The Rohingya and Rakhine are indigenous to Arakan and therefore to present day Burma. Before 1785 AD, Arakan existed as an independent nation for many centuries where Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya coexisted peacefully. We will work to re-establish the traditional relationship of peaceful coexistence that existed in the past between the Rohingya Arakanese and the Rakhine Arakanese peoples, and to promote a shared sense of being Arakanese among all peoples of Arakan.

The unity of the Rohingya people worldwide is indispensable, and the unity between Rohingya and Rakhine is vital to shape our own destiny in the Union of Burma to ensure our future and that of our children.

We express our grave concern over the current ‘policies of exclusion’ of the Burma opposition groups or democracy movements and Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) towards Rohingya. We affirm that the political process in Burma shall be genuinely inclusive on democratic principle. We are committed to pur-
The international community is well aware that the 3.5 million peace-loving Muslims of Arakan known as “Rohingya” have long been subjected to large-scale persecution, genocide, ethnic-cleansing, diabolical tyranny and extermination particularly by the successive Burmese autocratic regimes, the worst being the present State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military regime. They are also made largest target of other widespread human right violations, including rape, summary execution, torture, slave labour, restriction on movement and marriage, forcible dispossession and seizure of their land, denial of their citizenship, compelling them to become stateless or refugees. As a result about 1.5 million of Rohingyas have been expelled or have to leave their ancestral homeland for their lives.

In the face of the rapidly deteriorating situation of the Rohingya threatening their very existence and daunting challenges thrown upon them by the military junta, all Rohingya organisations have strongly felt that the total unity of the Rohingya people is indispensible. Thus the three Rohingya organisations -- Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) led by Nurul Islam, Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) led by Professor Mohammed Yunus and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) led by Dr. Mohammed Zakaria -- having common outlook towards all national, political and ideological matters, have united together and merged into a single organisation namely Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) on 11th December, 1998 to serve the cause of their people. Alas! Some of the members of the Standing Committee of the ARNO deserted and formed separately by using their former name, which encourage others to form their own parties to serve their own interest rather than to serve the suffering Rohingya community. When the well-wishers tried to unite them they dodged for last whole year. By forming one party they afraid their all privileges would be deprived. Strangely they are also preaching for unity. But the door is always open for them. They can join ARNO at any time as ARNO is the mother Organisation.

A new Central Committee (CC) of ARNO has been elected by the 4th Congress of ARNO on 13th December 2008. We hope the new (CC) of the ARNO, with the cooperation of the entire Rohingya people, would continue the struggle to achieve the cherish goal of victory.

Since Burma’s independence, the spirit of the Union of Burma or the principle of “unity in diversity” has been undermined resulting in fratricidal civil war of long 60 years continuing till today. We believe that Burma’s diverse ethnic issues and problems can only be solved through a meaningful dialogue among the military junta, the democratic opposition forces led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and representatives of the different ethnic groups, including that of the Rohingya people. Over and above, peace can only be established in Burma when the country is transformed into a welfare state, based on federalism where equality, justice, humanity, fundamental human rights and freedom will perpetually prevailed the right of self-determination of all ethnic peoples is guaranteed. In this connection, we reiterate that self-determination of the Rohingya people is a sine qua non for a permanent solution of their long-standing problem. Though a resourceful country Burma’s remains among the least developed and backward countries in the region. Educational instaurations, universities and colleges remain closed off and on, without certainty. Burma’s education system is failing both students and teachers and the country has futile chances of producing skilled work force. The spread of AIDS and communicable disease are out of control and alarmingly affecting the Burmese people. Without the timely removal of the autocratic military regime, the future of Burmese people will be doomed forever. In this connection, we reiterate to struggle together with the Burmese opposition and democratic forces to put this dastardly military rule to an end once and for all.

We appeal to international community, UNO, OIC, ASEAN and neighbouring countries, and NGOs for a permanent solution of the Rohingya problem.

