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The TRAGEDY OF THE ROHINGHA BOAT PEOPLE

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photo courtesy of Mr. Ferdi Nazirun Sijabat

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Editorial: The Rohingya boatpeople and its core cause

The tragedy of the Rohingya boatpeople drew the attention of the international community. It reflects the plights and agonies of the Rohingya people under the iron heels of the military regime of Burma (Myanmar). For Rohingyas the country has been like a pressure-cooker or tinned-Sardine. Mr. Surin Pitsuwan, the Secretary General of ASEAN and former Foreign Minister of Thailand said in an interview with Al-Jazeera that it is not an issue of a particular country but an issue of regional and international. The human rights groups express their serious concerns over the harsh treatment of the boatpeople by the Royal Thai security forces. Towing and forcing these helpless and highly vulnerable people back to the sea tying their hands without navigational equipments, foods and water in engineless boats to force them to the risk of drawing and sinking is a merciless and inhuman act contrary to the norms of civilized world. It is also an act in violation of the terms of the Law of the Sea and international humanitarian law. It is reported that one of the boat was capsized resulting in the death and missing of around 500 people. Pushing out to open sea is not an effective deterrent, it just jeopardizes lives.

In early December Thai Navy boats intercepted several boatloads asylum seekers approaching Thai shores. They were rounded up and detained on a remote island where they were beaten and given little food. Later, they were herded onto a navy boat that was towing a barge. Then they were forced to move into the barge with only two barrels of water and two bags of rice according to a survivor who was among the people who then drifted in Indonesia.

Despite their long history and more than a thousand years establishment in Arakan, the Rohingya are not tolerated in Burma because of their religion and ethnicity. They

are rendered stateless in their own country and have no rights in Burma while living in abject poverty. Crimes against humanity have been perpetrated against them, including denial of citizenship rights, severer restriction on freedom of movement, marriage, religion, fear and thought, forced labor, rape, land confiscation, arbitrary arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings and extortion on daily basis. This unbearable situation has compelled them to leave their ancestral homes and hearths.

Many left selling everything in their possession to pay human smugglers in the border towns of Teknaf or Cox's Bazar between 25,000 Taka and 100,000 Taka – depending on the destination of a dangerous journey out on the open sea for days and weeks, in fishing boats, basically in search of protection and safe shelter and also to seek better life in Malaysia or in Thailand as SPDC has curtailed all sorts of work for them in Burma. Their landed property are also confiscated and distributed among the new Buddhist settlers, invited from within and outside the country, including Bangladesh. It has systematically caused demographic changes in the Traditional Rohingya Homeland of North Arakan.

Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO), a representative organization of the Rohingya people of Arakan, Burma, has recently staged various campaigns and initiatives in order to care for these boat people as well as to engineer a comprehensive solution to the Rohingya problem. ARNO has staged protests in front of Thai and Burmese embassy in London on 26th January 2009. ARNO is con-



tacting all the concerned government bodies and media to help address the problem. It urges upon the international community to persuade Thai government to release all boat people in their custody; to grant asylum to those seeking protection and to give free passage to those who opt for going to other countries. Meanwhile, ARNO welcomes the proposed regional conference involving all states affected by the Rohingya boat people and to combat the rising tide of illegal migrants. However, ARNO emphasizes, “it

is imperative to address the root cause of the Rohingya problem, including the core cause of the boat people's flights from their hearths and homes”. But the ball is at the court of Burma. If the Burmese regime would improve human rights conditions and give Rohingya equal rights on par with all citizens of Burma, there will be no migrants.

Last not the least, the flights of Rohingya from their ancestral homeland, with which they have spiritual attachment, is not merely for economic reason. It has political and humanitarian roots. Because the Rohingyas were always solvent and self-sufficient until the execution of military's blueprint for the 'Rohingya extermination' rendering Arakan into a big prison without wall. In fact, they are fleeing continued 'crimes against humanity' which are arguably 'slow burning genocide'.

The problem of Rohingya is a forcible dispossession of their land and their expulsion from their ancestral homeland in the most inhuman manner. It is an 'ethnic cleansing' through systematic religious and political persecution with intent to turn Arakan into a 'Muslim free region'.

AI Calls for Access to Rohingya

By LAWI WENG
Friday, January 30, 2009

A leading international rights group, Amnesty International, called on regional countries on Thursday to address the plight of Rohingya migrants and grant the UN immediate access to the detained boat people.

Amnesty International sent an open letter on Thursday to the governments of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Burma and expressed its concern on the issue of Rohingya migrants.

“We write to you to raise our serious concern about the plight of the Rohingyas,” the rights group said in the letter.

It also urged the six regional countries to grant the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) immediate access to detained Rohingya in order to determine whether they need international protection.

The group asked the Burmese military government to stop persecution of the Rohingya people who live in Arakan State in western Burma.

