Australia’s response to the Rohingya human rights and migrant crisis—a quick guide

Dr Cameron Hill
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security Section

I. Background

Overview

As well as representing a human rights and humanitarian crisis in its own right, the ongoing Rohingya migrant crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh demonstrates the linkages between unresolved internal conflicts, mass displacement and wider instability in Australia’s region. In its latest worldwide threat assessment, published in February 2018, the United States Director of National Intelligence concluded that the mass displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh ‘will threaten Burma’s [Myanmar] fledgling democracy, increase the risk of violent extremism and provide openings for Beijing to expand its influence’.

The current crisis followed a series of attacks on 25 August 2017 on 30 police facilities in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships in northwest Rakhine State by a militant group known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). These attacks reportedly killed 12 members of the Myanmar security forces. ARSA, which is known locally as Harakah al-Yaqin (‘Faith Movement’), is described as a ‘small, underequipped group that has struggled to mount significant military operations’. The group also claimed responsibility for ambush attacks in January 2018 in Rakhine which left three Myanmar security personnel wounded.

Subsequently, in the wake of the Myanmar military’s (or ‘Tatmadaw’) brutal clearance operations, there have been unconfirmed estimates of thousands of civilian deaths and, as at 25 May 2018, almost 700,000 Rohingya have fled southern Bangladesh, placing additional strains on services, natural resources and local populations in one of the region’s poorest countries. Senior officials from the United Nations (UN) have accused Myanmar of crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and potential genocide.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) argues that if the crisis continues to be mishandled by the Myanmar Government, the potential risk for transnational Islamist terrorist groups to take advantage of the plight of the Rohingya will heighten:
The country has justified what it calls clearance operations by arguing the nation faces a terrorist threat. This could be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The plight of the Rohingya has captured the attention of the Muslim world, becoming a cause célèbre like perhaps no other since Kosovo.

Al-Qaeda, Islamic State and other jihadist groups, which have long issued statements of solidarity with the Rohingya for propaganda purposes, are now calling directly for attacks on Myanmar and its leaders. Most recently, on 27 October 2017, the media arm of al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent released a video message from the group’s leader, Abu Syed al-Ansari, repeating calls for a jihad against Myanmar in support of the Rohingya. Myanmar is not prepared to prevent or deal with such an attack, which could be directed or merely inspired by these jihadist groups.

ARSA has repeatedly denied links to foreign Islamist groups and more recent reporting from the ICG concludes that to date there has been no evidence of any connections to these groups. In a report published in May 2018 the international human rights group Amnesty International alleged that ARSA ‘is responsible for at least one, and potentially a second, massacre of up to 99 Hindu women, men, and children as well as additional unlawful killings and abductions of Hindu villagers in August 2017’.

As well as the ongoing threat of disease and malnutrition, there have been reports within the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh of killings, human trafficking and gender-based violence. As the 2018 monsoon season commences, an estimated 200,000 Rohingya refugees living in these camps have been assessed by the UN as being in direct danger from predicted landslides, floods and disease outbreaks.

While it has accommodated and provided temporary protection to a very large number of Rohingya, the Bangladeshi Government has also repeatedly stated that it intends to relocate some 100,000 Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char, a remote island off the country’s southern coast. One analyst has described Bhasan Char in the following terms—‘it isn’t just any normal island. It emerged from the waters in 2006 as a result of silt deposits. And is, unsurprisingly, highly vulnerable to the region’s extreme and violent weather patterns’.

Access to formal education remains out of reach for a generation of 530,000 school-age refugees, including the children of Rohingya who fled earlier waves of violence, because Bangladesh does not want the Rohingya to stay long-term.

The UNHCR has called on both governments to ensure that any repatriation of Rohingya back to Myanmar is ‘safe, voluntary and sustainable’. While Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a new repatriation agreement in November 2017, the ICG warns that the processes surrounding the implementation of this agreement remain fraught with risk for the displaced Rohingya. As a result, ‘the refugees’ return to their homes and lands thus is not only increasingly unlikely, but also becoming impossible in practice’.

