

## **Rohingya Crisis: A New Paradigm for Navies**

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A humanitarian crisis in the Bay of Bengal has attracted international attention; over 4,000 Rohingya migrants, also referred to as the 'boat people', embarked on rickety vessels have been sighted or intercepted by the maritime security forces of Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand. Many more may still be at sea and their handlers are waiting for an opportunity to land them on the shores of the eastern littoral countries of the Bay of Bengal.

The ongoing boat people crisis unfolded after a crackdown on people-smuggling gangs in Thailand, and the discovery of nearly 140 graves at 28 suspected people smuggling camps along Malaysia's northern borders further aggravated the situation. The crisis took a politico-humanitarian turn and the international community accused the Southeast Asian nations of 'cold-hearted policies', pushing Rohingya back to the sea and not allowing the desperate people to land ashore. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) urged Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia to offer temporary shelter to the boat people adrift in the Andaman Sea. During the last three months, several Rohingya people have perished at sea and nearly 50 decomposed bodies were found washed on the waterfronts of Rakhine state, Myanmar.

In the midst of the crisis, several regional countries deployed navies and maritime enforcement agencies. They were not only successful in preventing the boat people from landing ashore but also engaged in search and rescue (SAR) and provided humanitarian assistance. The Thai Navy deployed seven vessels and a variety of aircraft-HTMS Angthong, an Endurance class Landing Platform Dock (LPD) to serve as a

floating hospital cum interrogation centre; two frigates HTMS Saiburi and HTMS Thayan Chon; a landing craft, three patrol boats and four naval aircraft. These forces air-dropped food, provided water, and in one instance repaired the engine of the vessel carrying the boat people. Apparently, the boat people were quite satisfied with the assistance and stated that they planned to continue their voyage to a 'third country' i.e. Malaysia. Although, Thai Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha announced medical care for the boat people and assured shore based temporary shelters, but cautioned that boat people would be treated as illegal migrants.

The Malaysian Navy, Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) and Malaysian Marine Police launched operations to offer assistance to the boat people adrift at sea. Consequently, Malaysia put into operation 11 ships and three helicopters for search and rescue. The Malaysian Deputy Home Minister stated that "If the boat is still good and can sail back, we give them food, and drink and fuel and send them back". Likewise, the Indonesian authorities stated that "The people on the boat did not want to go to Indonesia, but they asked for help, clean water and food...After the aid was given, they parted". The Myanmar Navy rescued a boat carrying 707 Bangladeshi nationals and they were escorted ashore for interrogation and subsequent deportation.

The US Navy announced plans to '[work] with local partners' and deployed P8-A Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft at Sabang, Malaysia. It also requested Thailand for permission to operate from Phuket since its naval aircraft were still in Thailand having completed the 'Guardian Sea', a five-day anti-submarine warfare training exercise in the Andaman Sea. The Thai Armed Forces refused the US request and it has noted that "We have enough military support to look for Rohingya boats...If we do find any boats we will deal with the matter according to Thai laws. We will also provide those on board with humanitarian aid". Further, the Thai Air Force stated that "we have a fixed space for US military aircraft in long term. However, this space is very small and we don't want their aircraft tied to this area". Apparently, Thailand's reaction was in response to the US 'pressure to resolve human trafficking problems'.

It is true that Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand are caught up in the Rohingya crisis, their ability to engage in SAR and humanitarian assistance is noteworthy. For Thailand, this is a welcome development given that the Thai Navy was under tremendous pressure after it was accused in 2013 of pushing the boat people to the sea without offering them any assistance including firing at them. Earlier too, in 2009, nearly 300 boat people landed on Indian shores in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, amidst reports that had been pushed back to the seas by the Thai Navy.

The navies and maritime agencies are in the forefront of the current humanitarian crisis involving the boat people and have successfully responded to this human induced disaster; they would, in future, have to train for multiple missions simultaneously. This entails an overhaul of their training, education and equipment. The SAR and humanitarian assistance operations are inherently platform intensive and require specialist ships to carry helicopters and also be able to provide food, water and medical assistance. This capability is still evolving among the Southeast Asian navies. Further, there is a compelling need for a new imagination among the naval and maritime enforcement agencies of human induced security issues which will require a newly defined strategy in terms of force structure, human resource, and roles and missions. Above all a cooperative approach to address human security issues at sea will be the new defining paradigm for the navies.

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