

ASIA PACIFIC

# Rohingya Migrants From Myanmar, Shunned by Malaysia, Are Spotted Adrift in Andaman Sea

By THOMAS FULLER and JOE COCHRANE MAY 14, 2015

IN THE ANDAMAN SEA OFF THAILAND — A wooden fishing boat carrying several hundred desperate migrants from Myanmar was spotted adrift in the Andaman Sea between Thailand and Malaysia on Thursday, part of an exodus in which thousands of people have taken to the sea in recent weeks with no country willing to take them in.

Cries of “Please help us! I have no water!” rose from the boat as a vessel carrying journalists approached. “Please give me water!”

The green and red fishing boat, packed with men, women and children squatting on the deck with only plastic tarps to protect them from the sun, had been turned away by the Malaysian authorities on Wednesday, passengers said.

They said that they had been on the boat for three months and that the boat’s captain and crew abandoned them six days ago. Ten passengers died during the voyage, and their bodies were thrown overboard, the passengers said.

“I am very hungry,” said a 15-year-old boy, Mohamed Siraj, who said he was from western Myanmar. “Quickly help us please.”

It was not clear how much help they would receive. The Thai military, alerted to their presence by The New York Times, provided some water and food on Thursday,

then assisted the boat's departure farther out to sea early Friday, according to the governor of Satun Province, Dechrist Simshi.

The boat's plight provided a dramatic example of the migration crisis confronting the region: An estimated 6,000 to 20,000 migrants are at sea, fleeing ethnic persecution in Myanmar and poverty in Bangladesh, while countries are pointing fingers at one another and declining to take responsibility themselves.

Most of the migrants were thought to be headed to Malaysia, but after more than 1,500 came ashore in Malaysia and Indonesia in the last week, both countries declared their intention to turn away any more boats carrying migrants.

Thai officials have not articulated an official policy since the crisis began, beyond convening a regional conference to discuss the problem this month. Thailand is not known to have allowed any of the migrants to land there. The commander of the naval vessel that met the migrant boat here on Thursday, Lt. Cmdr. Veerapong Nakprasit, said it had "entered illegally."

The Indonesian Navy turned away a boat with thousands of passengers on Tuesday, urging it on to Malaysia, while the Malaysian authorities turned away two boats with a total of at least 800 passengers on Wednesday.

"What we have now is a game of maritime Ping-Pong," said Joe Lowry, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration in Bangkok. "It's maritime Ping-Pong with human life. What's the endgame? I don't want to be too overdramatic, but if these people aren't treated and brought to shore soon, we are going to have a boat full of corpses."

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has asked regional governments to conduct search-and-rescue operations to no avail. "It's a potential humanitarian disaster," said Jeffrey Savage, a senior protection officer with the agency.

Many of the migrants are believed to have been abandoned by their traffickers with little food or water.

Indonesia's chief military spokesman, Maj. Gen. Fuad Basya, said Thursday that

the military would “push back any boat that wants to enter Indonesian waters without permission, including those of boat people like the Rohingya.”

After Malaysian officials turned back a boat with about 500 people off Penang Island on Wednesday, Deputy Home Minister Wan Junaidi said, “What do you expect us to do?”

“We have been very nice to the people who broke into our border,” he told The Associated Press. “We have treated them humanely, but they cannot be flooding our shores like this. We have to send the right message that they are not welcome here.”

Malaysian officials reached by The Times on Thursday declined to comment.

Tens of thousands of Rohingya, a stateless Muslim ethnic group, have fled Myanmar over the last several years, most going to Malaysia or Bangladesh. But the exodus over the last few weeks seemed to have caught everyone by surprise.

There is no single reason for the spike in departures from Myanmar and Bangladesh, said Chris Lewa, coordinator of the Arakan Project, a human rights group that tracks migration in the Andaman Sea. For the Rohingya, an accumulation of setbacks has taken a toll, she said, including the tightening of fishing permits, which has hit the Rohingya monetarily and nutritionally, and the government’s insistence that its one million Rohingya residents are not citizens.

