The recently reported deaths at sea of nearly 100 Rohingya asylum seekers from Myanmar is the starkest reminder that Australia needs to step up its efforts to improve regional protection for asylum seekers and refugees. Without cohesive regional strategies to address the needs of fleeing asylum seekers, the body count will continue to grow, and we must all take some of the blame.

When more than 30 survivors were rescued from the sinking vessel off the coast of Sri Lanka, reportedly en route to Malaysia and Australia, stories emerged of bodies thrown overboard as people died from dehydration and starvation during weeks at sea.

When the Sri Lankan navy rescued another 138 people earlier this month, one person was found dead on board. In recent days, 121 Rohingya asylum seekers were rescued from a boat found drifting off the coast of Indonesia.

In their homeland, Myanmar, the 800,000 Rohingya residents are treated as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, denied basic rights and citizenship and subjected to daily discrimination. Many have fled to Bangladesh over the years but only 30,000 are offered basic assistance in official camps. The other more than 200,000 are treated as illegal Myanmar immigrants, refused aid, and often forced to survive in squalid makeshift sites.

The inter-communal violence that erupted in Myanmar’s Rakhine state in June last year has led to greater numbers fleeing in recent months. But attempts to find a safe haven over the nearest border often end in tragedy, with Bangladeshi guards ordered to arrest and return asylum seekers and forcefully turn boats back.

Children are included among those who have died at sea, with one ten-year-old girl recalling, 'we floated in the sea for four days and my younger brother starved to death'.

Other countries are just as unwelcoming. Rohingyas who try to land in Thailand are pushed back out to sea and many have died of starvation. Others are forcibly returned to Myanmar. The Thai Government recently granted six months’ temporary stay to more than 1700 recent
arrivals, temporarily reducing the need for further boat journeys. But the government claims it will push away future arrivals.

Around 25,000 Rohingyas are registered in Malaysia (more are unregistered) but are refused legal status and live in constant fear of arrest and deportation.

The UN Refugee Agency estimates 13,000 people left Myanmar and Bangladesh by boat last year, 500 of whom are likely to have died at sea. This year alone, several thousand mostly Rohingyas have boarded boats in the Bay of Bengal, while 115,000 remain displaced by the violence in Myanmar. In December last year, UNHCR had raised only thirty per cent of the funds needed to care for the internally displaced in the first six months of 2013.

As members of a regional and global community, Australia, along with other countries in the region, must stop ignoring the suffering of Rohingya people and stop pretending the problem is someone else's to solve.

Rohingyas are one of the most persecuted and dehumanised minorities in the world and we must do more to ensure no asylum seeker in our region is denied access to a fair refugee determination process or to appropriate and safe living conditions. Temporary and long term solutions must be sought urgently for those in need.

Australia's new immigration minister, Brendan O'Connor, said last week that to address the problem of people using desperate measures to seek asylum, 'we need a regional approach involving countries of origin, transit and destination under the auspices of the Bali Process'. Julia Gillard has previously said her government believes 'the only way to respond to what is a regional problem is to develop regional solutions'.

But in spite of some worthy policy efforts — notably the increase in our humanitarian program to 20,000 places each year — the Gillard Government is not leading by example. Corralling people into tents in Nauru and PNG, while diverting foreign aid to run those camps for small numbers of asylum seekers is not a regional solution. Nauru is not a source, transit or destination country and has no role to play in a genuine regional approach.
Last week, Foreign Minister Bob Carr announced a further $2.5 million in emergency aid for Myanmar, with half the money to be spent on much needed shelter, clean water and sanitation in the Rakhine State. But we and other countries need to do much more to assist and draw attention to the persecution, discrimination, and neglect of Rohingya people, both inside and outside Myanmar.

Within Myanmar, Rohingyas must be granted access to the same basic rights as the wider population and allowed to become citizens. Australia must continue to place pressure on the Myanmar government to facilitate processes that will lead to equality, freedom and peace for all ethnicities and religions. Australia must take immediate action to drive multifaceted protection strategies for people who seek safe haven outside Myanmar.

In Jakarta next month, governments and NGOs will attend a UNHCR facilitated regional discussion on irregular sea movements. UNHCR hopes the meeting will lead to progress on cooperative approaches that 'could offer asylum seekers and refugees an alternative to dangerous and exploitative boat journeys'.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, has called for 'a far more concerted effort by countries of the region both with regard to addressing the causes and to preventing lives being lost'. If Australia is genuinely committed to finding regional solutions and saving lives at sea, we must bring more to the table than empty words and Pacific island diversion policies that punish rather than protect vulnerable refugees.

*Susan Metcalfe has written widely on refugees and asylum seekers in Australia.*