

Women's walk across DMZ denied; they crossed on bus

By Eric Talmadge
The Associated Press

DORASAN STATION, South Korea — International women activists including Gloria Steinem and two Nobel Peace laureates were denied an attempt to walk across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing North and South Korea, but were allowed to cross by bus and complete what one of them called a landmark peace event.

The group of 30 women from 15 countries made a final appeal to authorities on both sides to allow them to walk across the demarcation line, but were turned down. The North allowed a South Korean bus to cross the demarcation line to pick them up on the North side of the DMZ and transport them over the border to South Korea.

United Nations Command officials met the group inside the DMZ after they crossed the demarcation line, and allowed them to march again after the final checkpoint on the southern side.

"We were able to be citizen diplomats," said Steinem, the 81-year-old feminism pioneer and author. "We are feeling very, very positive. We have received an enormous amount of support," she said after passing through South Korean immigration.

The women walked, carried banners, and sang on the North Korean side of the first checkpoint leading into the DMZ. They were then met by a large contingent of media on the South side.

The Koreas have remained divided since the 1950-1953 Korean War ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty. The DMZ that divides them is one of the most heavily fortified borders in the world. Authorities on both sides said they could not guarantee the safety of the women had they walked across.

Organizer Christine Ahn, a Korean-American peace activist, said the group had initially wanted to walk

through the symbolic truce village of Panmunjom, where the armistice was signed. Still, she said the crossing itself was a success and a "historic event" despite "governments setting boundaries."

Some members of the group expressed disappointment that the walk inside the DMZ was denied. But Ahn said she was satisfied that they were able to meet with North Korean women during their several-day stay in Pyongyang and to cross through the DMZ, which is rarely allowed in any form to civilians.

Ahn said the group went to the two Koreas to call for an end to hostilities on the Korean Peninsula, push for a reunification of families divided by the war, and promote dialogue between the two enemies.

International activists march to Imjingak Pavilion along the military wire fences near the border village of Panmunjom, in Paju, north of Seoul, South Korea. The activists were denied an attempt to walk across the Demilitarized Zone dividing North and South Korea, but were allowed to cross by bus. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



Rohingya seek better life in Malaysia, but reality is stark

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He worries most about his children. The younger two attend a community school for Rohingya refugees funded by a local Muslim group. They learn the Malay language, Islamic studies, and other subjects. His 11-year-old son wants to be a doctor and youngest daughter a professor, he said.

Hamid and his family have put in for resettlement in the U.S. or a third country through the UNHCR, but haven't heard anything back. He holds out hope that his children might be granted citizenship in Malaysia.

"I have spent half of my life here. I love Malaysia, but after 25 years, what do I get? It's OK for me, I am growing old, but what about my children? I don't want them to suffer like me," he said. "Our hope now is to go to America where they can be citizens and get higher education."

Hamid's views are echoed by many Rohingya families in Malaysia, who initially didn't view resettlement as an option but now see it as the only way for their children to escape an impoverished future.

Globally, only 80,000 refugees are resettled each year, with the U.S. taking about 70 percent of them. Refugees from Myanmar

make up the largest group, followed by Iraq, Congo, and Somalia. But many of those from Myanmar are ethnic Chins who are Christians and English-

speaking.

Apart from the U.S., most other countries are not eager to take in Rohingya Muslims amid concerns that they could not integrate successfully because of religious values, community structures, and language issues, said Towle of the UNHCR.

"Rohingya have not [been] featured very significantly in numbers in resettlement programs apart from the last few years, but the numbers are increasing," he said.

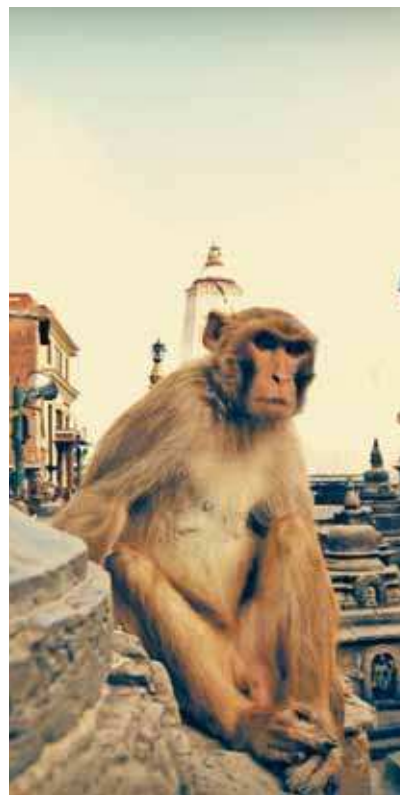
Towle urged Malaysia to consider giving Rohingya protected status and work permits, which could help plug gaps in the workforce.

"If you allow people who are going to be here anyway the right to work, you will flush them out of the gray economy and they will be more dignified contributors to Malaysia," he said.

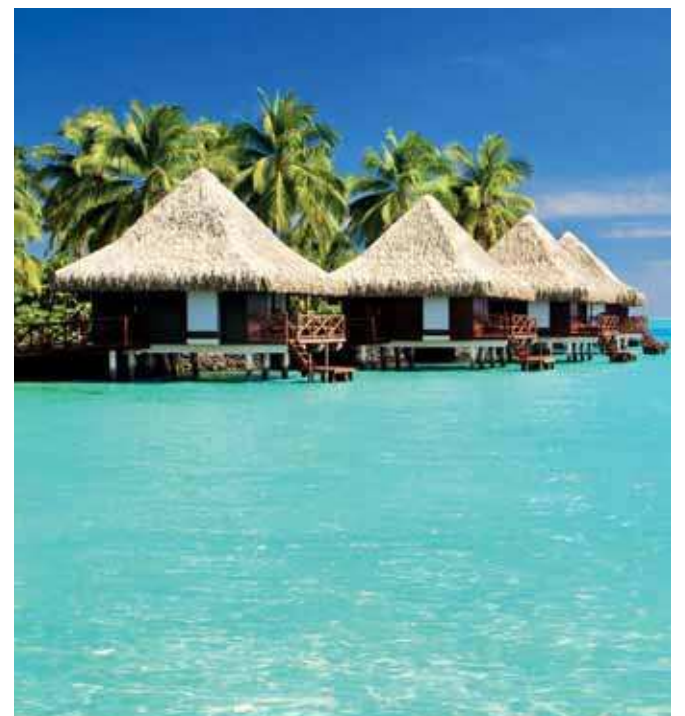
But Malaysia fears that allowing refugees to stay permanently will just encourage more to come.

Hamid said his family cried when they watched scenes of the scrawny Rohingya boat people on television. He said he has told his relatives in Myanmar not to come to Malaysia, mainly because of the risks of the sea journey and mistreatment by traffickers.

"Many people have died at sea due to being beaten, starvation, or illness. It's suicidal to come here," he said. "It's better to die in your homeland than at sea."



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