

‘Maritime Ping Pong’ in the Bay of Bengal

By JEFF STEWART

The awakening of wealthy nations to the realities of the swelling Third World isn’t just limited to the West. In May of this year, Southeast Asian news sources began reporting that smuggler-led boats containing tens of thousands of “Rohingya” Muslims from Myanmar had been making their way across the Bay of Bengal to the shores of Malaysia. Although many of the boat people made it ashore, thousands were reportedly stranded at sea, sometimes for weeks, after neighbouring Thailand initiated an immediate naval crackdown forcing the smugglers to abandon their human cargo.

The stream of flotillas has sparked a mixture of shock and outrage from both Malaysia’s government and its citizens. But unlike their Western counterparts, the Malaysian government has responded sternly and was quick to initiate a repatriation program that’s already sent thousands of the Rohingya back to Myanmar. The effort has hit diplomatic hurdles, however, as the Myanmar government insists the Rohingya are actually native to Bangladesh, Myanmar’s western neighbour. Bangladesh’s Prime Minister confirmed this, at least indirectly, when he called the Rohingya boat people “mentally sick” for leaving and tarnishing Bangladesh’s image. Whatever the case, the general response among the Malaysian people has been for the Rohingya to simply “go back home.” Amidst all the anger and confusion, “humanitarian” groups, like the intergovernmental International Organization on Migration, are accusing all the nations involved of “playing ‘maritime ping pong’ with people’s lives.”

Unfortunately for Malaysia, the nation’s increasing wealth coupled with stagnation in other parts of South and Southeast Asia will likely act as a magnet for further flotilla invasions well into the future. The Muslim-dominated nation grew out of a split from Singapore in 1964, when race riots broke out between Han Chinese and native Malay. Still today, it has a significant 10 percent Chinese minority whose outsized economic

performance has made the country an outlier among its neighbors like Indonesia and the Philippines.

Racial alienation in Malaysia still persists, however, as it is one of the few nations on Earth, besides the U.S., to install a rigid affirmative action system (referred to as the “Malaysian Social Contract”) giving the so-called Malay “Bumiputra” (“sons of the soil”) preferences in university placements, trade licences, government jobs, monopoly rights in certain industries, and even car and housing discounts. In spite of this, Malaysian Chinese still consistently take up the top spots of the nation’s rich list, which has helped push Malaysia’s per capita GDP to near Developed World-levels.

The country’s struggle with illegal Rohingya immigration isn’t new. Believed to have been natives of Bangladesh’s chronically poor Cox Bazaar region, the Rohingya now number almost 1.5 million in Myanmar. Their increasing size, mostly in Rakhine province along the Bangladeshi border, has kicked off a number of flare-ups over the last few years. The most recent flotilla has been attributed to the Rohingya’s treatment from Rakhine’s Buddhist majority. Agitation from Buddhist activists in 2012 reportedly forced 140,000 Rohingya to take shelter in displacement camps, where most are living today. Pictures from recent anti-Rohingya protests show throngs of fierce-looking, bald-headed Buddhists, many holding placards with threatening messages aimed at both Rohingya and unresponsive government officials in the provincial and federal capitals—Hollywood Buddhists, these aren’t.

The UN, Western diplomats, and human rights workers, meanwhile, claim that Rohingya-persecution is actually being sponsored by the Myanmar authorities. Rakhine Ethnic Affairs Minister, Zaw Aye Maung, has rebutted these allegations and defends the Buddhists, telling reporters that if ethnic cleansing is really taking place in the region, it’s against the Buddhists themselves. According to him, the tension is rooted in a population explosion in Bangladesh which threatens to “overrun” his province. Higher-ups within Myanmar’s central government seem to back this up. Speaker of the House, Shwe Mann, criticized both UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and international organizations requesting that they “avoid creating misconceptions about [his] country

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and aggravating communal tensions and conflict.”

