his Selangor apartment to take out the rubbish when he was detained by the authorities for not having his UNHCR card on him.

Despite claiming he had left the card at home, he was later deported back to Somalia where his father had been killed in one of the conflicts going on there.

Meanwhile, in another part of the country, migrant workers work 16 hours, seven days a week in a rubber factory.

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They need to seek permission from their employers if they want to leave the premises, and filing leave applications will possibly get them fired.

Such stories are becoming increasingly common in Malaysia, but a recent survey found that migrant workers and refugees face significant challenges in speaking up about their problems - which in turn allows for the perpetuation of injustices.

The above two cases were shared during the launch of the "Freedom On The Move" study yesterday.

Commissioned by South Africa-based NGO Civicus, it concluded that most migrant workers (79 percent) and refugees (89 percent) in Malaysia did not feel confident to “criticise or call on authorities to meet their needs”.

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Migrant workers were most afraid of their employers and business owners (46 percent). The survey also noted that some workers felt intimidated to speak up as their employers held on to their passports.

Refugees were most concerned about the police and other state agents (65 percent).

The 82 migrant workers interviewed were from Bangladesh, Nepal, Indonesia and the Philippines. The 65 refugees interviewed were Rohingya (Myanmar), Yemeni, Palestinian and Syrian.

Freedoms limited by employers, language

For migrant workers, the language barrier was the biggest challenge to exercising their freedom of expression (73 percent), followed by a lack of information (47 percent) and a fear of being fired, detained or deported (45 percent).

Similarly, refugees faced significant language barriers (55 percent) but harassment and intimidation were also a serious concern (49 percent).

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The survey further explored challenges the groups faced when exercising other civil liberties.

When it came to freedom of association, it found that 73 percent of migrant workers and 77 percent of working refugees faced “harassment or pressure from employers” in exercising their labour rights.

The survey also noted that some migrant workers were often “coerced” by agents or their employers to refrain from joining a workers' union.

As for freedom of peaceful assembly, most migrant workers did not feel safe participating in street protests (85 percent).

Nevertheless, 62 percent of migrant workers interviewed said they had previously participated in protests or memorandum handovers in Malaysia.

In contrast, refugees had a starkly different experience, with 72 percent saying they had not taken part in any protests. Rohingya refugees were the exception.

Most refugees believed they were not safe (83 percent) and not free (75 percent) to fully exercise their freedom of peaceful assembly.

The survey was part of Civicus’ global study that looked at the perceived civic space of migrant workers and refugees in Malaysia, Mexico, Kenya, Jordan and Germany.

'Human rights don't stop at border'

While fundamental freedoms guaranteed in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia only apply to citizens, Civicus researcher Josef Benedict contended that human rights should extend to all human beings.

Josef Benedict

“Human rights do not stop at the border. When you enter a country and you work from there, you want to be able to voice out opinions if you see something wrong.

“If people are frightened to even raise the issue of ‘why is my pay being cut’ or ‘why am I being laid off from work’; how else can they express these issues?

“These are issues that even Malaysians would want to express if they are affected, so why deny it to migrant workers and refugees?” he told Malaysiakini after the launch of the Civicus report in Petaling Jaya yesterday.

Benedict thus urged Putrajaya to create an enabling environment for migrant workers and refugees to access their rights and freedoms, regardless of their legal status.

He said all bilateral and multilateral agreements between nations should also guarantee these rights and freedoms, and punish violations.

Zero knowledge about rights

A key challenge to empowering migrant workers and refugees was a lack of awareness among the communities about their own rights.

Most Bangladeshi migrant workers to whom North-South Initiative (NSI) social mobiliser Abu Hayat Md Rafiqul Rezvi spoke to for the Civicus survey were poor and with limited levels of education. They also had “zero knowledge” about their fundamental freedoms.

“They did not know anything about the three freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association. Only a few workers, maybe one or two, have basic knowledge about unions,” Abu Hayat said during the report launch.

Despite the often terrible working conditions, he said this lack of awareness, coupled with intimidation from employers, caused these workers to be afraid of protesting.

Participating researcher and Syrian refugee Omar Alkhammash shared that most refugees he interviewed were afraid of being identified in the survey, over the fear of repercussions against them.

Omar Alkhammash (centre)

The Geutanyoe Foundation Malaysia media and communication coordinator explained how many refugees had run away from repressive governments where speaking up against injustices could possibly lead to deadly consequences.

Facing difficulties in a foreign land caused the refugees to continue to stay silent.