In June 2018 the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) signed a tripartite memorandum of understanding with the Myanmar Government to facilitate the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees to Rakhine State. While the agreement has not been made public, the Myanmar Government has said it would allow UN agencies access to parts of northern Rakhine state for the first time since August 2017. Despite the agreement, the UN maintains that the situation in Rakhine is still not conducive to safe returns and some analysts have expressed continued scepticism regarding the prospects for large-scale repatriation in the absence of wider changes in the political climate and security conditions in Rakhine State.

As the risks associated with the current monsoon season escalate, there have been reports of vessels carrying Rohingya arriving in Malaysia and Indonesia, raising fears of a re-run of the 2015
crisis when an estimated 25,000 Rohingya took to people-smuggling boats from the Bay of Bengal and fled to neighbouring countries.

**Myanmar Government responses**

While there has been widespread global and regional concern, within Myanmar there is no significant domestic constituency expressing concern for the plight of the Rohingya. They are regarded by much of the majority ethnic Bamar population and by the Myanmar Government as ‘illegal’ Bangladeshi migrants. ARSA is viewed by the Myanmar authorities as a ‘terrorist’ organisation which has targeted civilians in Rakhine and has escaped the scrutiny of international human rights organisations. As a result, ‘much of Myanmar’s population view international condemnations as not only unfair but also adversarial to the national interest—generating little institutional incentive for military operations centred around civilian protection’.

Following earlier waves of violence in 2012, 2013 and 2016, an estimated 127,000 Rohingya in northern Rakhine State remain segregated in internal displacement camps and do not enjoy equal access to basic health and education services, markets and employment opportunities.

Among the local ethnic Rakhine-Buddhist population—who have themselves suffered under decades of military rule and have their own armed insurgent groups—the predominant view of the Rohingya is that they are a group which seeks to displace the Rakhine through population growth, inter-marriage and, following ARSA attacks in October 2016 and August 2017, terrorism and violence. Historical, geographic and ethno-religious identity claims are deeply contested on both sides. Myanmar’s rapidly expanding social media access has played a role in hardening exclusivist narratives.

The military—which remains Myanmar’s most important political institution—is a key protagonist in these narratives and continues to portray the conflict as one that is aimed at defending the country’s ‘stability’, ‘unity’ and the preservation of ‘national races’, a term referring to a list of officially recognised ‘indigenous’ ethnic groups that does not include the Rohingya.

In the face of growing international criticism, including accusations of ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and genocide, in January 2018 the Myanmar military acknowledged that its security forces and Buddhist villagers killed ten Rohingya Muslims whose bodies were found in a mass grave in Inn Din village in western Rakhine State. In April, seven soldiers were sentenced to ten years for their involvement in this massacre. Despite this admission, two local Reuters journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, have been charged with violating Myanmar’s official secrets laws for their investigative reporting on this massacre. The two journalists are awaiting trial, but have been denied bail, and face the prospect of 14 years in prison if found guilty.

Humanitarian and international media access to Rakhine State remains restricted and international donors and aid agencies have repeatedly called for improved access. The Myanmar Government has facilitated some visits to affected parts of Rakhine State by foreign media, UN staff and foreign diplomats, under close supervision.

In late April 2018 the Myanmar Government did allow permanent representatives of the 15-member UN Security Council to visit the country to assess the situation, which included a visit to northern Rakhine State. Following the visit, the Security Council urged ‘the Government of Myanmar to grant the United Nations agencies and their partners immediate, safe and unhindered access to Rakhine State, as well as to other domestic and international non-governmental organizations providing humanitarian assistance’. The Council also called for ‘transparent investigations into allegations of human rights abuses and violations’ and urged the Government of Myanmar to ‘fulfil, based on respect for the rule of law, its stated commitment to holding accountable perpetrators of violence, including sexual violence and abuse and violence against...
children’. The United States accused unnamed fellow members of the Council of watering down previous drafts of this statement on the basis of ‘cynical and self-interested reasons’. This is seen by most commentators as a reference to China, which continues to seek close relations with Myanmar and is building a US$7.3 billion deep-sea port at Kyaikpyu, a port town in Rakhine State on the Indian Ocean.

