What should Asean's next move be?

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The Rohingya issue, with over 700,000 refugees from Myanmar taking shelter in neighbouring Bangladesh, remains a challenge for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

The plight of Rohingya, one of the worst humanitarian crises, attracts global attention, with governments and rights groups around the world urging Asean to play an active and constructive role. Yet, the complexity of Asean's organisational structure as well as its "non-interference" principle make it difficult for the grouping to make a move.

Such complexities have prevented not only individual member states but the organisation as a whole from engaging on the issue since Myanmar has not invited them to do so.

But that does not mean that Asean member states have completely shied away from the issue. For example, the two Muslim-majority countries, Malaysia and Indonesia, have spoken out on the issue. The Malaysian government, in particular, has been quite vocal on the issue to the point of vehemently criticising Myanmar.

As the Rohingya issue has continued to overshadow several other important issues of the region, Asean leaders have begun taking a more visible position on the issue, especially under the chairmanship of Singapore.

On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September this year, Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said that Myanmar should start repatriating the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh and must ensure that there is security, peace, justice and better prospects for everyone.

Mr Balakrishnan had also said that "Asean will work with Myanmar to facilitate this process", and added that "This is something we will have to watch in the next few weeks, next few months".

The Singapore foreign minister had also expressed the need for independent investigation into alleged crimes and hold people who are responsible fully accountable.
He also said, "Right now, there are a million people suffering. There's a humanitarian
disaster...unacceptable in this day and age."

The regional grouping's frustration was manifested again during the 33rd Asean Summit
in Singapore which ended last week. Unlike the previous Asean summits, the Rohingya
issue was discussed in almost every forum by Asean leaders and their dialogue partners
from the Asia-Pacific.

During the summit, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha told his Asean colleagues that
Thailand, which will chair the regional grouping next year, view the regional bloc as capable
of playing an important role in addressing the situation in Rakhine state in a constructive,
tangible and sustainable manner.

Gen Prayut suggested the enhancement of the Asean Coordinating Centre for
Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management to provide humanitarian assistance to
the affected people, as well as support the repatriation of Rohingya refugees and to ensure
the improvement of quality of life for all communities in Rakhine state.

The recent developments from Asean show both frustration and the desire to engage more
on the Rohingya issue. But the key question is whether Myanmar would welcome such
diplomatic gesture from fellow Asean states.

There is a possibility that Myanmar could construe such move as an attempt to interfere in
its internal affairs, which is apparently against the non-interference policy of Asean.

But Myanmar has to understand that it has already internationalised the Rohingya issue
following the constitution of the Kofi Annan Commission in 2016, and then the formation
of an Advisory Commission for the Implementation Committee of Rakhine State last year
with experts from home and abroad.

Moreover, in June this year, Myanmar had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with
the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Development
Programme (UNDP) to create conditions conducive for a voluntary, safe, dignified, and
sustainable refugee returns from Bangladesh, and their reintegration in the country.

Since it has already engaged with the UN agencies and international experts, Myanmar
should welcome Asean's goodwill gesture to help address the protracted Rohingya crisis.

An attempt to oppose the Asean's desire to engage will only hamper the cohesion and
strength of the organisation, and invites criticism from the international community.

Besides the Asean summits, platforms such as the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting
(ADMM) and the ADMM-Plus should be utilised to explore possible ways to cooperate with
the Myanmar military, which not only controls the security matters of the country but also
retains significant political power.
The longer the Rohingya crisis is kept unaddressed, the issue can become a breeding ground for radicalisation, which could be exploited and manipulated by the Islamic terrorists.

The role of ADMM and ADMM-Plus are particularly important for addressing such potential threats and for strengthening security and defence cooperation for peace, stability, and development in the region.

It is true that the Asean grouping has not taken any substantive measures on the Rohingya issue in the past, but given the recent developments within the organisation, we can only hope for a more active and engaging role for Asean.

But the fructification of such engagement will largely depend on the openness and receptiveness of Myanmar, as well as the level of commitment from Asean member states, particularly the incoming chair of the group.

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