

## Why Southeast Asia faces a migration crisis this summer

by [Michael Holtz](#)

May 19, 2015

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Southeast Asia is facing its worst migration crisis since the years following the end of the Vietnam War. With thousands of Rohingya refugees stuck at sea, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia have resorted to playing what a humanitarian agency calls “maritime ping-pong with human lives.”

### **Who are the Rohingya?**

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority group that mainly lives in western Myanmar. Decades of state-sanctioned discrimination in the Buddhist-majority country has led the United Nations to label them one of the most persecuted groups in the world. Hundreds of Rohingya have died in recent years amid violent attacks by Buddhist mobs and Rohingya live in apartheid-like conditions in western Myanmar.

The Myanmar government refuses to recognize the 1.1 million Rohingya who live within its borders as citizens. Rather it considers them to be illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh. As a result, rights groups say Rohingya have “no choice” but to leave. The UN refugee agency estimates more than 120,000 have fled in the past three years alone. Many pay human smugglers to help them out of the country.

### **Why are traffickers abandoning them at sea?**

For years, traffickers' preferred route was to transport migrants by sea to southern Thailand. There they would often hold them hostage in remote jungle camps—and extort ransom payments of \$2,000 or more from relatives—before driving them overland into Malaysia, where tens of thousands of Rohingya have sought asylum.

That all changed earlier this month with the discovery of a mass grave containing the bodies of 33 migrants in a camp near the Thai-Malaysian border. Thai authorities then launched a widespread crackdown on smuggling rings that had previously

operated with virtual impunity. Dozens of Thai police officers and government officials have been arrested for their alleged complicity. Thai authorities have also announced the arrests of at least two suspected trafficking kingpins.

The crackdown has led captains and smugglers to abandon boats crammed with thousands of migrants rather than risk landing on Thai shores. The International Organization for Migration estimates some 6,000 migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh remain stuck at sea on overcrowded fishing boats with little food or water.

### **How does the current crisis compare to Vietnam's "boat people" crisis?**

In a letter to regional heads of state, the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights said that "the longstanding persecution of Rohingya has led to the highest outflow of asylum seekers by sea since the U.S. war in Vietnam." About 25,000 migrants left Myanmar and Bangladesh on rickety boats in the first three months of this year, twice as many as in the same period in 2014, according to a UN estimate.

During the two decades that followed the fall of Saigon in 1975, more than 1 million Vietnamese fled their country out of fear of persecution at the hands of the Communist government. Hundreds of thousands of them escaped on boats, landing on the shores of Thailand, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. But by the late 1970s, many countries had become unwilling to accept more refugees. Their refusal sparked a humanitarian crisis that eventually led to the creation of an international resettlement program. The UN refugee agency says more than 755,000 Vietnamese resettled in the West.

### **Are there parallels with the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean?**

The desperate hope among Rohingya for a better life is shared with the tens of thousands of migrants from North Africa and the Middle East who have attempted to cross the Mediterranean and seek sanctuary in Europe.

The UN refugee agency estimates that 40,000 refugees and migrants have crossed the Mediterranean since January. More than 1,800 have died at sea, and the European Union is struggling to respond to the growing humanitarian crisis.

### **What has been the response in Southeast Asia?**

At least 1,500 migrants have made it safely to the Indonesian province of Aceh, where local fishermen helped bring many of them to shore. In Malaysia, more than 1,100 migrants are being held at a detention camp on the resort island of Langkawi after landing there on May 10.

But in recent days both countries—much like Thailand—have decided to clamp down. All three have ordered authorities to turn away overcrowded boats from their shores in what the International Organization for Migrants has described as “maritime ping-pong with human lives.” Indonesian officials have told fishermen not to help migrants either, unless their boats are sinking or they are in the water, according to the BBC.

The foreign ministers of Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia are scheduled to meet on Wednesday in the Malaysian capital to discuss the growing crisis. Yet so far they've failed to develop a coordinated response, leading to deepening criticism from humanitarian groups. They say the real blame lies with Myanmar and its treatment of stateless Rohingya. Myanmar has refused to confirm whether it will attend an emergency meeting on migration to be hosted by Thailand later this month.