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Humanitarian crises at sea

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The news of late has been replete with the continuing humanitarian crisis off of the coast of Italy, as thousands of African and Middle-Eastern refugees, fleeing war, persecution or repressive regimes, have taken a titanic risk, in unfriendly waters, by making their way to Europe. Despite the difficulty and

expense of rescuing and absorbing these refugees, Italy and other European nations have made attempts, however inadequate, to save these people from near-certain death at sea. Notwithstanding their efforts, many have died. In the last 10 days alone, more than 1,200 have drowned. The death rate so far in 2015 is 10 times higher than last year.

There is no easy fix, but maritime migration will not go away simply because governments where such refugees turn up wish it so. The political landscape in Syria, Somalia and Eritrea ensures refugees will continue to risk the voyage.

What has been transpiring, however, in the Andaman Sea and Straights of Malacca, off the coasts of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, makes the bumbling European rescue efforts seem like a welcome party.

Thailand had recently engaged in a long-needed anti-human-trafficking campaign. This occurred following its May 1 raid of a jungle camp in southern Thailand and discovery of a mass grave of 26 Rohingya victims of trafficking. Dozens of government officials and police officers have been charged with being complicit in holding these victims for ransom. (That is, ransom *in addition* to the exorbitant fees the victim migrants paid up front to get to Thailand.) Shortly thereafter, Thai officials found additional camps and more bodies. By shutting down the camps, they effectively shut down the trafficking route through Thailand. As a result, vessels already in transit to Thailand with their human cargo were unable to land. This past weekend, Malaysian authorities discovered mass graves and cage-like pens in at least 28 additional abandoned camps on its border with Thailand.

Rohingyas are Muslims, a miniscule minority of approximately 1 million in Buddhist-majority Burma, aka Myanmar, where, as of 2013, the total population was over 53 million. The Burmese Rohingyas have been systematically persecuted, subjected to sectarian violence, and denied citizenship, even though many Rohingyas have lived in Burma for several generations.

The humanitarian crisis unfolding now is twofold, comprised of the Rohingyas fleeing Burma and Bangladeshis fleeing abject poverty in their country. The resulting wholesale desperation has caused the Rohingyas and Bangladeshis to make the same treacherous voyage to nearby countries, namely Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

What makes this Asian crisis different from the one underway in Europe has been the neighboring Asian countries' response to these maritime migrants. Initially, once the anti-human-trafficking campaign commenced, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia said they would not send search-and-rescue operations to aid the thousands languishing at sea. Once the criminal traffickers and boat captains realized they could not bring their vessels to dock, gunmen arrived via speedboat and stole what little the refugees had left - then captains and crew members absconded with the armed invaders and left the refugees adrift without food or water.

As of last week, there were still about 7,000 Asian maritime migrants believed to be at sea; some have been there for as long as three months, following abandonment by

their smugglers. (According to a United Nations estimate, however, approximately 25,000 people left Burma and Bangladesh in the first quarter of 2015.) As these unskilled refugees maneuvered their vessels to shore, they were instead pushed back into international waters by the governments where they sought to make landfall.

Last Tuesday, the Indonesian Navy refused to aid a boat containing thousands of refugees, instead pushing it toward Malaysia. The following day, Malaysia turned away two boats containing at least 800 passengers. Thailand adopted a policy of pushing away boats from its shores, though it did give the refugees water, food and fuel.

Finally, facing growing international pressure, Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia ordered the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency and the Royal Malaysian Navy to rescue the maritime migrants, saying it was "basic human compassion" to give food and medical aid to the hungry and sick.

Indonesia then said it would offer temporary shelter to the maritime migrants already on their shores, but would not send rescuers out to sea.

Burma finally agreed to attend a regional meeting on the crisis, which it had previously declined to do. That regional summit will occur Friday in Thailand, which agreed to help the migrants but refuses to take in additional survivors. As Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch in Asia, said, "[T]his meeting is happening too late ... there might not be anyone left alive on these boats by the time the meeting takes place."

This is a complex problem, and the countries being asked to care for the migrants while resettlement, repatriation or asylum are addressed have staggering domestic problems of their own, including widespread poverty. Indeed, many of the migrants who have made it to shore are now in Indonesia's Aceh province, one of the areas hardest-hit in the devastating 2004 tsunami and one of the poorest regions of Indonesia.

It's easy to pontificate about what other countries should do in the face of such a large-scale tragedy. While the U.S. is undeniably a nation of immigrants, we have also erred tragically when similarly faced with migrant refugees.

On May 13, 1939, a German transatlantic ship, the St. Louis, departed Hamburg for Havana, Cuba, with 937 refugees aboard, nearly all Jews fleeing the Nazis. Most had applied for U.S. visas and held Cuban landing certificates and transit visas. On arrival in Havana, officials refused to admit them and denied the passengers disembarkation. (There were already 2,500 Jewish refugees in Cuba that had sparked xenophobia, anti-Semitism and resentment.) The St. Louis then headed toward Miami, where some frantic passengers sent cables to President Franklin D. Roosevelt requesting refuge. Roosevelt didn't respond, and neither the State Department nor the White House took measures to allow the refugees to come ashore to American soil. With nowhere to disembark, on June 6, 1939, the full ship returned to Europe, where many perished as a result of precisely what they were fleeing.

More recently, last year we were faced with another crisis when over 50,000 unaccompanied Central American children arrived to our southwestern borders. We didn't exactly handle that well either, and we are still in dire need here of immigration reform.

History has proven one thing crystal clear: The U.S. will never have a completely open-door immigration policy. Neither will Australia, the U.K., France, nor any other developed Western nation. So can we really expect Thailand, Malaysia or Indonesia to have one?

The only way to address this problem is at its source. Just as Hitler delusionally saw the Jews as the source of all Germany's woes, Burmese President Thein Sein's government views their Rohingya minority with like-minded disdain.

The Rohingyas are effectively denied Burmese citizenship, and according to Human Rights Watch, are subject to attacks that constitute ethnic cleansing: over 130,000 have been confined to ghetto-like camps with insufficient healthcare, food and education. In April, the Burmese government formally rescinded the Rohingyas temporary identification cards, the last form of official ID extended to stateless Rohingyas. That sounds eerily familiar; no small wonder they are fleeing the country in droves.

Following Burma's November 2010 elections after 60 years of military rule, the U.S. finally restored full diplomatic relations in recognition of its quasi-civilian government, headed by Thein Sein. Two years later, President Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to visit Burma.

While we can't tell Burma how to behave, we can certainly put more diplomatic pressure on it and incentivize it to reform if Burma wishes to continue be the recipient

of U.S. taxpayer largess via the current U.S. Agency for International Development and other institutional programs.

In memory of those who have recently perished at sea trying to escape persecution and for those who died while attempting to escape the same fate in horribly sad eras not long ago past, we owe it to the remaining maritime migrant refugees to help. Any way we can. As human beings, it's our moral imperative.

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