Prior to the current violence, there had been some high-profile attempts to seek an internal political solution. In September 2016, following a request from Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Counsellor of Myanmar, the Kofi Annan Foundation and the Office of the State Counsellor established an Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. The Commission was headed by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and its August 2017 final report, released just prior to the ARSA attacks, recommended a range of measures ‘to surmount the political, socio-economic and humanitarian challenges that currently face Rakhine State’, including the longstanding inter-communal tensions between the Rakhine Buddhist population and addressing the citizenship status of the Rohingya. While repeatedly denying claims of systematic human rights abuses, Suu Kyi has committed to the full implementation of the report’s recommendations.

In December 2017, Myanmar appointed another advisory body to support the Implementation Commission for Rakhine State, headed by a former Thai deputy prime minister, Surakiart Sathirathai. The credibility of this new body was questioned in early 2018 following the resignation of one of its high-profile appointees, former US politician Bill Richardson, who publicly labelled it a ‘whitewash’ and criticised the approach taken by Suu Kyi. An interim report by the advisory body was delivered to the Myanmar Government in February 2018.

In the wake of ongoing efforts by victims and human rights activists and lawyers to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court (ICC), in May 2018 Naypyidaw announced the establishment of a new independent commission of inquiry into ‘the violation of human rights and related issues following the terrorist attacks by ARSA’. According to the announcement, the commission will be composed of three members, including an international representative, and will be assisted by domestic and international legal and technical experts. Human Rights Watch has described this latest commission as ‘not merely inadequate, but an attempt to delay and deflect real justice’ and has urged the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Myanmar to the ICC.

II. Australia’s response

International and bilateral diplomacy

The Australian Government has consistently echoed international calls for ‘restraint by the Myanmar authorities, for the protection of civilians, and for unfettered access to be granted to humanitarian workers’. The Australian Government welcomed—the full implementation of the recommendations of the August 2017 final report of the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, noting that ‘implementation will be a long-term process and Australia stands ready to assist Myanmar in its efforts’.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, stated on 23 October 2017 that ‘the Australian Government condemns the ongoing violence in Rakhine State. We continue to call for the protection of civilians and the unfettered access for humanitarian workers’.

Prior to the current crisis, in March 2017 the Australian Government co-sponsored an EU-led resolution in the UN Human Rights Council to establish an international ‘fact-finding mission’ to investigate allegations of systematic human rights abuses in northern Rakhine State. A spokesperson for the Australian Government stated at the time that this decision ‘reflects our deep and consistent concern about the allegations and our objective for a thorough, credible and impartial investigation’. To date, this fact-finding mission has been blocked by the Myanmar
Government from accessing Rakhine State, but it has visited displaced Rohingya communities in Bangladesh and Malaysia.

In October 2017, in response to reports that Australia had sought to ‘soften’ a Human Rights Council resolution on Myanmar, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) stated that ‘we consider it important we maintain appropriate lines of communication with Myanmar on a very challenging set of security, human rights and humanitarian issues and concerns in Rakhine state’. The Foreign Minister has also stated that she has refrained from publicly condemning Myanmar’s government ‘because I can see that Aung San Suu Kyi can’t be blamed for what’s happening. She has to be part of the solution; otherwise we will be going back decades in terms of Myanmar’s growth and prosperity’.

Prime Minister Turnbull and Foreign Minister Bishop held a bilateral meeting with State Counsellor Suu Kyi during her March 2018 visit for the ASEAN-Australia Summit. According to reporting by ABC News:

Mr Turnbull was pressed about the controversy at a press conference at the conclusion of the summit. "Aung San Suu Kyi addressed the matter comprehensively at some considerable length herself," Mr Turnbull said. "She seeks support from ASEAN and other nations to provide help ... from a humanitarian and capacity-building point of view. So our goal is to support a peaceful and speedy resolution of the humanitarian problems, the humanitarian disaster truthfully that has resulted from the conflict."