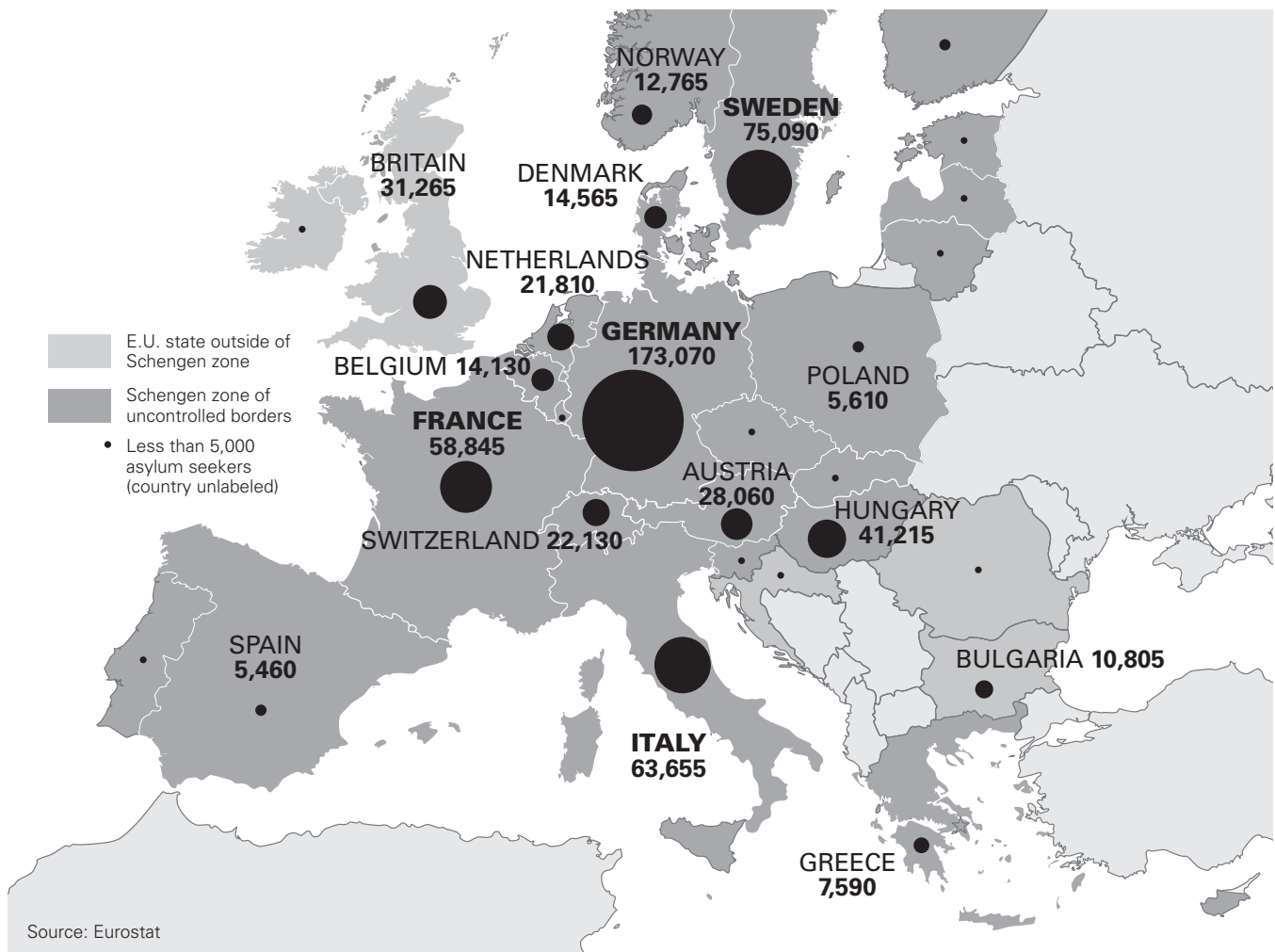
Western diplomats and human rights workers have so far refused to acknowledge why the Rohingya ended up in Myanmar in the first place. Similar groups have lately made the same error when discussing, for instance, the Dominican Republic, which has recently urged illegal aliens from Haiti within its borders to return home. Little to no discussion is spent on the chronic corruption and inept governance in either Bangladesh or Haiti, and no consideration is ever given to the native Myanmar and Dominican majorities, who naturally feel animus toward the incoming foreigners.

It may be that the lack of much-needed reforms so typically found in immigrant-sending countries could be challenged if immigrants were *kept* from leaving, either by a strict repatriation policy and/or tighter immigration controls. A member of Malaysia’s parliament from the Pan-Malaysian Islamic (PAN) party touched on this issue when he stated, rather bluntly, that the incoming Rohingya were acting like “cowards” and should go

back and fight against the allegedly deplorable conditions they face in Myanmar. “Why are they being cowards by staying here?” he asked. Another party member, Mohd Yusof Zaidi, pleaded with the boat people by saying, “Find ways to stop the violence... we ask those here to go back to fight their government.” Whether the Rohingya belong in Bangladesh or Myanmar, both corrupted governments are likely receiving a reprieve to the extent the Rohingya are simply able to get up and go.

Raising the spectre of “moral hazard,” which always accompanies a failure to enforce immigration laws, PAN party member Zaidi warned that a flood today will lead to a tsunami tomorrow: “If we keep accepting all of them (Rohingyas), then the Vietnamese will come, then the Cambodians, *and even the Americans*, and we will find ourselves as the dumping ground for refugees.” (Emphasis mine).

If America refuses to pay heed to this warning and fails to follow Malaysia in the way it deals with its illegal immigration problem, this might actually come true. ■



According to the *Washington Post*, “The number of migrants seeking asylum in Europe more than tripled between 2008 and 2014. Germany, Sweden, Italy, and France together received more than half of all new asylum applications in 2014.”