“It’s a combination of things,” Ms. Lewa said. “Their lives have become worse and worse.”

The fact that so many are at sea at once, however, may be in part an unintended consequence of the Thai crackdown on human trafficking. After the discovery of a mass grave this month believed to contain the bodies of 33 Burmese and Bangladeshi migrants, officials raided several smuggling camps in southern Thailand and charged dozens of police officers and senior officials with being complicit in the trade.

The camps were way stations where migrants were often detained in prisonlike conditions until they or their families could pay smugglers for passage to Malaysia. As horrid as those camps were, without them, the migrants have been stuck at sea,

their traffickers afraid to set foot in Thailand.

"Their business model has been interrupted by the operations in Thailand," Mr. Lowry said. "They will be back eventually — smuggling in trafficking is very lucrative — but they are waiting for now."

Migrants generally pay about \$1,800 each for passage to Malaysia, along with the promise of a job when they arrive, Ms. Lewa said.

But they are frequently shaken down for more payments along the way, and many never make it to Malaysia, a Muslim country that until recently had tacitly allowed the backdoor migration of Muslims from Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Interviews with passengers aboard a boat that washed ashore on the northern tip of Sumatra Island, Indonesia, on Sunday provided a glimpse of the brutal conditions they faced at sea and the desperation that drove them to make the risky voyage.

Passengers told of waiting on the boat for months before it sailed because the smugglers wanted to pack it as full as possible with paying passengers.

Most were forced to remain in the hold, squatting no more than an inch from the person in front of them. Every other day, they were fed bits of rice and noodles and small amounts of water. A hole in the floor, opening directly into the ocean, served as a toilet.

The passengers prayed or talked quietly, their whispers broken by the occasional sound of others vomiting from seasickness.

"There was no singing, only crying," said Muhammed Kashim, a 44-year-old Bangladeshi.

Seven days into the voyage, the ship's Thai captain abruptly stopped the vessel at sea, they said. The next day, gunmen arrived on a speedboat, boarded the ship and robbed migrants of their valuables.

The captain and crew fled with the gunmen, abandoning the ship.

Mahammed Hashim, 25, a Rohingya from the Kyauktaw District in Rakhine State, said the risks of traveling in a rickety wooden ship with little food or water were less than those of remaining in Myanmar.

"We assumed that danger would come, but there was no other way," he said. "We were living in a country that is more dangerous than the sea."

They were lucky. A day later, the boat grounded in Indonesia, whose policy is not to turn back ships once they have made landfall.

The 584 passengers, including 59 children and 86 women, five of them pregnant, will have the opportunity to apply for refugee status with the United Nations refugee agency, a process that is expected to take months. For now, they are being housed at a government compound in Paya Bateung, in Aceh Province, where they sleep on concrete floors but have blankets, food and water.

The Rohingya, effectively stateless, have a reasonable chance at asylum. But the 208 Bangladeshis in the group will probably be considered economic migrants who, denied the right to work in Indonesia, will eventually choose to return home, Mr. Savage of the United Nations said.

Mahammed Jahangir Hussein, a 32-year-old Bangladeshi, said that was not an option. His father sold a house and farmland to raise the \$3,250 he paid for the voyage and a promised job in Malaysia.

"If the Indonesian government says we cannot work, all the men here are saying, 'Let's work in another country,'" he said. "There's nothing back home for us."

Asked about his future, he waved his arms toward the migrants gathered around him and up at the scruffy concrete building he had just moved into.

"This is my future," he said.

Thomas Fuller reported from a boat in the Andaman Sea, and Joe Cochrane from Paya Bateung, Indonesia. Austin Ramzy contributed reporting from Hong Kong.

A version of this article appears in print on May 15, 2015, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Turned Away From Land and Abandoned at Sea.