Rohingya National Congress Arakan, Burma.
Dated: 13th December 2008
Refugee rights organization has called on the Thai government to stop stranding Rohingya boat people from western Burma’s Arakan State at sea after apprehending them for illegally entering Thailand. In a press release issued on Monday, Washington, DC-based Refugees International said the Thai government “should instruct its Army to desist from its new and troubling policy of pushing refugees and migrants intercepted on boats back out to sea.”

According to the group, press reports indicated that there were at least four confirmed deaths and as many as 300 people missing after a boat that had been towed out to sea by the Thai authorities capsized.

One report said that on December 18, the Thai Navy set 412 people adrift on a single boat in international waters near the island of Koh Surin, off the coast of Thailand. After 13 days at sea, the Indian Coast Guard rescued 107 survivors of the ordeal near the Andaman Islands. Thai officials disputed the claim. “Thai immigration office will never send illegal immigrants back to their countries by putting them back in the boat then let them go,” said Police Lieutenant General Chatchawal Suksomjit, commander of the Thailand Immigration Office.

Chris Lewa, an expert on Rohingya issues who interviewed some of the survivors, said that they told her they were forced to get onto the boat at gunpoint and were given just four bags of rice and two tanks of water. “It’s an outrageous situation. Thailand must stop putting them back in the middle of the sea,” she added.

The Rohingya are a stateless Muslim minority who face harsh treatment by the Burmese authorities. They are prohibited from travelling outside Arakan State and are further marginalized by other discriminatory regime laws. Last September, more than 100 Rohingyas were given six-month prison sentences after they were arrested while traveling to Rangoon in search of work.

Many seek to escape the economic hardship of their restricted lives and turn to brokers to help them find work outside Arakan State. Hundreds put to sea in leaky vessels and head for Malaysia, but many end up on Thailand beaches or drown in the stormy waters of the Andaman Sea.

According to official Thai figures, the number of Rohingyas arrested for illegally entering Thailand has increased steadily in recent years, from 1,225 in 2005-6 to 4,886 in 2007-8. There were 659 Rohingyas seized in eight separate incidents from November 26 to December 25 last year.

Source: Irrawaddy, Jan 15, 09

Sheikh Hasina, the leader of Awami League party which won landslide in this week’s elections in Bangladesh, said opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi of the neighboring Myanmar, who has been under house arrest since May 2003, should be released. She told a questioner at her first press conference after her alliance’s grand victory at Bangladesh-China Friendship International Conference Center that her party is always in favour of democracy. When a foreign journalist asked her to explain her stand on detained Myanmar leader Suu Kyi, Sheikh Hasina said, “We want immediate release of Suu Kyi”. “Burma is a close neighboring country of Bangladesh and as such we want good neighborly relations with Yangon”, Sheikh Hasina said. “Friendship with all and malice to none” is our cardinal foreign policy she said adding that she wants a peaceful and democratic South Asian region


The inmates of the Buthidaung jail (in Arakan State) are 1114. About one hundred are Rakhaines and non-Rohingyas. One thousand are Rohingyas sentenced for marriage without permission. Some are sentenced for immigration cases, a few are sentenced for drug and logs smuggling. There are 58 Rohingya women almost all are sentenced for marriage. Reported by an inmate released recently that jail is build for only 200 inmates.
PROTECT THE PERSECUTED ROHINGYA BOATPEOPLE

The Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) supports the Press Release dated January 15, 2009 of the Refugees International urging the Thai officials to treat the Rohingyas and other boatpeople humanely and “to ensure that refugees seeking asylum are properly screened and are not forced back to their country of origin if it will put them at risk.”

The Rohingyas are the worst victims of human rights violations in Burma. They are rendered stateless and have no rights within Burma while living in abject poverty. Crimes against humanity have been perpetrated against them, including denial of citizenship rights, severe restriction on freedom of movement, marriage and religion, forced labour, rape, land confiscation, arbitrary arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings and extortion on daily basis. This impossible situation has constrained them to leave their hearts and homes in search of safe shelter and better life.