The Prime Minister also met with Ms Suu Kyi in Canberra on Monday morning and discussed the crisis. Myanmar has been in negotiations with Bangladesh over the fate of displaced Rohingyas. Mr Turnbull encouraged Ms Suu Kyi to reach a resolution so that the refugees could return to their homes. He also made it clear Australia would be willing to keep aid money flowing to both Myanmar and Bangladesh to help resolve the emergency.

Reflecting the divergence of views within ASEAN and the organisation’s discomfort with public statements on human rights issues, the Rohingya crisis was not mentioned in the Summit’s joint statement.

In response to growing allegations of ethnic cleansing and genocide, at the Human Rights Council session in March 2018 the Australian Government stated:

Australia reiterates its deep concern about events in Rakhine state, including reports of widespread and systematic human rights violations and abuses by Myanmar security forces and local vigilantes. We also note with concern ongoing clashes between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups in north-eastern Myanmar and barriers to humanitarian access.

Australia reiterates its call for a thorough, credible and independent investigation, including through the fact-finding mission. We encourage Myanmar to grant the fact-finding mission access to affected areas. Perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses must be held to account.

In terms of the Australian Government’s official position on whether the actions of the Myanmar military constitute ‘ethnic cleansing’ or ‘crimes against humanity’, DFAT has stated that the Australian Government is awaiting the findings of the UN fact-finding mission, which is due to report to the Human Rights Council in September 2018.

On 5 April, Australia’s Ambassador to Myanmar met with the commander-in-chief of Myanmar’s military, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. According to a post on General Min Aung Hlaing’s official Facebook page, the two discussed defence cooperation, as well as the situation in Rakhine State:
Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing received Ambassador of Australia to Myanmar H.E. Mr. Nicholas Coppel at the Parlour of Bayintnaung Villa, here, this morning. Also present at the call together with the Senior General were Lt-Gen Soe Htut of the Office of the Commander-in-Chief (Army) and senior military officers. The Australian Ambassador to Myanmar was accompanied by Military Attaché Col. Paul Bruce and embassy officials.

At the meeting, they frankly discussed cooperation between the two armed forces of Myanmar and Australia and cooperation in defence affairs, progress in building the Standard Army of Myanmar, concerted efforts of the government and the Tatmadaw in restoring eternal peace and participation of Australia in the peace processes, progress of undertakings in Buthidaung-Maungtaw region of Rakhine State, and a helping hand given by Australia to development tasks of Myanmar.

The Australian Government has indicated that Australian embassy staff are attending court hearings for the two Reuters journalists, that it has registered its concerns regarding their arrest and that it is ‘pursuing other avenues to draw attention to their plight’. Australia has joined other countries in calling for the release of the journalists and for unhindered media access to Rakhine State.

**Access to Rakhine State**

The Australian embassy in Yangon has participated in Myanmar-supervised visits to Rakhine State. According to a statement from the US embassy in Yangon (linked on the Australian embassy website), the most recent visit involving Australian officials took place in early February 2018.

On the basis of this visit, DFAT stated in Senate Estimates hearings in March 2018 that it assessed that ‘the conditions [in Myanmar] don’t currently exist to support the safe, dignified and secure return of Rohingya’. The Foreign Minister echoed this assessment in April—‘as much as I would like to encourage the Rohingyas to return home, they must have a safe and secure place to which they can return and I don’t believe Myanmar has yet been able to provide credible evidence that that would be available to them’.

DFAT has noted that its ability to monitor the situation facing Rohingya communities in Rakhine State remains limited by ongoing access restrictions.

