

Australian
Labor



TRANSCRIPT

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**E&EO TRANSCRIPT
RADIO INTERVIEW
ABC RN BREAKFAST
WEDNESDAY, 20 MAY 2015**

SUBJECT/S: Rohingya asylum seekers

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FRAN KELLY: South East Asian countries are going to meet today to discuss the humanitarian disaster unfolding in the Andaman Sea. Around 5,000 refugees mainly Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar are stranded on boats with dwindling supplies of food and water. This follows Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia all turning them away from their territorial waters, pushing them on. The International Organisation for Migration has described the situation as maritime ping pong with human lives. Shadow Immigrations Minister Richard Marles happens to be in Myanmar at the moment, he has been meeting with Government officials and members of the persecuted Rohingya minority. Richard Marles has spoken with our political editor Alison Carabine.

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION: In recent weeks we have seen the Thai authorities disrupt people smuggling activities and as a result what you've then seen is people smugglers effectively abandon their victims, literally crews abandoning boats and victims left to their own devices on these boats in the Andaman Sea. Obviously there is a looming humanitarian disaster here and we need to be supporting the Governments of the region to do all they can and to find the political space to avert that humanitarian disaster.

ALISON CARABINE: You have had talks with the UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration, now we understand that there are thousands of people who are stranded in the Andaman Sea but does either agency have a clear fix on

just how many people are washing about out there on the water, one estimate puts that beyond 5,000, is that right?

MARLES: It's very difficult to answer that question, what we know is that it's certainly measured in thousands of people exactly how many is hard to know. Australia needs to do all it can to support the Governments of the region to find the political space necessary so that a humanitarian effort can be undertaken here.

CARABINE: The problem is that no country in the region will take these people in, there does seem to be frustration that Myanmar is unwilling to engage in talks, is that the sense that you've got from being in Yangon that the regime is washing its hands of this crisis.

MARLES: I think there is in Myanmar an understanding of what's happening, I think actually that ultimately this needs shared responsibility of all the countries in the region and ultimately there needs to be some form of effort put in place to rescue these people other than apportioning blame in what is a very complex environment I actually think we need to be supporting the countries of the region to work with each other so that that humanitarian effort can be undertaken.

CARABINE: That must be the first priority to rescue these people but today there will be talks involving Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the UNHCR. The search is on for a third country to settle the Rohingyas, what role should Australia be playing here, does Labor want to see Australia settle some of these people?

MARLES: Well the question of settlement ultimately it is a long way down the track, and there is a lot of complexity associated with that. I have met with members of the Rohingya community here in Myanmar and there are actually different views around that community on the question of settlement, the immediate issue has to be averting the humanitarian crisis here and now that is what we need to do.

CARABINE: Should Australia be rescuing these people?

MARLES: Well let me tell you what Australia should not be doing and what we should not be hearing from our Prime Minister right now. The sort of lecturing that we have heard from Tony Abbott yesterday and over the weekend I think actually is deeply unhelpful for the region we've seen the Prime Minister in two different theatres around the world, in the Mediterranean and now here in the Andaman Sea, really try and make a pretty cheap domestic point by peddling his three word slogan in very different environments to the journey that people were undertaking between Java and Christmas Island. It's probably fair to say that the European Governments and those dealing with the issues of the Mediterranean kind of regarded him as the global village idiot, but as a country which is a significant country within the region I think his comments around the question of turn backs denies political space in this region and is deeply irresponsible.

CARABINE: And I take it that's a reference to what the Prime Minister had to say on the weekend when he said 'border security does need to be humane and decent but the boats have to be stopped and if that means more vigorous action on the high seas well so be it' that's the quote have those comments been noted in the region?

MARLES: The Prime Minister comments have been noted in the region, Australia is a regional player and when you have the Prime Minister peddling a line in relation to turning back boats as if every circumstance were the same, it's silly, it's clearly ignorant.

CARABINE: Richard Marles the turn backs by Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand are different from the turn backs Australia has initiated but could it be that these countries have taken some inspiration maybe even some heart from Australia's policy of tow backs?

MARLES: Look, the policies that you've seen play out in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia in fact have occurred over many years and pre date many of the policies that have been adopted by Australia. But I'll tell you what has been noted and that is the comments of the Prime Minister in recent days.

CARABINE: But Richard Marles Australia's approach to border security including turn backs and indeed offshore processing, and it was Labor which reopened Manus Island and Nauru, do you accept part of the blame for maybe undermining some of the international norms when it comes to accepting and processing refugees? Which we are now seeing played out throughout South East Asia in regard to the Rohingyas.

MARLES: The issue which we ought to judge actions by in this context is how we provide greater safety at sea.

CARABINE: But have these countries looked to Australia for a template of how to deal with asylum seekers?

MARLES: I don't think that's right and the point is I think there is enough sophistication around the world in dealing with the issue of people movement to understand that whilst there are some commonalities there are enormous differences in the circumstances, differences relating to whether or not people are coming from transit countries or source countries and differences in terms of the tactics that are adopted by people smugglers. Now frankly I don't think that anyone equates the circumstance between Java and Christmas Island with the particular route from the top of the Bay of Bengal into South East Asia, it is a different circumstance, but it's actually why we need to be helping these Governments and supporting them rather than pretending that a particular policy can be a panacea for every situation.

KELLY: That's Richard Marles Shadow Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, he is actually in Myanmar at the moment. He was speaking there with our political editor Alison Carabine..

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