We express our serious concern over the harsh treatment of the boatpeople by the Thai security forces. Towing and forcing these helpless, hapless and highly vulnerable people back to the sea tying their hands without any foods in engineless boats to expose them to the risk of capsizing and sinking is a merciless action made in utter disregard of international law and other international standards and practices. Report says one of such boats has capsized resulting in the death and missing of more than 300 people. It is not a solution at all.

Therefore, we urge upon the Government of Thailand and all those concerned to treat these boatpeople humanly, and not send the Rohingyas asylum seekers back to Burma, where their lives will be in danger. Instead they may be granted adequate protection and assistance on humanitarian ground. We also urge upon the Thai Government with the international community to try for a permanent solution of the longstanding Rohingya problem.

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From page 6

Burma’s Muslim Rohingya Minority

Forced labour is widespread. “The regime is carrying out an attack on our language, identity and culture,” said one Rakhine. The National United Party of Arakan (NUPA) has an alliance with the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO). One NUPA leader told me: “When a people have been living this long through history, why should they be deprived of their citizenship rights?”

“The regime is trying to take away our identity,” a Rohingya leader told me. “We will not be there in the very near future. The disintegration of our society will take place. Our prime concern is that we must not be eliminated.” With that context, it is perhaps not surprising that some Rohingyas have been radicalised, feeling they have few allies in the world. Militant Islamist groups have preyed on their vulnerability. There are even suggestions that some Rohingyas have been linked to al-Qaeda. All the more reason, it seems, why it is essential to speak up for them, and encourage Burma’s democracy movement to be more inclusive. Not only is there a strong moral case to speak out against their persecution, but a powerful strategic incentive to do so as well. As one moderate Buddhist Rakhine told me: “We have to reach out to moderate Rohingyas, and work with them, because if we don’t, they will have nowhere else to go but radical Islamism.” Burma is troubled enough as it is, without that prospect to add to its woes.

Benedict Rogers is the author of A Land Without Evil: Stopping the Genocide of Burma’s Karen People (Monarch, 2004), and has visited Burma and its borderlands more than 20 times. He also serves as Deputy Chairman of the UK Conservative Party’s Human Rights Commission. October 6th 2008

Widowers in northern Arakan to wait for three years for remarriage

In Northern Arakan State, including the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung, widowers have to wait for a minimum of three years to re-marry, a widower from Buthidaung said on condition of anonymity.

A widower named Hussain (not his real name), who hails from Buthidaung Township told Kaladan Press Network that his wife had died of cancer three months ago. She had left three children and they did not have a grandmother also, who could look after them. Hussain is a farmer, who spends most of his time cultivating land and is therefore unable to look after his children. He goes to work after handing over the children to a neighbor, for the day.

After collecting all the necessary documents, the widower submitted an application to the Nasaka, Burma’s border security force, to seek permission for remarriage. However, the concerned Nasaka officer asked him to wait for at least three years to seek permission. After speaking to the Nasaka officer, the widower said he had been facing difficulties with his children and asked them to grant permission. The Nasaka, however, did not relent.

In order to get permission for remarriage, there are more formalities. Initially, the applicant had to get forms from the concerned office where he had to pay kyat 5,000. After collecting the forms, these would be filled up by the clerk of the Village Peace and Development Council (VPDC), where the applicant had to pay kyat 3,000. Then the application would be sent to the VPDC office for a recommendation letter from the VPDC Chairman, where again the applicant had to pay kyat 5,000, a bridegroom’s father, who declined to be named, said.