**Humanitarian assistance**

The Australian Government’s principal response to the crisis has been to pledge significant humanitarian support for affected populations in Myanmar and Bangladesh. As at 1 June 2018, the Government had committed $51.5 million in assistance to help address the humanitarian needs of Rohingya and affected communities in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Most of this aid—around $44 million—has been directed to the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya in Cox’s Bazar in eastern Bangladesh (Table 1).
### Table 1: Australian Government assistance to the Rohingya crisis since August 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Summary of assistance</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 Sept 2017</td>
<td>‘… contribute to life-saving food being provided to up to 300,000 people. Australian support in Bangladesh will be provided through the World Food Programme and the International Organisation for Migration. In Myanmar, Australia will work with the Red Cross movement to reach those affected by the conflict’.</td>
<td>$5 million</td>
<td>Media release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Sept 2017</td>
<td>‘… providing food, shelter, clean water and essential health services for displaced people in Bangladesh. This assistance will be provided through the World Food Programme, the International Organisation for Migration and other trusted humanitarian partners’.</td>
<td>$15 million</td>
<td>Media release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Oct 2017</td>
<td>‘… providing food, clean water, shelter and essential health services. Our assistance will also help treat children for malnutrition, create safe and secure areas for vulnerable women and provide maternal health services. The new contribution will include support for the World Food Program, Save The Children, Oxfam and Care. It will also support an upcoming joint funding appeal with the Australia Red Cross and Australia for UNHCR’.</td>
<td>$10 million</td>
<td>Media release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Jan 2018</td>
<td>‘… supply life-saving medicine, help quarantine the sick, train local medical staff, and boost community awareness activities aimed at reducing [diphtheria] infection rates’.</td>
<td>$1.5 million</td>
<td>Media release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 April 2018</td>
<td>‘… provide food to more than 700,000 people in Cox’s Bazar, and high-nutrient porridge to more than 100,000 children under the age of five and breastfeeding or pregnant women. It will also support child protection services and counselling and medical services for women and girls who have survived sexual and gender-based violence’.</td>
<td>$15 million</td>
<td>Media release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 May 2018</td>
<td>‘… provide access to basic health care for 50,000 people, help 18,000 children to attend school, improve shelter for 17,600 people in advance of the monsoon and cyclone season, and help to reunite separated and unaccompanied children with their families’.</td>
<td>$5 million</td>
<td>Media release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$51.5 million</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This assistance is in addition to $45 million in humanitarian aid that the Australian Government has previously provided in the wake of outbreaks of violence in Rakhine State in 2012, 2013 and 2016.

Australia’s key humanitarian partners include the World Food Programme, the International Organization for Migration, BRAC (a Bangladesh non-government organisation), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UNHCR and international and Australian non-government organisations. In terms of the regional humanitarian response, the Foreign Minister stated in late
2017 that ‘we’re working closely with Indonesia, who has taken a pretty strong leadership role on the humanitarian front and actually, some of our specialists are embedded with the Indonesian humanitarian team in Bangladesh...’.

According to data from UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), as at 25 May 2018 Australia was the third-largest donor to the UN’s current consolidated humanitarian appeal for the displaced communities in Cox’s Bazar, after the US and the UK (see Table 2).

### Table 2: UN consolidated appeal: Rohingya refugee crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Largest sources of response plan/appeal funding</th>
<th>Funding for response plan/appeal (US$m)</th>
<th>As a share of overall funding to the response plan/appeal (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States of America, Government of</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom, Government of</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia, Government of</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Commission</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Emergency Response Fund</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan, Government of</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private (individuals &amp; organizations)</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden, Government of</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada, Government of</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark, Government of</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNOCHA FTS: Bangladesh: Rohingya Refugee Crisis 2017

According to the UN’s Financial Tracking System, which reflects publicly reported contributions, as at 25 May 2018 the current Rohingya Refugee Joint Response Plan, launched in March 2018, had received just 18 per cent of the US$951 million appeal. The Plan runs to December 2018.

Australia’s bilateral aid to Myanmar has been reduced by more than a third over the last several years as part of broader international development assistance cuts, falling from $73 million in 2014–15 to an estimated $42 million in 2018–19. Bilateral aid to Bangladesh has been reduced by a similar amount, falling from $72 million in 2014–15 to an estimated $42 million in 2018–19. In response to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice, DFAT has previously stated that none of the additional humanitarian assistance for Myanmar and Bangladesh has been redirected from existing aid programs.

DFAT has also stated that the Australian Government ‘will continue to monitor the situation, particularly as access constraints and humanitarian needs evolve, and will make a judgement about whether and when it would be appropriate to provide additional funds’. In December 2017, following a review of Australia’s humanitarian assistance to Myanmar, DFAT agreed to a recommendation to develop a comprehensive multi-year strategy to guide this assistance, ‘including considering options for responding to displacement of people from Myanmar to Bangladesh’.

