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Should Australia step up to rescue the Rohingya?

8 September 2017

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With the might of a Buddhist-dominated state and its military pitted against a [dispossessed Muslim minority](#), the current catastrophe unfolding in Myanmar's Rakhine State may well mark a watershed moment in the politics of modern Southeast Asia.

The Myanmar military, known as the Tatmadaw, has once again displayed its characteristic zeal for scorched-earth counter-insurgency tactics, which it has honed over decades in other minority regions of the country — such as Karen, Shan and Kachin. Visceral anti-Muslim sentiment throughout Myanmar has given the Tatmadaw an even more brutal edge today in Rakhine State. As its willful and excessive use of force against the stateless Rohingya pushes yet another exodus of tens of thousands of refugees into Bangladesh and excites passions across Muslim Indonesia and Malaysia, the Tatmadaw has arguably emerged as a serious threat to regional cooperation and security.



Against this grim backdrop, Australia — with a decades-long record of humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping — has a role to play in preventing a dangerous downward spiral.

Australia has a strong record of making significant contributions to peace and stability in the region. In the early 1990s, Australia's former foreign minister Gareth Evans and military commander John Sanderson were instrumental in instigating a UN-mandated international response in Cambodia. And in 1999, Australia led the multilateral intervention in East Timor with the help of a number of Southeast Asian states including Thailand and the Philippines. Today, the Australian Defence Force is more capable than ever to respond to crises and disasters.

The Rakhine crisis presents an important opportunity for Australia to step forward as a regional leader to address a spiralling humanitarian crisis and counter the [radicalisation and violent extremism](#) that will surely follow if the [refugee crisis imposed on Bangladesh](#) is allowed to fester.

Australian leadership would involve pledging and following through swiftly to fund new refugee camps inside Bangladesh that are needed desperately. With Australian assistance and expertise, these camps could securely and humanely shelter Rohingya refugees — with clinics, mosques and basic schools — as they await return to their homeland inside Myanmar.

One can only hope that in the coming months this latest eruption of the long-running Rohingya crisis will prompt enough concerted international pressure on Myanmar to ensure the safe return of its refugees.

In the short term, ASEAN simply [lacks the resolve and unanimity](#) to act decisively on the humanitarian front. Indonesia has called for action and dispatched its foreign minister to Naypyidaw, but it is not well placed to act decisively. Given the religious dimension to the animosity, it is unlikely that a predominantly Muslim country — be it Indonesia or Malaysia — will play a leading role in addressing this crisis.

For their part, Thailand's ruling generals have displayed a genuine affection for their Tatmadaw counterparts and co-religionists in Myanmar and are otherwise distracted by domestic political drama. Other ASEAN members lack the capacity and commitment to play a leading role.

The United States is also otherwise occupied, as President Trump confronts the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula, a reinvigorated insurgent campaign in Afghanistan and a plethora of other challenges in the Middle East, not to mention flooding in the US' southeast.

Elsewhere, India is acutely concerned about Chinese influence in Myanmar and is therefore unlikely to take actions that could be construed as critical of Naypyidaw. Indeed, it appears India is actually looking to expel its own Rohingya refugees — albeit without burning down their homes and raping their womenfolk. Bangladesh itself is totally overwhelmed by the scale of the refugee influx, a state of affairs only exacerbated by recent catastrophic flooding.

This leaves Australia as the only regional player with the financial and technical capacity and diplomatic clout to take up a real leadership role. It is unpleasant to think of tragedy as an opportunity. But this crisis appears to offer an important opportunity for Australia to act as a responsible and compassionate regional player, as others for various reasons are falling short. Nor should compassion be seen in purely altruistic terms. If squalid, make-shift border refugee camps are left to fester, the anger and extremism they will foment is likely to migrate ideologically and physically to Malaysia, Indonesia and possibly even Mindanao.

Action is required now as a preventive measure to address humanitarian needs and hopefully to counter the prospect of the further spread of violent extremism. Australian leadership would require humanitarian assistance and efforts to counter extremism wrapped up into one.

Australia has rightly sought to focus more on its own region to help bolster security and stability. A flotilla left Sydney harbour on 4 September 2017 tasked with building relations and demonstrating Australian goodwill across the region. Operation Rakhine Rescue is begging to be launched.

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A version of this article first appeared here at the [Bangkok Post](#).



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