Afterwards, the application would be sent to the Sarapa (Military Intelligence) of Nasaka for a recommendation letter, where the
Till 957 CE Arakan had been ruled by Hindu dynasties. Both the people and governments were Indian similar to Bangalees, Arakan, in fact, is a continuation of the Chittagong plain. The “true Chronicle” records that in the 957CE, a Mongolian invasion swept over Arakan. According to Wilhelm Klein, all of a sudden, Arakan changed. The invading tribes made the country face to east, away from India. The Tibeto-Burman who had entered the country stayed in Arakan-with the racial mixture which characterizes today Rakhings.

Those who are now known as Rohingyas are the local indigenous people living in Arakan since the dawn of the history that later embraced cultural and religious reformation to upgrade their ancient tradition. Islam was introduced in Arakan by Arabs traders and Sufi mystics within 50 years of the advent of Islam in 610 CE. Dr. Pamela Gutman wrote that, the Rakhings appears to have been an advance-guard of Burmans who began to cross into Arakan. A Phayre, D.G.E. Hall, M. Collis and other historians who wrote Burmese history, wrote that the people of Wassali were Indians. M. Collis wrote that, “...it (Arakan) was an Indian land, dynasty following dynasty. Then in AD957, the whole area was overrun by a Mongolian incursion from the north. The Mongolian mixed with the Indian and erected the Arakanese race. According to San Shwe Bu, a Rakhing historian, Arakanese history proper than (after 957 CE) began and it lasted 9 centuries until 1784 CE. According to D.G.E. Hall till 10th century the people of Arakan were Indian and similar to Bangalees. Rohingya is the only race of Arakan similar to Bangalees. It is not logical to deny the fact that Rohingya has a ‘historic right; the right of the first occupation of Arakan.

The Wassali state was established by Mahawara Min of the west of Naf River in 600-612 CE at Pruma of present Maungdaw township. Pruma was a sea port in accordance to the records of the tourists in 2nd century CE. From Pruma, the Wassali state was established by conquering small states adjacent to it. King Mahawara and his subjects were Indians similar to today’s Rohingyas.

In the ‘Kyaukza’ stone inscription serial No.963/20-23-804 Burmese era 1442 C.E. there is indication of Muslim King’s reign of Arakan in 14th century who were friends of Burmese kings and used to visit them. The Kings of Arakan had Muslim title. If they were not Muslim kings mentioned in the inscription, the Muslim king of Arakan might be Rohingya Muslim kings, from Myanmar river valley, the eastern of the Naf River. Rohingyas claim their existence there of over thousands years. If not thousands years, their existence might be from the time of 1202 C.E. when the Muslims conquered Bengal, that is 800 years. In 1406 Arakan was occupied by Burma. The king of Arakan, Narameikhla fled to Muslim Bengal. He was restored to the throne of Arakan in 1430 by Bengal Sultan who sent a large Muslim army to drive out the Burmese invaders. The Muslim army of Wali Khan and Sandi Khan all stayed and settled down in Arakan. The Mrauku dynasty was established after driving out Burmese invaders in 1430. It was the most glorious era in the history of Arakan.

For one hundred years (1430-1530) Arakan was under the political influence of Bengal as a vassal state. For nearly one century (1582-1666) the Chittagong division was under Arakanese rule. The court language of Arakan had been Persian till 1845, 22 years further beyond British occupation. The coins found in Arakan belong to those of Mrauk U are Muslims. The Mrauku, rulers inscribed their coins and state emblems with ‘Kalama; Muslim profession of faith, and Muslim name of the kings in Arabic script. In the court of the Araknese kings Muslim ministers and Qadis (Judges) were appointed.

