

Hundreds of refugees perish at hands of Thai army

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Pictures published in the international media this week confirm recent reports that hundreds of refugees have been towed out to sea by the Thai Army and abandoned with little food or water.

The photos, supplied to the US television network CNN, are believed to have been taken by someone involved in the operation. They show refugees being towed on a small, overcrowded boat by the Thai Army before being cut loose. CNN reported that up to 190 refugees, mainly Rohingya Muslims from Burma's western Arakan state, were crowded onto the boat.

There are about 28,000 registered Rohingya refugees in UN camps in Bangladesh, but it is estimated that an additional 100,000 to 200,000 others live in that country. Groups of Rohingya, with smaller numbers of Bangladeshis, regularly set sail in rickety boats to look for work in South-East Asia. Since 2006 the number of such people has reportedly risen from 1,200 to 5,000.

Since December, the Thai military has been rounding up, beating and detaining refugees on the island of Koh Sai Baed, before casting them adrift in unpowered vessels. About 500 men are missing and feared drowned in the Indian Ocean, not far from the tourist resorts of Phang Nga and Phuket.

Shocked tourists have provided international newspapers with photographs of refugees lined up on beaches at gunpoint. One Australian, Andrew Catton, gave CNN photos of people lying prone under military guard. "Whenever someone raised their head or moved, they [guards] would strike them with a whip," Catton said.

Survivors who were rescued by the Indian coastguard have given harrowing accounts of their treatment by the Thai army. One survivor, Mohamed, said: "[They] ordered us to

get on that boat. We all denied. First they pointed their guns at us, but we still refused to move. Our hands were already tied on the navy ship but this time they also tied the legs of some people and threw four of them into the sea.

"Once we were all on it, they untied our hands. Afterwards, they continued to tow us for some time and then all of a sudden they cut the towing rope and left."

The survivors were from the first of two anti-refugee operations in the past month. On or about December 18, more than 400 men were set adrift. Rescuers found 107. About 12 days later, four boats without engines carrying 590 refugees were cut loose. One carrying 193 washed up in Indonesian Aceh, a second carrying 150 drifted to the uninhabited Tillanchong Island, part of the Indian Andabar and Nicobar Islands. Two boats with 237 on board are reportedly missing.

According to the *South China Morning Post*, the barbaric policy was introduced by the Thai army's elite Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) in December when it took control of refugee matters from civilian immigration services. The newspaper published photographs of Colonel Manat Khongpan, a regional commander in ISOC, supervising tens of hand-bound refugees on Sai Daeng beach.

Thailand's new Democrat Party Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has defended the policy, saying Rohingya boat people would be "pushed out of the country" as part of a crackdown on illegal immigration. At the same time, in a bid to assuage an international outcry, he met human rights activists and promised an investigation.

Abhisit's fragile coalition government was installed with the backing of the military, the state bureaucracy and the monarchy last month, following four months of protests by the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) that resulted in

the judicial ousting of the previous Prime Minister Somchai Wongasawat and his government.

Abhisit took office under a constitution, drafted by the military after it seized power in 2006, that allows ISOC extensive powers to restrict basic democratic rights and override the civilian administration in all or part of the country.

The treatment of the Rohingya refugees appears to be part of an anti-refugee crackdown in response to the deepening impact of the global economic breakdown, which, combined with last year's PAD blockade of Bangkok airport, has led to a sharp downturn in the Thai economy (see New Thai prime minister takes office amid continuing protests, 31 December 2008).

Fearing rising unemployment and social unrest, the Thai authorities are mounting a diversionary campaign against the estimated five million asylum-seekers, unauthorised migrant workers and visa over-stayers living in Thailand.

The Abhisit government confirmed this week that it will repatriate 5,000 Lao-Hmong refugees held at Huay Nam Khao camp for almost two years. The Hmong people are one of several major tribal groups in Laos. Last June, refugee protests against repatriation plans led to the torching of half the camp. Afterward, 800 protesters were forcibly repatriated to Laos, while the rest were sent back to the camp. The abuse of the Rohingya refugees is also connected to the Thai military's long-running repression of Muslim separatist groups in the country's southern provinces, which border Malaysia. Senior army officials have claimed that the Rohingyas are a potential security threat because, as Muslims, they might have been intending to join the southern insurgency. Human rights experts have said the claim ignores the origins of the Rohingyas' problems, which date back at least to their persecution by the Burmese military junta in 1991-92, when around 270,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh.

Similar methods to those used against the Rohingyas—being forced to lie prone in rows, beaten and then transported en masse—were visible when the army killed 78 Muslim demonstrators at Tak Bai in 2004. Last week, Amnesty International reported an upsurge of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and disappearances in the south during 2008, accusing the Thai security forces of "widespread systemic torture" of detainees, amid a "culture of impunity".

The Indonesian government said on Friday that it would not grant political asylum to the 193 Rohingya and Bangladeshi survivors stranded in Aceh Province, where they have been detained at a naval base on Weh Island. Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda said that the boat people were believed to be economic migrants bound for Malaysia rather than asylum seekers.

While the UN and Western powers have expressed concern about the fate of the Rohingyas, the Thai authorities are offering the same pretexts that Western governments give for their own often-fatal practices of blocking or turning back refugee boats. The decision to highlight the plight of the refugees may well be an attempt to pressure the Thai government to assert its independence from the military, particularly on key issues of economic policy.

An editorial in the Murdoch-owned *Times* of London on January 27 declared that the army's abuse of refugees was a test of Abhisit's "political bravery". The newspaper said the affair "confirms the fears of those who doubted that Mr Abhisit (who has described the reports of the Rohingyas being cast adrift as 'exaggerated') would be able to govern without feeling in debt to the army generals who helped him to gain power".

The global economic meltdown will only worsen the refugee crisis in Asia and worldwide. Rising unemployment and government crackdowns are certain to intensify the problems facing the rising numbers of people who have been forced to flee from persecution, armed conflict and natural disasters. According to the latest estimates of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had risen to 67 million, plus 12 million stateless people, by the end of 2007.



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