

Rohingya refugees abused and killed in camps in Malaysia/Thailand

John Roberts
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As delegates from 19 countries gather today in Bangkok for a meeting on “irregular migration in the Indian Ocean,” more evidence has emerged of the horrors facing thousands of Bangladeshis and Rohingya Muslims from Burma fleeing persecution and poverty. All of the countries attending the meeting, in one way or another, bear responsibility for their plight.

According to estimates by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), at least seven boats containing 2,600 dehydrated and starving refugees are still adrift in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea—testimony to the badly coordinated and half-hearted official rescue efforts.

Another 3,500 Rohingya and Bangladeshi refugees have managed to reach shore in Malaysia and Indonesia after those governments ended the policy of driving the boats out to sea and granted temporary shelter to some for one year. The UN estimates that at least 120,000 asylum seekers have left from Burma and Bangladesh so far this year.

For years, Rohingya and Bangladeshi refugees have been forced to rely on often unscrupulous traffickers who have used well-established routes via sea to southern Thailand and then through jungle pathways across the border into northern Malaysia. The extent of the trade makes clear that officials, including at high levels, were involved.

Refugee boats were left stranded at sea by the traffickers when Thai authorities closed down transit camps in the south of the country earlier this month after the discovery of 33 corpses provoked popular outrage.

BBC journalist Jonathan Head uncovered evidence of involvement of Thai government officials and businessmen in the transit camps. His report published

May 22 included an interview with a local Thai official who had closed down one camp but was ordered by the central government to send the Bangladeshi migrants to a detention centre where it was common knowledge that detainees would be “sold back to the traffickers.”

A police officer spoke of a large camp in the military zone on the Thai-Malaysian border big enough to accommodate 1,000 trafficked migrants that could not be shut down as the military had not given its approval.

Over the past week, Malaysian police have uncovered a network of 28 camps near the Thai border where refugees were imprisoned and maltreated in order to extort more money from their relatives. Police believe that one camp held up to 300 people, while others were smaller.

Malaysia’s national police chief Khalid Abu Bakar told *Time*: “I am not surprised by the presence of smuggling syndicates. But the depth of the cruelty, the torture, all this death has shocked me.” He confirmed on Monday that at least 139 possible graves had been found near the camps, which included crude wooden cages for those who attempted to escape.

Forensic teams have begun working to find and recover bodies. Only one body has been discovered above ground in a wooden holding pen. It was so badly decomposed that forensic investigators had to remove it in five separate bags.

Brad Adams, Asia director of the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW), said: “Survivors describe how they flee persecution in Burma only to fall into the hands of traffickers and extortionists, in many cases witnessing deaths and suffering abuse and hunger.

One Rohingya woman told HRW that she had been held in camp on the Thai side of the border and severely abused to force her relatives to pay a ransom. “The brokers beat me with sticks and bamboo and put

out cigarettes on my legs and ankles because I could not raise the money,” she said.

Adams pointed to official involvement in the trafficking operations. “Interviews with officials and others make clear that these brutal networks, with the complicity of government officials in Burma, Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia, profit from the desperation and misery of some of the world’s most persecuted and neglected people,” he said.

After denying the existence of camps or graves in northern Malaysia until as late as this month, Malaysian authorities have been forced to detain 12 police officers for alleged involvement in the human trade. Government ministers, however, are continuing to try to play down the extent of the trafficking.

Former chief of the UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, Matthew Friedman, told the *Guardian* that there were reports on the camps going back 10 years which had been passed onto authorities, “but there was no follow-up.”

The Rohingya are a persecuted Muslim minority in Burma where they are branded by authorities as “illegal Bangladeshi immigrants” and have no citizenship rights, even though many have lived in Burma for generations. Even as the US was forging closer relations with Burma’s military backed government in 2012, the Rohingya were subjected to a new wave of state-sanctioned violence that resulted in scores of deaths and drove tens of thousands from their homes.

Having fled persecution in Burma, the Rohingya face similar treatment in Bangladesh where they have been herded into detention camps, official and unofficial, where they face appalling conditions. The government has just announced that it intends to force 32,000 registered Rohingya refugees from two official camps in the Cox’s Bazar district, a tourist area, out of sight onto Hatiya Island in the Bay of Bengal.

The Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean being convened today in Bangkok by the Thai military junta supposedly to “comprehensively work together to address the unprecedented increase of irregular migration across the Bay of Bengal in recent years.”

Attending are all the chief culprits in human trafficking trade, including Burma, Malaysia and Indonesia. Far from addressing the horrific situation facing the refugees, the assembled countries will no

doubt seek to cover up their own responsibility while imposing even more obstacles to those seeking asylum and forcing them to ever more desperate lengths.

The Burmese delegation has already made clear that it has no intention of alleviating the plight of the Rohingya in any way. On Wednesday, Buddhist monks and nationalists from the reactionary Habyelsaw Tadaban organisation held a march of 300 through Rangoon, denouncing the Rohingya as “beasts” and demanding the government make no concessions in Bangkok.



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