On Friday, a Burmese state-run newspaper, Myanmar

Ahlin, carried a story that claimed the Rohingya are not among Burma’s more than 100 ethnic minority groups.

“It will be complicated if Thai authorities repatriate the 66 Rohingya migrants to Burma,” the report said, referring to an earlier group of detainees.

However, Kitty McKinsey, who is the regional spokeswoman for UNHCR in Asia, told The Irrawaddy on Friday that the detained migrants were clearly Rohingya, and they departed from Burma.

The UNHCR was granted access to 12 Rohingya teenagers from a group of 78 Rohingya who were rescued

On Friday, a Burmese state-run newspaper, Myanmar Ahlin, carried a story that claimed the Rohingya are not among Burma’s more than 100 ethnic minority groups.

by the Thai navy on Monday night. She said the teenagers are in good condition.

The health of the remaining Rohingya is unknown. The UNHCR is in discussions with the Thai government to obtain access to those in detention, she said.

Kasit Piromya, the Thai Foreign Minister, told reporters in Bangkok on Thursday that he has agreed “in principle” to grant UNHCR access to the detained Rohingya boat

people after talks were held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Meanwhile, two leading US-based rights groups, Refugees International and Human Rights Watch, claim the Thai navy has mistreated hundreds of Rohingya boat people who left from Burma, forcing many of them back out to international water with limited food and water. The groups said as many as 300 Rohingya are missing. Thailand has denied the charges, but in a statement released on a Web site on Wednesday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that “should concrete evidence be presented, the Thai Government would seriously look into such cases.”

Last week, Foreign Ministry officials met with envoys from India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Burma to discuss the exodus of the Rohingya from Burma.

Due to alleged discrimination against the Rohingya people, there has been a persistent exodus of Rohingya from Burma and Bangladesh since the early 1990s in an effort to reach Thailand and Malaysia.

Chris Lewa, an expert on Rohingya issues, said the number of boat people may increase this year due to the impact of the global economic downturn on one of the poorest regions of Asia.

ROHINGYA REFUGEES- VICTIMS OF CONSPIRACY

By A. Nazim

The death of hundreds of Rohingya Muslims of Arakan, Burma(Myanmar) and Bangladeshi Muslims in the Andaman sea after they were left adrift in boats without engines by Thai navy is an act of crime against humanity. Thailand has to take responsibility to what has happened to the helpless Muslims. But the actual culprit of this tragedy is the brutal military regime of Myanmar. The military regimes from 1962 have been implementing a policy to expel Rohingya Muslims of Arakan applying by all available means. All restrictions are put to have negative impact in the lives of Muslims so that they choose to leave the land and Buddhists are to be replaced on the vacated land. The drive of ethnic cleansing and expulsion steadily took its momentum culminating mass exoduses in 1978 and 1992. The military regimes thought that they could clear up a bulk of population totaling more than 200,000 each time in a few days time. But each time they tried, the drive ended in futility and even boomeranged. Muslims who took refuge were to be accepted back under the pressure of international community. United Nations (UN) had to

try very hard to get inside Arakan to oversee the repatriation process and to work for rehabilitation and reintegration. All the efforts of international community have gone against the will of the military and the plans and projects on the field are faced stiff blockade from the ruling junta. After 1992 exodus and subsequent repatriation, the military regime brought Nasaka forces to the Muslim north of Arakan in a bid to crush Muslim population. The Nasaka is a newly created force designed to act against Muslims and they are only deployed in Arakan and is present till today. They are deployed over the Muslim dominated north Arakan dividing it into 9 sectors. All the sectors fall within Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships. These Nasaka forces, in collaboration with other administration departments and army have been active in anti-Muslim activities. This long drawn anti-Muslim drive played an important role in expelling Muslims as Muslims themselves started to choose to leave the land in small numbers without making an en mass flow of people. This unnoticed movement of Muslims across the border has not created any hue and cry and no international attention has brought in until the recent loss of lives of hundreds of them in bizarre way in the high seas.

The new trend of movement of Rohingya Muslims of Ara-

kan started only a few years back. Muslims in groups cross into Bangladesh where all arrangements are made for the journey. But in recent months Muslims living in Arakan need not to cross the border as they are provided free access by Nasaka and Sarapa (military intelligence) to start the journey from inside Arakan. Even people from Bangladesh are allowed to come in and board the boats intended to go across the bay. Nasaka and Military get money from the intending Muslims and the money are paid through their agents who collect it. The area covers Nasaka sectors 7 and 8 and is a coastal belt some 15 miles south of Maungdaw. Normally 100,000 Kyats is to be given as bribe to the Nasaka and Sarapa forces and the agents get extra money from the passengers.