There is a coin of Razagr/ Salim Shah I (1593-1612) in the collection of Chittagong University museum. Dr. A. Karim remarks that the coin of Salim Shah is very interesting and it throws light on Arakan relations with Bengal. He also wrote that Nowadays many scholars have deciphered the coins, and have read the Muslim names of the kings properly. There is no doubt that the names are clear Arabic words, e.g. Husain, Ilyas, Kalima, Mohamad, Nuri, Salim, Sikandar, etc. Not only that, European writers like Fray Setasien Manrique have also written the Muslim names of Arakanese kings. Manrique was himself in the Arakanese court for a pretty long time, he was present in the capital on the occasion of the coronation of the king Thiri Thudamma (Salim Shah II). So Manrique’s evidence cannot be questioned. What is more important is that Manrique used the words, e.g., Husain, Ilyas, Kalima, Mohamad, Nuri, Salim, Sikandar, etc. Not only that, European writers like Fray Setasien Manrique have also written the Muslim names of Arakanese kings. Manrique was himself in the Arakanese court for a pretty long time, he was present in the capital on the occasion of the coronation of the king Thiri Thudamma (Salim Shah II). So Manrique’s evidence cannot be questioned. What is more important is that Manrique used the
It is not often you meet someone who tells you that he is from “a people at the brink of extermination.” But the testimonies from refugees in a remote corner of southern Bangladesh, on the border with Burma, justify that assessment. For the Rohingya people, a Muslim minority in northern Arakan State, western Burma, are a stateless people whose very identity is denied.

All the people of Burma are suffering at the hands of one of the world’s most brutal, and illegitimate, military regimes. From time to time Burma’s crisis hits the headlines, as it did with protests led by Buddhist monks last September, and Cyclone Nargis in May this year. In between such events, however, Burma fades from the world’s attention.

If Burma as a whole is under-reported, the people on its western borders are almost unknown to the world. Journalists, activists and aid agencies who visit the region tend to head for the Thailand-Burma border, where access to refugees, displaced people and democracy groups is greatest.

Few visit Burma’s borders with India, where a famine is unfolding, or with China, where women are trafficked into prostitution, and fewer still make it to the Bangladesh border where a slow, forgotten genocide is taking place.

The Rohingya people are ethnically and culturally closely related to the Bengali people in the area surrounding Chittagong, but have lived in Burma for generations. While their precise history may be debated, for generations they have lived in Burma, but many have returned, unable to survive in their homeland. One refugee said: “As long as human rights abuses continue in Burma, we cannot go back. We are caught between a crocodile and a snake. Where can we go?” Another expressed their dilemma, and statelessness, equally starkly: “The Bangladeshi authorities say we are from Burma. The Burmese regime says we are Bengalis. Where should we go?”

As part of its campaign against the Rohingya, the junta regularly stirs up anti-Muslim sentiment among the Buddhist Rakhine and Burmans, with some success.

“The regime uses the Rakhine against us as part of a divide-and-rule policy,” said one Rohingya. And so in addition to facing persecution from the regime, the Rohingyas face discrimination from Burma’s democracy movement too. Many Rakhine and Burmans in the democracy movement refuse to recognise the Rohingyas as an ethnic group, and they have been denied membership of the opposition ethnic Nationalities Council. There is a dispute even over the term ‘Rohingya’, and many Rakhine prefer to call them “Arakanese Muslims”, “Burmeese Muslims” or “Bengalis of Burma”. Some Rakhine, however, have recognised the need to work with the Rohingyas against their common enemy, the regime. After all, the Rakhine are also victims of the junta. In schools, teachers use Burmese and the Rakhine language is banned. Forced labour is widespread. “The regime is carrying out an attack on our language, identity and culture,” said one Rakhine. The National United Party of Arakan (NUPA) has an alliance with the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO). One NUPA leader told me: “When a people have been living this long...”
A delegation of four Rohingya activists from Burma have returned from a two-day advocacy and awareness-raising visit to Brussels, in which they highlighted the political and humanitarian crisis in Burma as a whole, and the plight of the Rohingyas on the Bangla-Burma border in August, the Rohingyas on the Bangla-Burma border in August, the Rohingyas on the Bangla-Burma border in August, and the Rohingyas on the Bangla-Burma border in August. The delegation from the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK) was facilitated and hosted by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and included BROUK’s President, Maung Tun Khin, CSW’s Advocacy Officer Benedict Rogers, who visited the Rohingyas on the Bangla-Burma border in August, accompanied the delegation. In meetings with officials in the European Commission and Council, as well as staff in the European Parliament, the delegation called on the European Union (EU) to support UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s proposed visit to Burma next month, and to urge the UN to introduce specific benchmarks for progress in Burma, accompanied by deadlines. The first such benchmark, the delegation said, should be the release all political prisoners prior to Ban Ki-moon’s visit. The delegation also urged the EU to encourage Ban Ki-moon to raise the plight of the Rohingyas during his visit, and to put pressure on Burma’s military regime to lift restrictions on marriage, movement and education for the Rohingyas.

