

# Turning tide?

**Paul Letters** says whether refugees cast adrift in regional seas are persecuted Rohingya or economic migrants, we all have a duty to ensure they are rescued from their desperate situation

The waves of refugees and economic migrants attempting to cross the seas has too often been seen as a threat to be repelled. Now, certain key countries are suddenly implementing progressive policies for helping rather than turning away desperate individuals and families smuggled across the seas. This needs to be the beginning – not the peak – of regional and international cooperation on what is fundamentally a humanitarian issue.

UN figures suggest that 25,000 refugees and migrants left Myanmar and Bangladesh in the first quarter of this year, double the number over the same period in 2014. The region has been slow to act. Asean's motto of "One Vision, One Identity, One Community" hardly stands up in the face of its members turning away boatloads of human suffering. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, currently chaired by Malaysia, has had nothing to say about Myanmar's persecution of its Rohingya minority.

However, last week, following the Philippines' announcement that it is prepared to receive up to 3,000 potential refugees, Malaysia, together with Indonesia and then Thailand, announced a reversal of the policies of turning away boats. Malaysia and Indonesia agreed to temporarily receive up to 7,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshi people, and offers of resettlement are dripping in from countries as far flung as Gambia in West Africa.

Recently, the Thai government has targeted the human trafficking gangs with action that the Asian and international community must develop into a broader, coordinated approach against this dirty business. One boatload of desperate people can be sold to Thai smugglers for US\$30,000. Smugglers then hold these people prisoners, often around the Thai-Malay border – where mass graves have been found – and demand over US\$1,000 per person in ransom from their families. The effects of cracking down on the smugglers have resulted in the gangs now abandoning refugee boats far out to sea. The Thai authorities need support from the international community.

Now, even Myanmar is changing its stance. It has long refused to participate in any talks that threatened to mention the Rohingya people by name. But it is sending officials to Bangkok this Thursday, when Southeast Asian nations will discuss



the human trafficking crisis. According to a Myanmar government spokesperson, assurances that the term "irregular migrant" will be used instead of "Rohingya" have brought them to the table.

The US is also getting involved, offering financial aid and indicating a willingness to receive some of the Rohingyas permanently. It would be gratifying to see Beijing step up and offer assistance: that could only help reduce the impression that China tends only to get involved in Southeast Asia when seeking opportunities to advance territorial claims.



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What has prompted certain nations to act for the good of humanity now? Moral leadership had been at best ignored and, in some quarters, utterly lacking – including from Aung San Suu Kyi herself. Myanmar nationalists in the 90 per cent Buddhist state depict Suu Kyi as "the Muslim lover" in a country where public sympathy for Rohingya Muslims is conspicuously absent. But now that Myanmar's government has finally acknowledged the issue exists, Suu Kyi should take the risk of losing some votes in November's election and

speak out. The reasons for the improved efforts lie more internationally, with prompts coming from recent UN condemnation of the refusal of Southeast Asian countries to rescue those adrift at sea, together with unprecedented media reports. Last week, the BBC showed the world footage of life on board: throngs of increasingly sick people live for months in filthy conditions, stacked on overcrowded wooden shelves in the hold – a sight painfully reminiscent of the Atlantic slave trade, something we thought had been consigned to history.

Last month, boats carrying almost 2,000 people from Africa to Europe sank in the Mediterranean Sea, with over 1,200 lives lost. The European Union is now planning military operations to inspect, seize and dispose of vessels involved in the smuggling of migrants.

UN Security Council permanent members China, Russia and the US are also in on these EU negotiations. We need to see the UN and its member states take a global view of this issue: the underlying causes of poverty and persecution which drive people from Africa and the Middle East to make the harrowing journey to Europe are similar to the issues Southeast Asia is now confronting.

Last week, in rejecting Indonesia's direct request for assistance, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop seized upon the Indonesian government's claim that only 30 to 40 per cent of people rescued from the Andaman Sea are Rohingya asylum seekers. In response to developments in Southeast Asia, Prime Minister Tony Abbott said, "I don't apologise in any way for the action that Australia has taken

to preserve safety at sea by turning boats around where necessary." He described that as "necessary if the scourge of people smuggling is to be beaten".

Indonesia and, by implication, Australia, estimate that 60 to 70 per cent of those stranded at sea are illegal labourers from Bangladesh who seek jobs in Malaysia. If such an assumption is correct, so what? So what if some are political refugees and some are economic refugees? These Bangladeshis are still in desperate need, like the Rohingyas, but for different reasons. People – and that is the key word, whether they be Bangladeshi or Rohingya – are duped by criminal gangs who extort quantities of extra cash from the families of their prisoners and hold them in appalling conditions.

