

Hundreds dead in refugee graves in Malaysia

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Malaysian authorities announced yesterday that they had found mass graves containing hundreds of corpses of refugees in the Malaysian northern state of Perlis. The graves were discovered last week in 17 abandoned transit camps accommodating Rohingya Muslims attempting to escape oppression at the hands of Burma's military-backed government and Bangladeshis fleeing poverty.

Transported south to Thailand's border with Malaysia, the Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants were reportedly held against their will in the makeshift jungle camps until they handed over more money or their families back home paid ransoms. Such large-scale and financially lucrative operations could not have existed without the criminal involvement of state officials in both Malaysia and Thailand.

"The only way these kinds of camps could operate was with the support of the military, police and politicians who were either directly involved or were paid to look the other way," Human Rights Watch Asia spokesman Phil Robertson, told the *Guardian* newspaper yesterday.

According to the Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Malaysia*, police found 30 large graves containing hundreds of corpses a week ago, near the towns of Padang Besar and Wang Kelian. The *Star Online* reported 100 bodies in Padang Besar alone.

Malaysian Home Affairs Minister Zahid Hamid claimed that he was shocked by the find but admitted that the camps had probably been operating for at least five years. He said more camps and mass graves are likely to be discovered.

The Malaysian camps were close to others in southern Thailand where 33 corpses were unearthed earlier this month. The *Bangkok Post* reported that the existence of these camps was an open secret. However, the discovery of the graves caused outrage in Thailand, forcing government authorities to shut the camps.

The closure of the usual routes from Burma and Bangladesh via southern Thailand to Malaysia contributed to the current maritime refugee emergency. An estimated 7,000 refugees are still trapped at sea. Up to 2,000 are in immediate danger without proper food or water supplies on overcrowded boats. Scores of people are believed to have died in the past two weeks.

While Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Burma all denied entry to these vessels, over 3,500 refugees have come ashore or been rescued by fishermen and civilian boats in the past two weeks.

On May 20, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia held a four-hour emergency meeting over the mounting crisis and Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to allow some boats to enter. Thai officials said any change in policy would have to comply with domestic laws. Since then, some rescue operations have been mounted.

The temporary change in Malaysian and Indonesian policies, which came after popular outrage internationally and within the two countries, is entirely cynical. The policy is limited to boats already at sea and the provision of emergency food and shelter, conditional on "international community" assisting in the repatriation or resettlement of the refugees within one year.

Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur are also calculating that the onset of the monsoon season, from now until October, will temporarily end the current boat arrivals.

Four Malaysian naval vessels began searching for boats on Friday but the government of Prime Minister Najib Razak has limited the search area to Malaysia's territorial waters.

Indonesia President Joko Widodo, who ordered his navy to carry out search and rescue operations on Friday, made his first public comments on the crisis last weekend. On Saturday he declared that the decision to accept the migrants was a "good solution." The next day, however, he said that Indonesia could not afford

the costs and it needed international support.

On the same day, Indonesian disaster management agency Sutopo Purowo Nugroho said that the government would begin sending back home 720 Bangladeshi refugees starting this week, claiming that they were “economic migrants.” Nugroho said that United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration would fund the repatriations.

The claim that the Bangladeshi refugees were “economic migrants” has not been substantiated and, moreover, violates what should be a basic democratic right of workers to live and work in any country of their choice.

As well as a life of poverty, those forced to return to Bangladesh could face reprisals. Yesterday Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina publicly attacked the migrants, denouncing them as “mentally sick” and “tainting our image on the international arena.”

International support is limited. In line with its reactionary “border protection” policies, the Australian Liberal-National government, with bi-partisan backing from the opposition Labor Party, has refused to allow any of the Rohingya asylum seekers and Bangladeshis to settle in Australia.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott hailed the initial decision of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia to use their navies to prevent the refugee boats from landing, which, if not overturned, would have condemned many to death at sea.

Washington’s response is no less cynical. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf last week declared that the US was “ready to help countries of the region bear the burden and save lives.” She added that the US was willing to consider requests to resettle some of the refugees, without indicating how many or on what conditions.

Washington’s overriding concern is not the fate of the refugees, but to use the crisis to deepen its diplomatic and military ties across the region as part of undercutting Chinese influence. The Pentagon has announced that it is preparing to carry out maritime aviation patrols and was interested in “working with local partners to help with this issue.”

Since late 2011, the US has forged closer ties with the military-backed regime in Burma effectively turning a blind eye to treatment of the Muslim Rohingya

minority who are denied basic citizenship rights and are subject to state-sanctioned persecution. Like the government, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy does not defend the democratic rights of the Rohingya, who are branded as “illegal immigrants.”

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met government leaders in Burma last week and called for an improvement in conditions for the Rohingya “so that people don’t feel that their only choice is to put their lives at risk by leaving and taking to sea.” The remarks are purely cosmetic. Washington is primarily concerned with strengthening relations with the Burmese regime and has no intention of pressing too hard on “human rights” issues.



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