Maung Tun Khin said: “We had extremely valuable discussions with EU officials and European Parliament staff, in which we were able to raise awareness about the suffering of all the people of Burma, and particularly to spotlight the plight of the Rohingyas who receive so little international attention. Among the issues we raised, we urged the EU to encourage on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Islamic nations to put pressure on the regime in Burma. We were also able to discuss the humanitarian situation in Arakan State and the suffering of refugees in Burma. The message we delivered was that all the people of Burma are suffering, and it is time for increased international action. The EU has a vital role to play and we were privileged to have this opportunity to discuss the crisis in Burma with EU officials.”

CSW’s Advocacy Officer Benedict Rogers said: “We were delighted to be able to facilitate this opportunity for the Rohingyas. We had valuable discussions and opportunities to provide information about the brutal suppression of the Rohingyas, among the most persecuted groups in Burma, to people who were not previously aware. We also highlighted the wider suffering of all the people of Burma.”

Source: CSW & BROUK, November 5, 2008

**Released Burmese prisoners languish in Bangladesh prison**

| Burmese prisoners accounting for 105 people, though released (popularly known as RP) have been languishing in Bangladesh prison since 2006 because the Burmese military government refuses to recognize them as Burmese citizens. According to a prison report, 105 released Burmese prisoners were brought to Cox’s Bazaar prison located near Burma’s western border, from several prisons around Bangladesh in 2006 to be handed over to Burma. However, the released Burmese prisoners could not be sent to Burma from Bangladesh as the Burmese authorities refused to accept them. An immigration official Abu Kalam from Cox’s Bazaar said that Burmese authorities told them whenever they request their transfer to Burma that they could not check whether the prisoners in Bangladesh are Burmese nationals or not. According to prison sources, the Bangladesh government is not willing to keep the released Burmese prisoners in Bangladesh prison anymore as the authorities have to spend additional funds for them. At the same time, accommodation for Burmese prisoners is also another problem for Bangladesh because there are many prisoners staying in prison though there is not enough adequate accommodation in the prison. In Cox’s Bazaar prison, there are nearly 400 Burmese citizens and most of them are detained by Bangladesh authorities for illegally entering Bangladesh territory. It is learnt that there are 1500 Burmese nationals in Bangladesh prison and the numbers have increased in recent years. Source: Narinjara News, Jan 1, 2009 |

**To our esteemed readers and well-wishers**

We wish happy New Year to our readers. We are overjoyed to publish again the “ARAKAN”. Due to unavoidable circumstances we are unable to publish the “ARAKAN” for a long period, for which we are regretted. We request our valuable readers to help the continuation of “ARAKAN” in every possible way.