### III. Proposals for a strengthened response

**Calls to suspend defence cooperation**

In September 2017 Amnesty International called upon the Australian Government to suspend cooperation with the Myanmar military in response to allegations of gross human rights abuses in Rakhine State:
‘While a campaign of ethnic cleansing is being committed against the Rohingya people, the Australian Government must suspend all forms of support to Myanmar’s military’, Amnesty International Australia’s Campaigns Manager Michael Hayworth said.

‘Amnesty International is calling on governments with military relationships with the Myanmar Army to use these relationships to press the army to stop the violations; and those providing training to the military to immediately suspend co-operation. This includes Australia’.

The United States has applied sanctions on a senior member of the Myanmar military, General Maung Maung Soe, and the UK has suspended all of its defence cooperation with Myanmar. In April 2018, European Union foreign ministers agreed to prohibit the provision of military training to and cooperation with the Myanmar military and ‘adopted a legal framework for targeted restrictive measures against certain persons from the Myanmar Armed Forces and the border guard police’.

In April 2018, Labor’s Shadow Minister for Defence, Richard Marles, described Australia’s defence cooperation with Myanmar’s military as ‘untenable’ in light of the alleged atrocities perpetrated by the Tatmadaw on the Rohingya.

The Turnbull Government has rejected repeated calls for Australia to suspend all bilateral defence cooperation, arguing that Australia’s cooperation with the Myanmar military aims to ‘promote professionalism and adherence to international laws’ and that it is ‘important we maintain appropriate lines of communication with the Myanmar military to do this’.

In Senate Estimates hearings in March 2018, DFAT stated:

The engagement that Australia has with the [Myanmar] military is relatively small ... In our view, the continuing military engagement is very important. Engaging with the military, which still has a particular role in the political situation in Myanmar, is a channel through which we can both engage with the military and also work with the military in the development of and to support the further democratisation in Myanmar.

Professor John Blaxland, head of the Australian National University’s Strategic and Defence Studies Centre and a former Australian defence attaché to Thailand and Myanmar, has supported this position, arguing that suspending defence cooperation would be ‘like cutting off your nose to spite your face ... it’s actually unhelpful because this is the only venue for engagement with the Burmese military on issues relating to human rights’.

The Defence Department has stated that it will ‘review current and planned defence activities on a case-by-case basis’. DFAT stated in Senate Estimates hearings in May 2018 that in regard to bilateral defence cooperation and targeted sanctions, all options ‘continue to be under consideration’.

The Australian Government maintains an arms embargo on Myanmar ‘due to concerns about ongoing armed conflict, weapons proliferation and human rights’.

Refugee resettlement

According to a DFAT country protection assessment published in January 2017, seven months prior to the start of the current crisis, ‘official and societal discrimination against Rohingya in Rakhine State, on the basis of their ethnicity, is endemic. They lack citizenship, face severe restrictions on their freedom of movement and are the subject of systemic extortion and harassment’.

Based on these kinds of assessments, the Refugee Council of Australia has called on the Australian Government to consider a special resettlement program for displaced Rohingya populations,
similar to that in place for Syrian and Iraqi refugees. A former Australian ambassador to Myanmar, Trevor Wilson, has also argued that the resettlement of refugees should be part of Australia’s wider attempts to help resolve the current crisis, noting that on the whole ‘Rohingya have proved to be excellent citizens’. In addition, expert and advocacy organisations such as the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law and the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network have offered recommendations on how Australia could help provide safer refugee pathways in the region for groups such as the Rohingya.

According to evidence provided in June 2015 by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection to Senate Budget Estimates hearings, between 2008 and May 2015, 412 people identifying themselves as ‘Rohingya’ were granted humanitarian visas. However, according to the Refugee Council of Australia, only 37 Rohingya were resettled in Australia between 2013 and early 2017.