Over the past week, at a time when Australia – once presented as a beacon of democratic light and civilised development in a region of unsavoury regimes – has pointed the finger at those stranded at sea as economic imposters, Myanmar has taken a progressive turn. Last Friday, Myanmar – which at 150th on the UN's Human Development Index is ranked below every Asian nation bar Yemen and Afghanistan (whereas Australia is ranked second in the world) – performed its first rescue of a migrant boat. Over 200 people – all Bangladeshis, apparently – have been saved by Myanmar's navy.

We can only hope governmental talks in Bangkok bring more progress. It's time all players in the region and beyond stepped up to the mark, for the good of humanity.

Paul Letters is a freelance journalist and novelist. See paulletters.com

## Gift of friends

**Kelly Yang** says a story about a great friendship has inspired her to pay more attention to deepening ties outside the family



Two weeks ago, I came across the most extraordinary essay by Matthew Teague in *Esquire* magazine. Teague's wife was diagnosed with stage four cancer at the age of 34. The cancer was everywhere; "like somebody dipped a paintbrush in cancer and flicked it around her abdomen," he wrote. He and his wife have two little girls. To help him get through this devastating situation, Teague's best friend quit his job and moved in.

The first thing I thought after reading this extraordinary story was, "Wow, that's an amazing friend." That was followed by: I don't have a friend like that.

Ten years of being out here in Hong Kong will do that to a person. I've missed more weddings, baby showers and reunions of friends back home in the United States than I can count.

And while I do have friends in Hong Kong, here, we are tied together by geography, rather than mutual interests.

These days, hanging out with friends in Hong Kong consists of three or four people slumped on the couch or at a restaurant table, all checking their iPhones. Any talking that gets done takes place over WhatsApp and usually involves a multitude of emoticons. Why articulate your feelings when you can just slap on a smiley icon?

Not that any of that bothered me. But when I read Teague's article, suddenly, I got a gnawing feeling in my gut, a worry that if I didn't start making time for friends – real time, not just WhatsApp time – it was going to be too late for me.

To my surprise, when I showed my teenage students the article, many did not share this fear. I asked them how many of them, if they knew for sure they could end up with a friend like Teague's – someone who really steps up for you – would put the time and energy into cultivating that friendship. Very few people raised their hands and the ones who did quickly yanked them back down.

"Friendships are overrated," the kids informed me. They said very matter-of-factly that the chances of them ever needing such a level of emotional support was low. One even asked, "Is this friend really smart or something? Is he rich?" Apparently all that factored into their decision.

I stared at them in disbelief. What had happened to them? I remember being a teenager once. My friends meant so much to me. They're what got me through some of the hardest times of my life.

Interestingly, a study recently found that rats also treasure friendships. When rats were given a choice between saving another rat who was drowning and a piece of chocolate, they chose to help the rat.

That these pesky little critters could be so compassionate gives me hope. I'm confident that if rats can do it, so can we. It's going to take the reshuffling of our priorities and putting down our phones, but it can happen.

I hope to follow in the kind rat's footsteps, starting this summer, relaxing with friends as I take in the beach and the sun.

Kelly Yang teaches writing at The Kelly Yang Project, an after-school centre for writing and debate in Hong Kong. She is a graduate of UC Berkeley and Harvard Law School. www.kellyyang.edu.hk

## Rural committees must serve all residents, not just indigenous villagers

**David Newberry** says the interests of all homeowners and the common good are unfairly neglected

The rural representative elections took place in the New Territories in January this year. Since 2003, there have been two elected positions for each village – the indigenous village representative, elected by descendants of families which lived in the village in 1898, and the resident village representative, elected by permanent Hong Kong identity card holders who live in the village. These elections are controlled by the Rural Representative Election Ordinance, and the representatives are elected to serve on a rural committee, of which there are 27.

The committees are influential and are used by the government to assess village sentiment; the chair of each committee serves on the Heung Yee Kuk and is an ex officio member of the relevant district council. Crucially, the committees fulfil a pivotal role in the administration of the small house policy.

So, how do these committees work? Recently, a registered elector wrote to the Home Affairs Bureau asking for details of the meetings of the rural committee serving his village. The reply from the district office was that the dealings of the rural committees were "not open to public for enquiries". It transpires that the committees are merely registered societies, with no requirement to be transparent, or even to publish a constitution.

So, although members are elected, there is no requirement for the representatives to be

accountable to their electorate or anyone else – not even the Home Affairs Bureau knows what goes on at the meetings. Although the process of electing members is controlled by the ordinance, the rural committees themselves are uncontrolled. They are funded by the taxpayer – members receive a small stipend – with no requirement to account for this money.

What do the committees see as their role? When the outline zoning plan was being drawn up for the Hoi Ha enclave, the Sai



**Rural committees operate without regulation and without accountability**

Kung North Rural Committee's only comment was that more land should be set aside for building small houses.

The large majority of the actual residents of Hoi Ha – 35 people – wrote to the rural committee asking that it should also express residents' concerns over sewage facilities, parking and other infrastructure problems, should the village be increased significantly in size. The reply made it clear that non-indigenous villagers were, and always would be, "outsiders", and that "the primary aim of the rural committee is to look after

the traditional interest of the indigenous villagers, particularly to safeguard their traditional rights on village houses".