“Over here (in Malaysia) refugees are focusing more on healthcare, working rights and education, more than on having civic space.

“But they don’t understand that civic space is the way to lead them into their targets,” Omar said.

The Malaysian government does not officially recognise refugees and regards them as undocumented foreign nationals.

They must pay the higher rates imposed on foreigners at public healthcare facilities and are also not allowed to gain formal employment or enrol in public schools.

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UPDATE 4-Defying court order, Malaysia deports over 1,000 Myanmar nationals

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\* Rights groups say deportation plan could endanger lives

\* Court had granted stay until 10 a.m. on Wed

\* Decision to deport 'inhumane and devastating' - Amnesty

\* Malaysia says it did not deport refugees or asylum seekers (Adds statement from Amnesty)

By A. Ananthalakshmi and Rozanna Latiff

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia, Feb 23 (Reuters) - Malaysia sent more than 1,000 Myanmar nationals back to their strife-torn homeland on Tuesday despite a court order to halt the deportation, a move rights groups said could endanger the deportees' lives.

The 1,086 Myanmar citizens were sent back on three navy ships sent by Myanmar's military, which seized power in a Feb. 1 coup, sparking weeks of protests from pro-democracy activists. Malaysia had initially said it would deport 1,200.

Malaysia vowed not to deport Rohingya Muslims or refugees registered with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

But the agency has said at least six people registered with it were among the deportees. Refugee groups also say asylum seekers from the minority Chin, Kachin and non-Rohingya Muslim communities fleeing conflict and persecution at home are among those being deported.

Malaysia's Immigration Department director-general said the repatriated Myanmar citizens did not include Rohingya refugees or asylum-seekers.

"All of those returned had agreed to be sent back voluntarily without being forced by any party," Khairul Dzaimee Daud said in a statement.

He did not respond to queries on why the repatriation was carried out despite the court-ordered halt.

The Kuala Lumpur High Court had granted a stay until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, when it was scheduled to hear an application by rights groups for a judicial review to suspend the deportation.

Just before the ruling, the migrants were bussed in from across the country to the naval base at Lumut in western Malaysia where the Myanmar ships were docked.

'INHUMANE AND DEVASTATING'

Those deported had been detained for immigration offences. Malaysia does not formally recognise refugees, treating them as undocumented migrants.

Amnesty International, one of the groups which requested the judicial review, called the decision to deport without a proper assessment of the returnees "inhumane and devastating".

"Using indirect means to push people back to face grave human rights violations is essentially constructive refoulement," Katrina Maliamauv, Amnesty Malaysia director, said in a statement.

"There are still huge, deeply concerning question marks over the status of those sent back today."

The rights groups in their court filing had said among the deportees were three people registered with the UNHCR and 17 minors who have at least one parent in Malaysia.

Concerns over deportation of unregistered asylum-seekers have persisted, as UNHCR has not been allowed to interview detainees for more than a year to verify their status. The Southeast Asian nation is home to more than 154,000 asylum-seekers from Myanmar.

The UNHCR had not been allowed access to those deported on Tuesday.

The United States and other Western missions have been trying to dissuade Malaysia from proceeding with the deportation and urged the government to allow UNHCR to interview the detainees. They also say Malaysia is legitimising the military government by cooperating with the junta. (Additional reporting by Joseph Sipalan in Kuala Lumpur and Lim Huey Teng in Lumut; Editing by Ed Davies, Simon Cameron-Moore, Jacqueline Wong, William Maclean and Philippa Fletcher)

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WRAPUP 2-Coup prompts outcry from Myanmar as Biden threatens sanctions

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(Adds Biden on potential sanctions, UK's Johnson)

\* U.N. Security Council to meet Tuesday

\* State of emergency to last a year

\* Junta replaces key ministers

\* West condemns, ponders next steps

Feb 2 (Reuters) - Western leaders condemned the coup by Myanmar's military against Aung San Suu Kyi's democratically elected government and hundreds of thousands of her supporters took to social media to voice their anger at the takeover.

In the early hours of Monday, the Myanmar army handed power to military chief General Min Aung Hlaing and imposed a state of emergency for a year, saying it had responded to what it called election fraud.

The sudden turn of events derailed years of efforts to establish democracy in poverty-stricken Myanmar, also known as Burma, and raised more questions over the prospect of how and when a million Rohingya refugees will return to the country.