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**Nasaka into lucrative business in Maungdaw**

The Commander of Nasaka village’s border security force of area No 5 in Maungdaw Township provided loans to villagers of his area on January 7, for cultivation of summer paddy. The commander disbursed Kyat 100,000 to the villagers through the village Peace and Development Council (VPDC) Chairman of Loune Don village tract in Maungdaw Township. But, villagers had to pay the commander at least 150 Taungs (one Taung =14 kg) of paddy after harvesting in summer. Villagers do not willing to take the money for paddy as the price is very low compare to those of open market price, but the concerned authority forces to take the money. One Taung of paddy costs Kyat 700. But, in the open market, one Taung of paddy is being sold at Kyat 2,300. As a result, the Commander makes a profit of kyat 1,600 on one Taung. The Commander will net Kyat 140,000 from 150 Taungs of paddy. The Commander also gave loans to other villages which are under Nasaka area No. 5. At present, in Maungdaw north, a kilogram of rice is being sold at Kyat 450 while it was Kyat 400, 15 days ago. A 50 kg rice bag is being sold at Kyat 18,000 in Maungdaw while it was only Kyat 16,000, two weeks ago. A village elder said, “The concerned authority always thinks that how to get money from villages which are under his control.”

Source: Kaladan News, Jan 15, 2009

Volume 1, Issue 1 January 2009
Rights group calls on Thailand to change policy for boatpeople

A rights group, Refugees International (RI) from Washington, D.C called on the Government of Thailand to change their policy towards boat people, who have been recently entering their territory, through a press release yesterday.

The boat people are primarily stateless Burmese Rohingya escaping severe oppression and harsh poverty at home, but also include some Bangladeshi migrants. Both group board boats of varying seaworthiness with the aim of finding security and economic opportunity in Thailand and Malaysia, the statement said.

"The Government of Thailand should instruct its Army to desist from its new and troubling policy of pushing refugees and migrants intercepted on boats back out to sea which endangers their lives, and exposes them to the risk of capsizing or sinking," the statement said.

The Thai government is detaining them on a remote island and then forcing them back out to sea, statement added.

"The actions of the Thai government contravene accepted standards of international law that discourage putting civilians at greater risk after being in the custody of government officials. The Thai authorities should, at a minimum, revert to the practice of deporting undocumented migrants. Thai officials should also ensure that refugees seeking asylum are properly screened and are not forced back to their country of origin if it will put them at risk," the statement more added.

"The Thai government is taking highly vulnerable people and risking their lives for political gain. It should be engaging the Burmese government on improving conditions at home for the Rohingya if it wants to stem the flow. The Rohingya will continue to make the journey because they have no hope for a better life in Burma. Pushing them back out to sea is not an effective deterrent – it just jeopardizes lives," said Advocate Sean Garcia.

"The Rohingya are stateless and have no rights inside Burma. The Burmese government targets them for forced labour and extortion, and restricts their movement. The Burmese government's policy of actively displacing the Rohingya from their homeland means that any refugee who is forced back is subjected to arrest and abuse. Until the Rohingya are recognized by Burma as citizens, neighboring countries like Thailand must protect and assist this vulnerable population," he added.

"It was a sick and bizarre situation, and there appeared to be children in the groups as well. They were forcibly exposed to the hot sun although trees provided shade a few meters away. Some of the tourists went over to look at what was going on," said Mrs. Skibelig, who had her Christmas holiday in Similan Islands, Thailand, together with 20 other family members, is one of the eyewitnesses about the policy of Thailand regarding boatpeople.

"When we first arrived on the beach we thought the Thai military was going through a military drill. Later we understood that something very, very serious was going on," said Mrs. Skibelig.

"The men were mostly Bangladeshi and some Burmese nationals, aged between 18 and 60, who drifted through the Bay of Bengal, and we are trying to rescue the boatpeople with navy ship and helicopter," said authorities in Port Blair.

"To arrest people when they enter Thai waters then release them in international waters, without motors or sails, would clearly be a violation of international human rights," said Chris Lewa, a Bangkok-based social worker who is seeking better treatment for the Rohingya boat people.

Refugees International is a Washington, DC-based organization that advocates to end refugee crises. In November 2008, Refugees International staff conducted a mission to Bangladesh and Malaysia to assess the humanitarian conditions for Burmese Rohingya refugees, including boat migrants. There are approximately 1 million Rohingya living outside Burma.

Source: Kaladan News, Jan 13, 2009