

Rohingya refugees among 250 feared dead in boat capsized

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An overloaded fishing trawler carrying hundreds of Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi nationals has capsized in the Andaman Sea, in what is one of the deadliest maritime disasters in the region in years. Around 250 people—men, women and children—are missing and feared dead after the vessel, which left from Teknaf in southern Bangladesh and was bound for Malaysia, went down around April 9.

The trawler was routed along a well-known sea lane towards Malaysia, a primary destination for Rohingya seeking to escape the squalour of Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar camps, where many have lived for years after being driven from their homes in Myanmar. According to UN agencies, the boat was grossly overcrowded and ill-equipped for the open sea when it encountered rough conditions and capsized in the Andaman Sea, close to the Indian Andaman and Nicobar archipelago.

The tragedy only came to light by sheer chance. On April 9, a Bangladesh-flagged tanker, the M.T. Meghna Pride, spotted people clinging to drums, logs and debris and rescued nine survivors—eight men and one woman, three Rohingya and six Bangladeshi nationals. They were later handed to the Bangladesh Coast Guard and police in Teknaf.

One survivor, identified in local reports as Rahela Begum, a Rohingya woman, described drifting “two days and one night” in the sea, clinging to a piece of wood until she lost consciousness. When she awoke, she saw the tanker looming over her. She has no idea what became of the hundreds of others who shared the boat.

Rafiqul Islam, another of the survivors, told Reuters that they had been at sea for four days. In an attempt to avoid naval patrols, the crew forced passengers into cramped storage compartments meant for fish and nets. “There was hardly any oxygen,” he said, adding that

at least 30 people died from suffocation before the boat capsized. He estimated that there were about 240 people still onboard at the time, including women and children.

Despite the scale of the catastrophe, there is no evidence of a serious, sustained, multinational search-and-rescue operation to find the missing. A Bangladeshi official declared that the sinking occurred outside the country’s territorial waters, implying it had no responsibility for broader search efforts.

The Andaman Sea disaster is only the most recent in a chain of mass drownings and disappearances. In May 2025, UNHCR reported that two boats shuttling between Bangladesh and Myanmar’s Rakhine coast had capsized, with roughly 427 Rohingya feared dead. In November 2025, a Malaysia-bound vessel carrying around 70 people sank near Ko Tarutao on the Malaysia–Thailand maritime border; at least 21 died and dozens more went missing.

UN data indicate that between January and early November 2025 alone, over 5,100 Rohingya attempted dangerous sea journeys from Myanmar and Bangladesh, with nearly 600 reported dead or missing. Many voyages go unrecorded, meaning the true toll is far higher.

The largely Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar have been a persecuted minority for decades. Since formal independence in 1948, military and civilian regimes alike have systematically stripped them of basic democratic rights, culminating in the 1982 citizenship law that effectively rendered them stateless “foreigners” in their own homeland.

In 2012, communal violence in Rakhine State, encouraged and armed by the state, led to mass internal displacement, ethnic segregation and long-term confinement of Rohingya in camps around Sittwe,

forcing many to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh.

Between 2012 and 2015, over 110,000 Rohingya and impoverished Bangladeshis embarked on rickety boats towards Thailand and Malaysia, producing the so-called “boat people” crisis that governments across the region responded to with pushbacks and detentions.

The decisive turning point was 2016–17. After a smaller operation in late 2016, the Myanmar military used attacks by Rohingya militants in August 2017 as the pretext for vast “clearance operations”: village burnings, massacres, mass rape and landmines seeded along escape routes.

Médecins Sans Frontières estimates that between August and December 2017, some 655,000–700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, with MSF documenting at least 6,700 Rohingya killed. Those who fled joined earlier arrivals, creating the largest concentrated refugee population in the world.

Over a million Rohingya are trapped in the Cox’s Bazar “mega camp,” in conditions of extreme overcrowding, insecurity and deepening deprivation. Food rations have been repeatedly slashed. Movement is strictly limited. Access to education and healthcare is minimal, formal work is banned, and there is no pathway to citizenship or integration.

Bangladesh, which is not a party to the Refugee Convention, labels Rohingya merely as “forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals” and openly insists on eventual “repatriation,” despite the fact that the military responsible for the violence holds power in Myanmar and the country has plunged into a broader civil war.

Under these conditions, dangerous sea journeys are a response to ghetto conditions in Bangladesh. UN and NGO reports have documented the growing resort to paid passage on unseaworthy boats out of Cox’s Bazar and Teknaf towards Malaysia and Indonesia, despite the great risks.

Conditions of uncertainly, poverty and exploitation are what awaits those who reach Malaysia. Like Bangladesh, Malaysia is not party to the Refugee Convention and has no asylum law. Rohingya and other asylum seekers are simply “illegal immigrants” under the Immigration Act, and can be subject to arrest, caning, indefinite detention and deportation.

The UNHCR registers refugees and issues cards, but these have no firm legal effect: even card holders can be detained or deported, and access to detention centres

for monitoring has been repeatedly curtailed.

Most Rohingya in Malaysia live “in the shadows,” packed into substandard housing on the margins of Kuala Lumpur and other cities. They have no legal right to work, forcing them into informal, low-paid and hazardous jobs in construction, plantations, restaurants and factories. Children are barred from public schools and rely on under-resourced community learning centres.

Public opinion, stoked by the media and political establishment, has turned sharply hostile, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Rohingya are denounced as disease carriers and job thieves. The state has turned away boats and mounted immigration “crackdowns” that sweep refugees into detention.

The plight of Rohingya is an acute expression of a global crisis. Worldwide, more than 100 million people are displaced, driven from their homes by war, repression, economic collapse and climate catastrophe—processes rooted in the mounting crisis of global capitalism. The working class internationally has a responsibility to defend the basic democratic rights of refugees to asylum and to oppose the vilification of some of the world’s most vulnerable people, which is exploited by governments to justify persecution, dire poverty, imprisonment and the use of the military to bar entry.



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