The U.N. Security Council will meet on Tuesday, diplomats said, amid calls for a strong response to the detention of Suu Kyi and dozens of her political allies, although Myanmar's close ties with council member China will play into any decision.

U.S. President Joe Biden said the coup was a direct assault on Myanmar's transition to democracy and the rule of law.

"The United States removed sanctions on Burma over the past decade based on progress toward democracy. The reversal of that progress will necessitate an immediate review of our sanction laws and authorities, followed by appropriate action," Biden said in a statement.

Min Aung Hlaing, who had been nearing retirement, promised a free and fair election and a handover of power to the winning party, without giving a timeframe.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party, which won a landslide 83% in a Nov. 8 election, said that she called on people to protest against the military takeover, quoting comments it said were written earlier in anticipation of a coup.

But the streets were quiet overnight after troops and riot police took up positions in the capital, Naypyitaw, and the main commercial centre Yangon. Phone and internet connections were disrupted.

Many in Myanmar voiced their anger on social media.

Data on Facebook showed more than 334,000 people had used the #SaveMyanmar hashtag denoting opposition to the coup, and some people changed profile pictures to black to show their sorrow or red in support of the NLD, often with a portrait of the 75-year-old Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner.

"We as a citizen of Myanmar not agree with the current move and would like to request the world leaders. UN and the world medias help our country - our leaders - our people - from this bitter acts," said one widely reposted message.

Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other NLD leaders were "taken" in the early hours of Monday morning, NLD spokesman Myo Nyunt told Reuters by phone. U.N. human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said at least 45 people had been detained.

MINISTERS REMOVED

The United Nations led condemnation of the coup and calls for the release of detainees and restoration of democracy in comments largely echoed by Australia, the European Union, India, Japan and the United States.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain, the former colonial power in Burma, called for the release of Suu Kyi and others. "The vote of the people must be respected and civilian leaders released," he said.

Consolidating the coup, the junta removed 24 ministers and named 11 replacements to oversee ministries including finance, defence, foreign affairs and interior.

Banks said they would reopen on Tuesday after suspending services on Monday amid a rush to withdraw cash.

Yangon residents rushed to stock up on supplies. Foreign companies from Japanese retail company Aeon to South Korean trading firm POSCO International and Norway's Telenor tried to reach staff in Myanmar and assess the turmoil.

Suu Kyi's election win followed about 15 years of house arrest between 1989 and 2010 and a long struggle against the military, which had seized power in a 1962 coup and stamped out all dissent for decades until her party came to power in 2015.

Her international standing as a human rights icon was severely damaged after she failed to stop the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas in 2017 and defended the military against accusations of genocide. But she remains hugely popular at home and is revered as the daughter of Myanmar's independence hero, Aung San.

'BROKEN WINGS'

The coup followed days of tension between the civilian government and the military. In the pre-written statement on Facebook, Suu Kyi was quoted as saying that an army takeover would put Myanmar "back under a dictatorship".

"I urge people not to accept this, to respond and wholeheartedly to protest against the coup by the military," it said. Reuters was unable to reach any NLD officials to confirm the veracity of the statement.

Supporters of the military celebrated the coup, parading through Yangon in pickup trucks and waving national flags.

Democracy activists and NLD voters were horrified and angry. Four youth groups condemned the coup in statements and pledged to "stand with the people" but did not announce specific action.

"Our country was a bird that was just learning to fly. Now the army broke our wings," student activist Si Thu Tun said.

In the capital, security forces confined members of parliament to residential compounds on the day they had expected to take up their seats, representative Sai Lynn Myat said.

Beijing called on all sides in Myanmar to respect the constitution and uphold stability, but "noted" events in the country rather than expressly condemning them.

Bangladesh, which is sheltering around one million Rohingya, called for "peace and stability" and said it hoped a process to repatriate the refugees could move forward.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of which Myanmar is a member, called for "dialogue, reconciliation and the return to normalcy" while in Bangkok, police clashed with a group of pro-democracy demonstrators outside Myanmar's embassy.

"It's their internal affair," a Thai government official said - a hands-off approach also taken by Malaysia and the Philippines.

The November vote faced some criticism in the West for disenfranchising many Rohingya but the election commission rejected military complaints of fraud.

In its statement declaring the emergency, the military cited the failure of the commission to address complaints over voter lists, its refusal to postpone new parliamentary sessions, and protests by groups unhappy with the vote.

(Reporting by Reuters staff; writing by Matthew Tostevin, Philippa Fletcher and Grant McCool; editing by Angus MacSwan and Rosalba O'Brien)