

Minorities, Muslims

# Migrants must be turned back: Badawi

HUA HIN (Thailand), Feb 27: Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi urged Southeast Asian nations hit by an influx of boat people from Myanmar to be "firm" and turn back the migrants, a report said on Friday.

Abdullah also criticised Thailand and Myanmar over the treatment of the Muslim Rohingya refugees, an issue that has vexed the regional bloc since reports last month that Thailand's military set hundreds of them adrift.

"We have to be very firm in dealing with this situation. If we are not, then all of us will have a problem," Abdullah said in an interview with the Bangkok Post ahead of his arrival at a regional summit in Thailand.

"We have to turn them back." His comments were published a day after

rights groups urged Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) leaders meeting this weekend to put the issue at the top of the agenda.

Many of the refugees have been rescued in Indonesian and Indian waters in recent weeks since Thailand's army allegedly towed them to sea in barges after they washed up on Thai beaches; but scores are feared to have died.

Malaysia is one of the main destinations for Rohingyas fleeing poverty and oppression in military-ruled Myanmar, although many of the boat people land in Thailand first and try to cross over by land.

Abdullah said that the issue was causing tensions between Asean members and had to be resolved. "We feel that they are being pushed onto us instead of

Thailand accommodating them somehow," he said, adding that many then went on to Indonesia.

"When they come to us of course we know they come from Myanmar. When we ask Myanmar, they ask: 'Are you sure they are our people? What evidence have you got?'" Myanmar has officially denied that the Rohingyas are from the country, saying that they are not one of its recognised ethnic minorities. They have been denied citizenship in Myanmar since a change in the law in 1982.

It says they are from neighbouring Bangladesh, where hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees live in camps.

Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya said that Myanmar had agreed after talks at the Asean summit to take back

some migrants — but only if they were proved to be ethnic Bengalis and not Rohingyas.

"Those who are not the Bengali minority, who are the Rohingyas, this will require further consultation," he told reporters.

Myanmar's senior official in Hong Kong earlier this month described the Rohingya boatpeople as "ugly as ogres" and insisted that they should not be described as being from his country.

His Malaysian counterpart, Rais Yati, said Myanmar had agreed to allow Asean to collect data on Rohingyas living in the region in an effort to resolve the problem.

"This will allow us to establish a databank on the Rohingyas with the help of Myanmar. We cannot go into the ques-

tion of the origins of the Rohingyas — that is a contentious issue," he told reporters.

Rais said that there were 14,000 Rohingya migrants living in Malaysia and that there was a "sense of urgency" to find a solution.

"We hope the heads of state will discuss this on February 28," he said.

Asean Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan said on Thursday that the bloc would discuss the issue at a meeting of the so-called "Bali Process" regional forum against people-smuggling on April 14-15 on the Indonesian island.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said in statements on Thursday that the summit must address the rights of refugees and migrants, in particular the Rohingya.—AFP