The rural committee also asserted that this "right" to build a village house was absolute, irrespective of where the indigenous villager lived.

So, rural committees exist primarily to safeguard the interests of indigenous villagers, most of whom do not live in the village, and representing the views of "outsiders", who may own property and have lived in the village for decades, is not part of their remit. Yet, the ordinance makes it clear that resident representatives should not deal with the rights and interests of indigenous villagers. Surely, those representatives, who now make up 50 per cent of the committees, should be speaking for all village residents, including "outsiders".

The rural committees were set up during the Japanese occupation for "village heads". This worked well when village heads lived in their village and were in daily contact with the residents, all of whom were indigenous.

However, with the advent of the small house policy in 1972, the demographics of villages changed; the village head often moved away and, in many villages, the non-indigenous population began to outnumber the indigenous.

For this reason, the government introduced the resident representative in 2003 – to serve village residents. However, although the ordinance was gazetted to

control the election processes, no changes were made to the status of the rural committees, which continue to operate without regulation and without accountability to the electorate or taxpayers.

The solutions to this unsatisfactory situation are easy. In the short term, the committees should publish agendas and minutes of meetings; the meetings should be open to the public and audio recordings made. In the long term, rural committees should be controlled by legislation and their responsibilities to represent the residents of villages, as well as non-resident indigenous villagers, should be clearly defined.

The present situation, where rural committees are run so that the indigenous villager diaspora may make money out of the small house policy, irrespective of the social and environmental damage this might cause to the village, must be replaced with one where the committees represent equally the wishes and views of the people who actually live in the villages as well as serving the cultural needs of indigenous villagers.

David Newberry is co-founder of Friends of Hoi Ha, an environmental advocacy group, which recently joined the Save Our Country Parks Alliance

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## To know China, we must understand the party ruling it

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn** urges study of a series of Communist Party books

On Thursday, the Communist Party is publishing in English an unprecedented series of books, titled *Understanding the CPC*. The launch, at BookExpo America in New York, where China is the "featured country of honour", is a milestone, marking the party's dual commitment to domestic renewal and international outreach.

China is at a crossroads, and the outcomes will affect the entire world. The only way to grasp its current conditions and anticipate its future prospects is to understand what the party is and how it works.

These books are the Communist Party explaining itself – philosophies and policies, organisation and governance, vision and challenges. These are not dispassionate, academic critiques, but real-life expositions of how the party interprets itself. It is good to know what the party wants the world to know. *Understanding the CPC* is the story of the party, told by the party. This is how the party thinks.

President Xi Jinping's (习近平) "Four Comprehensives", his overarching political theory, elevates "strictly governing the party" to the highest rank (along with building a moderately prosperous society, deepening reform, and governing according to law). It has become Xi's transformative hallmark. Although previous leaders have stressed party discipline, none has done so like Xi.

Wang Qishan (王岐山), the party's anti-corruption chief, declared that one cannot

understand China without understanding the Communist Party. The essential characteristic of "socialism with Chinese characteristics", he said, is "the leadership of the Communist Party". Building a moderately prosperous society would be impossible, Wang continued, without party rule.

Understanding the party addresses three fundamental questions. First, why has China opted for one-party rule; by what right does the party hold perpetual rule? Second, what is it about party structure, organisation and governance that enables it to endure as the ruling party; how has it brought about China's remarkable development? Third, what challenges does it face in the future, amidst increasing domestic complexity and international volatility?

For the world to understand the party, the heart of the matter is to explain why and how it avers that its one-party system, under current national conditions, is optimum for China.

All systems of governance have trade-offs. The benefits of a one-party system include the capacity to implement critical policies rapidly, such as the stimulus package during the financial crisis of 2008 that insulated China from the worst of the recession. A one-party system can also assure that strategies which require long-term commitment have long-term commitment (for example, China's western development).

The cost or danger of a one-party system is that society is

much more dependent on the quality of its leaders, and much more vulnerable to their vicissitudes and excesses. While China's one-party system has had great success during the period of reform, in decades prior, when leftist ideology was enforced with oppressive zealotry, waves of political mass movements decimated the country and impoverished the people.

There are trade-offs, too, in public restrictions, particularly in the media. Although some believe China would be more stable with a multiparty system, such a forecast seems wishful thinking, disconnected from Chinese realities.

While I agree that China today is best served by its one-party system, for the party to retain its ruling status, it has a higher obligation to enhance standards of living and personal well-being, which includes increasing democracy, transparency in governance, public oversight of government, various freedoms, rule of law, and human rights.

If the world does not understand the party, it is its responsibility to reach out to the world. That's what this series of books is all about. Foreigners may disagree with the party, but all who need to know China, all who think they know China, must understand it.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn is an international corporate strategist and political/economics commentator. This article is based on a keynote speech he will give at the book launch