
ASEAN CANNOT ASK MYANMAR FOR ROHINGYA REPATRIATION

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Asean cannot discuss citizenship of Rohingyas with Myanmar, but is ready to provide healthcare and education, said Singapore's foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan in parliament yesterday.

"Simple answer: No," he said when MP Louis Ng asked him if the issue of citizenship for refugees could be discussed by Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) at a deeper level, reported The Straits Times.

Dr Balakrishnan said, "Citizenship is a fundamental political right. It goes to the heart of sovereignty. It goes to the heart of the construction of how a country looks at itself and identifies who is in and who is out. This is not something that foreigners should get involved in."

He said it was not possible for Singapore or Asean to impose a deadline to start the repatriation process, but the regional bloc will stand ready to support refugees by aiding healthcare and education initiatives, and the promotion of interfaith dialogue.

Rohingya repatriation could not begin in November last year as the Rohingyas as well as the United Nations refugee agency and aid groups opposed it, saying the conditions in Rakhine were not safe and they had no guarantee of citizenship.

Balakrishnan said that at the recent Asean Foreign Ministers' Meeting in January, the subject of Rakhine state came up for extensive informal discussions among the leaders.

"We focused on efforts by Asean to support refugees as well as Myanmar, and, in particular, on the safe and voluntary repatriation of these refugees," he noted.

The Asean Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance will dispatch to Myanmar a needs assessment team to help identify the areas through which Asean can provide support.

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