

NTS Bulletin August 2015**Building more systematic approaches to Internally Displaced Persons in Southeast Asia Post-2015**

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The year 2015 has been notable for bringing to the public eye, situations involving the movements of people. In April and May of this year, news emerged of thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshis stranded at sea. They faced an extremely precarious situation with dwindling supplies and resources on the one hand, and an uncertain future on the other. One of the main reasons that prompted them to undertake this risky journey was internal displacement within their own home countries. While representatives from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar met in May earlier this year to discuss the issue, not nearly enough has been done towards ensuring their human security. Thus, it is important to increase understanding about Internally Displaced Persons (or IDPs), one of the most vulnerable and insecure groups in Southeast Asia. According to the Centre for Research on Globalisation, 95 percent of the total 855,000 displaced people in the region are in Myanmar, the Philippines and Indonesia.

Rights for Internally Displaced Persons in ASEAN

The Regional Cooperation Framework, endorsed by the Bali Process is an initiative through which the rights and interests of IDPs can be promoted. At the ASEAN level, the ASEAN Charter's preamble enshrines the protection of human rights, and the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AIHCR) was set up in 2009. This was shortly followed by the establishment of the ASEAN Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), which was established in 2010. Most recently, the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration was adopted in 2012, which affirms in Article 5, the human rights of vulnerable groups.

At the national level, the Philippines has taken a commendable step by introducing an "Act Protecting the Rights of the Internally Displaced" in 2013. Apart from regional and national instruments, other actors such as International Organisations (IOs) including the UNHCR, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) offer assistance and protection where access is granted to IDPs in Southeast Asia. The 1998 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement define and outline the rights of IDPs. The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (the UNOCHA) has been working in Mindanao province in the Philippines, and has highlighted the necessity for further assistance to IDPs.

Still quite a way to go

IDPs experience varied and severe forms of human insecurity. In Myanmar, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) states that in Myanmar's Rakhine state there are an estimated 140,000 internally displaced persons in 2015. The displacement was a result of situations of violence, disproportionately directed towards the Rohingya minority in 2012. The Philippines has also witnessed internal displacement due to both conflict between state and non-state actors in Mindanao, as well as extreme weather events affecting an estimated 119,000 people in May 2015.

The internally displaced face a unique situation that makes them especially vulnerable. As they are displaced within the territorial borders of their states, they fall outside many international conventions on the movements of people. Concerns over national sovereignty can sometimes cause friction with other actors in providing assistance and protection. This can raise obstacles when it comes to cooperation between different ASEAN member states. Keeping these concerns in mind, it is critical that national governments and agencies improve their responses to the needs of IDPs. These responses can be improved through introducing legal mechanisms and monitoring and enforcement bodies.

The Way Forward

With World Humanitarian Day on the 19th of August in sight, it is time to reflect on the status and situation of Internally Displaced Persons in Southeast Asia. In a recent meeting of the AIHCR in June, the need to acknowledge that human rights were spread across all the three pillars of ASEAN was discussed. Mainstreaming human rights was emphasised as another important step for the ASEAN Community Post-2015 vision. This is a positive step towards moving the concept of human rights away from a remote plane and weaving it through the fabric of ASEAN. Towards this end, opportunities for cooperation on the humanitarian front can also be explored within smaller, sub-regional groupings involving countries that are directly or indirectly affected by these issues.

It is evident from the examples cited above that sustained attention and funding towards IDPs is essential for ensuring their human security on various levels. There should be greater emphasis on long-term recovery and the different pathways that are required to achieve it.

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