ASEAN Has a Responsibility to Protect

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Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have a serious problem in their backyard. Every day in Myanmar approximately 1 million Rohingya Muslims are denied their most basic human rights and face a risk of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.

Myanmar is not just a member of the regional body, but heads ASEAN as its 2014 chair. The treatment of the Rohingya is a test of the degree to which ASEAN member states take seriously their commitment to regional cooperation on protecting human rights and their global pledge to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a pact to protect populations from mass atrocity crimes.

So far, ASEAN states and the broader international community are failing in this commitment. For decades they have turned a blind eye to the persecution of the Rohingya, one of the world’s most vulnerable minorities. Rohingyas are denied by the government the right to citizenship, restricted from having more than two children, and many are forced to live in segregated, squalid ghettos that they can only leave with permission from authorities. Rohingyas have repeatedly been attacked and killed on the basis of their identity, receiving little to no physical protection from security forces.

Formerly the perennial international pariah, the Myanmar government has received praise for new political and economic reforms. Yet it has utterly failed to protect the Rohingya, for whom conditions have only worsened since the government began its transition to democracy in 2012.

Increasing hate speech by political, cultural and religious figures has served to dehumanize the Rohingya in the eyes of Myanmar’s public by demonizing them as unwanted “Bengali” foreigners.

Despite government assurances that it would allow ethnic self-identification in the first national census conducted since 1983, just days before data collection began the government announced that “Rohingya” would not be recognized.

The widespread culture of impunity for state and non-state actors who perpetrate or incite attacks against Rohingyas fuels a growing cycle of anti-Muslim violence within the country.

Meanwhile, neighboring states have made it abundantly clear that they will not open their borders nor offer protection to Rohingyas attempting desperately to flee persecution. Anti-Rohingya sentiment is not confined to Myanmar’s borders. On July 10 Bangladesh announced that it would cease recognizing marriages involving Rohingyas.

The world has seen this before. The Holocaust and Rwandan genocide have shown us what happens when a minority population is systematically dehumanized, deprived of their rights, forced to live in segregation, and denied asylum elsewhere.

In the wake of the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews and Tutsis, the world vowed to prevent these crimes from being repeated. Yet today in Myanmar, the Rohingya face institutionalized persecution.
With little international attention and a failure to hold the Myanmar government accountable for the safety and protection of the Rohingya, their plight is all the more dire.

Faced with unfolding crimes against humanity on their doorstep, will ASEAN states continue to shirk their responsibility? Myanmar seems to expect this. At this year’s first ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting on Jan. 16, only days after another round of anti-Rohingya violence in Rakhine state left over 40 men, women and children dead, Myanmar rejected the inclusion of talks on “the Bengali issue”, arguing that it was an “internal affair”.

A global commitment to the Responsibility to Protect, born out of the resolve of “never again”, means that atrocities are not internal affairs. Every government, including all ASEAN member states, affirmed this in 2005 when they endorsed the Responsibility to Protect at the UN World Summit.

They committed to safeguard all populations, irrespective of their religion, ethnicity or citizenship, from crimes against humanity, genocide, ethnic cleansing and war crimes. ASEAN’s own Charter obliges its members “to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

To continue to stand by as the Rohingya suffer is to fail these obligations and condemn the Rohingya to a future of persecution.

Myanmar has demonstrated its unwillingness to protect them. ASEAN members must uphold their responsibility to protect and urge Myanmar’s government to take immediate action to halt the tide of hate speech, provide physical protection to vulnerable Rohingya communities, hold accountable all who incite or perpetrate crimes, and take concrete steps to foster a more inclusive society, foremost by granting Rohingya equal access to citizenship.

With atrocities unfolding, ASEAN members should provide a safe haven within their borders to Rohingyas seeking refuge.

Myanmar is currently the face of ASEAN. What happens within its borders is a reflection on the body as a whole and the international human rights standards to which it holds itself accountable.

With Rohingyas facing the risk of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, it is simply unacceptable for ASEAN states to appeal to regional preferences for “non-interference” as a justification for silence and indifference.

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