Cohorts of Rohingya asylum seekers are currently being held in Australia’s offshore detention and processing facilities in Papua New Guinea and Nauru. In September 2017 there were reports that the Australian Government had offered to pay some Rohingya to return to Myanmar. An unspecified number of Rohingya have been resettled in the US as part of a 2016 bilateral refugee resettlement agreement. It was reported in 2016 that a Rohingya man, Mohammed Roshid, had been resettled in Phnom Penh as part of a controversial 2014 bilateral agreement with Cambodia. In May 2018, a Rohingya man on Manus Island died after reportedly deliberately jumping from the window of a moving bus. Amnesty International has called for an independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding this death and the UNHCR has called upon the Australian Government to provide full support to refugees and asylum-seekers held in offshore detention in order to ‘avert further harm and tragedy’.

As noted, given the number of displaced people in camps in Bangladesh, the worsening conditions in the camps with the looming monsoon season and further delays implementing the Myanmar/Bangladesh resettlement agreement, there remains the potential for another regional migrant crisis similar to that of 2015. During this crisis, the Abbott Government refused to resettle any of the stranded Rohingya fleeing Myanmar and Bangladesh, despite calls by Indonesia that Australia should do more to assist the regional response.

The Gillard Labor Government was also reluctant to resettle large numbers of Rohingya, with Foreign Minister Carr arguing in early 2013 that while Australia would continue to provide humanitarian aid to Rohingya populations, a long-term solution lay primarily with the Myanmar Government.

**Regional diplomacy**

Experts and advocates such as Elaine Pearson from Human Rights Watch and Professor John Blaxland have argued that given the alleged gross human rights violations and the threat to regional security posed by the ongoing crisis, Australia should be spearheading a much wider regional diplomatic and humanitarian effort, including the deployment of Australian Defence Force assets:

> Australia has modestly but effectively led regional coalitions to resolve emergent crises in the past. For instance, in 1993, then foreign minister Gareth Evans was a driving force in generating the momentum for a UN-mandated international mission to bring about a peaceful and democratic Cambodia.

> Similarly, in 1999, when violence broke out after the East Timor referendum results showed clear support for independence, Australia took a principled stand and led a coalition to restore peace and order, drawing in support of key ASEAN partners such as Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore.
As Bangladesh struggles to cope with the newly-arrived Rohingya refugees, and Myanmar unhelpfully blocks international humanitarian agencies from resuming their work in Rakhine State, Australia should also lead in providing urgently needed humanitarian assistance.

Today, the Australian government has a more robust capability to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief than ever before.

With the navy's new amphibious ships, and experience in effective multi-agency cooperation displayed in responding to a string of disasters in recent years, Australia is best placed to offer to form the foundation of a multinational and multiagency coalition to respond to this massive humanitarian crisis.

The time to act is now. Australia has long been a middle power acting like a small power but it can accomplish a great deal when it rises to the occasion. Australia should engage with its neighbours to find a solution to this crisis that, if left untended, could spiral further into chaos.

Australia needs first to call for Myanmar to allow humanitarian agencies and independent monitors into Rakhine State.

It should be a leader in the effort to support the Bangladeshi authorities in responding to the overwhelming needs within Bangladesh.

These are the starting points for a wider coalition in which Australia should play a leading role.

More recently, in the face of the monsoon threat and in the wake of recent Rohingya boat arrivals in Malaysia and Indonesia, Dr John Coyne from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute has argued:

Australia needs to enhance its bilateral and multilateral strategies to address the persecution of the Rohingyas, starting with upgrading our relationship with Bangladesh. And it must be relentless in its efforts to bring Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia together to work with Myanmar to resolve the Rohingya issue.

Further reading
The International Crisis Group has published several briefings papers on the current conflict in Rakhine and the human rights and humanitarian situation facing the Rohingyas, as has Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Regular updates on the humanitarian situation and the international community's response are published on Relief Web, a specialised digital reporting service of the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Updates on the Australian Government’s response to the crisis are published on the DFAT website.

The Australian Council for International Development provides regular updates on the work of Australian non-government humanitarian and development organisations.

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Source: European Commission, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, Emergency Response Coordination Centre website