

Statement by Volker Türk, UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, at the Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean 29 May 2015 Bangkok, Thailand

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Thank you very much for convening such an important meeting and for giving us the opportunity to participate.

The images and reports about intolerable human suffering, including recently the discovery of mass graves, have not only seized international attention but have also deeply shocked people around the world. They have mobilized States, civil society, and international organizations at the highest level, including in the case of the United Nations, the Secretary-General himself.

It is clear we are faced with a complex phenomenon of mixed movements of people from Bangladesh and Myanmar. Some [economic migrants] can go back; others [people with international protection needs] cannot at this point in time. We need to find urgently solutions for both.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that there are any simple solutions to this phenomenon. Yet, as the world has learned from South East Asia, there is always an opportunity in a crisis and a real potential for a "win-win" situation for all involved. It will require political will and leadership, individually and collectively, to achieve that.

UNHCR will be with you to help and support. We, along with IOM and UNODC, have shared with you 10 proposals for action. We hope they will be given serious and urgent consideration today.

Saving lives must be the number one priority. We are encouraged by commitments expressed in Putrajaya last week and by concrete action taken since to strengthen search and rescue, allow disembarkation and establish or enhance reception facilities. Yet, there is an urgent need to reach a common understanding about more effective and predictable disembarkation options and proper reception arrangements in the region, in the spirit of ASEAN and the Bali Process, and building on the regional cooperation framework developed in Manila in 2002.

What we see unfold in front of our eyes in South East Asia needs to be seen in a broader global context. Mixed movements happen in all regions of the world. We hope to have come a long way from the Comprehensive Plan of Action for the Indochinese to the way in which such movements could be addressed creatively today.

There is no solution without addressing root causes, as recognized by the Foreign Ministers of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand last week. Among other things, this requires full assumption of responsibility by Myanmar towards all people on its territory. Granting of citizenship is the ultimate goal, and we welcome some initial steps taken in this regard. In the interim, a legal status for all habitual residents recognizing that Myanmar is their own country is urgently required. Access to identity documentation and the removal of restrictions on basic freedoms is needed to normalize and stabilize lives.

Several countries attending this conference today have experience in resolving the situation of individuals with undetermined citizenship, including stateless persons living in their country of birth and/or habitual residence. We would be pleased to convene or support a peer-to-peer exchange of experiences on these issues to move forward.

Action is also required to facilitate the return of internally displaced persons and to invest in the socio-economic development of Rakhine State for the benefit of all. We will step up operationally with partners to support Myanmar's initiatives in basic infrastructure, access to livelihoods and community development there. Equally important is the dissemination of information to populations both in Myanmar and Bangladesh about the dangers of sea voyages similar to UNHCR's projects "Telling the Real Story" and the "Know Before You Go"

campaign, using social media and other innovative platforms for informing migrants and refugees heading for Europe.

With respect to the immediate crisis of migrants and refugees moving by boat, UNHCR will support countries in the region to identify and assist individuals with international protection needs. By way of example, families which have been split up need to be reunited. Women having experienced sexual violence need access to a proper response, including medical care and counselling. Unaccompanied children need appropriate shelters. The basic protection, assistance and solutions needs of all have to be met.

We are also committed to doing our utmost to identify third country resettlement solutions for the most vulnerable and those with specific needs. We can scale up this solution, depending on concrete commitments by resettlement countries, but it is crucial to be realistic. In light of several major crises around the world, rising numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers and urgent needs everywhere, the capacity of a number of States to offer places is limited and, moreover, the prospect of resettlement, real or perceived, could exacerbate the problem by encouraging additional departures.

Recognizing that it will take time to address the root causes of these movements, we need creative, temporary solutions. As noted before, this region has successfully managed the migration of millions of people. Thailand alone has recently regularized well over a million temporary workers. ASEAN is moving towards an Economic Community with freer movement envisaged.

With the much admired economic dynamism of South East Asia, we must surely be able to find a way to address the protection needs arising from this situation – at least until such time as conditions are ripe for people to return home or find another solution. In essence, this means that those who cannot return now because of international protection reasons be allowed to stay temporarily and work. This would simply recognize and regularize what has already been happening in reality for many years.

We are ready actively to support such temporary local stay arrangements, through registration, documentation and other means, together with the governments concerned.

We very much look forward to engaging with you and supporting you in an all-out endeavour to find solutions.

Thank you.

[UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration \(IOM\) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\) 10-point plan of action](#)