It is very much clear that the military regime is directly involved in this process and that they are directly responsible for these tragedies and they are most accountable. The Myanmar military must have to take the prime responsibility as the root cause of the problem is there and Thailand is to be blamed for the mistreatment and abuse. The ruling military regime called State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) is surely to deny any wrong doings against the Rohingya Muslims and will insist that Muslims are equally

treated. The steps taken by UNHCR and other human-rights groups are most commendable and Thailand has the responsibility to tackle the problem. The Anti-Muslim policies adopted by the Myanmar military should be brought under strict scrutiny and it can be done in diplomatic ways by the concerned regional countries in collaboration with UN. It is most likely that the military will not mend its policy unless strong pressure is put.

The problem is not an economical but rather it is a political issue and must be solved politically. When Muslims are politically crippled it has an immense impact on their economic lives. Muslims have become an outcast community and all nationality rights are curtailed. They are no more treated as citizens though they rightfully enjoyed it before. They are the natives of the land which is no more accepted by the military. Rohingyas have the history of living in Arakan for thousands of years and they are already present long before the colonization of Arakan by the Myanmar (Bamar) military in 1784. British took over control in 1824. Arakan again fell under Burmese rule in 1948 when independence was provided by the British. It is of utmost important that for Muslims, right to live in Arakan has to be guaranteed with full nationality rights as enjoyed by other non-Muslim sister commu-

nity. Muslims have to come out from disenfranchised situation and can have the chance to involve in mainstream Myanmar society and politics. They have to regain their lost status as citizens of Myanmar. All travel ban put on them have to be put to the end. Free pursue of higher education is to be allowed. Ban on admission to schools of medicine, engineering and computer sciences and other professional institutions are to be lifted. Mosques and religious schools are to be allowed to function properly. Restrictions on reparation are to be lifted. Muslims cannot think of building a new Mosque and not a single one is built in the last 50 years. Marriage of Muslims is tightly controlled and birth control is forced on them. Violation of marriage code is severely dealt and hundreds of Muslims are now in jail of non-compliance. Because of the control on Muslims marriage, there are hundreds of new born babies each year who are to be registered but are denied and now thousands of young generation Muslims are rendered unauthorized persons. Starting this year (2009) a new enlisting form is introduced for such illegal child births. Because of the lengthy process and costly payments to get marriage permissions, majority Muslims are unable to go through the process. Though marriage is done according to Muslim custom, this is unauthorized under

the regional decree thus disqualifying it.

Every year Nasaka checks are done and every Muslim family comes under strict scrutiny. Those who are not present during the check are instantly cancelled from the household family list and red marked as fled to Bangladesh. This check is not done on Rakhine community and any Rakhine who cross into Arakan is no problem for the authorities. During the BSPP (Burma Socialist Program Party) under Gen. Ne Win, hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi Rakhines (Mrama and Maghs) entered Arakan and spread over to the Sittwe and other districts. These Mrama and Maghs became Rakhines and are accepted as citizens as regional BSPP rulers were all native Rakhines. Present time Arakan economy is dominated by those Rakhines and they are dominant traders in Sittwe. Recently, a number of Bangladeshi Bhdhists were found to have entered Arakan illegally but they are dealt leniently though many Rakhines are openly engaged in anti-government activities abroad joining hands with other pro-democracy movements. The Nasaka check routinely carried out against Muslims is to verify how ethnic cleansing is working and how much Muslims have reduced over the year.

This is clear that Rohingya

Muslims who opt for going abroad are not leaving for mere economic reasons but because they are politically suppressed and poverty engenders exodus. The total administration in Arakan is formulated in such a way that no Muslims choose to stay in their own land. So, a policy change within the military regime to reinstate to usurped rights of Rohingya Muslims is the only way for a permanent solution.

AN OPEN LETTER TO H.E. KITTI WASINNODH, THE AMBASSADOR OF THAILAND IN LONDON

Date: 26th January 2009
 H.E. Kitti Wasinnondh
 The Ambassador of Thailand
 Royal Thai Embassy
 29-30 Queen's Gate
 London SW7 5JB

Subject: Concern on the Rohingya boatpeople.

Your Excellency,

Regarding Rohingya boatpeople we would like to express our concerns as follows:

1. The Thai Navy had intercepted at least 992 Rohingya and Bangladeshi boatpeople on Thai territorial waters in Andaman Sea between December 18 and 30, 2008. Some of the boatpeople were beaten. Then the Thai navy, after intentionally removing the engines from the captured boats, tied the hands of these helpless people and forced and towed them in engineless boats into the high sea, without navigational equipments, sufficient food and water, and abandoned them to expose to the risk of sinking and drowning. According to survivors, more than 500 boatpeople are missing or feared dead. We have never expected such a treatment from a neighbouring democratic country like Thailand. It is a violation of international humanitarian laws and standards. We strongly protest and condemn it.

2. The Rohingya are a people under constant tyranny. So far about 1.5 million them were expelled from the country or have had to leave their homeland to save their lives since 1948. They are rendered stateless facing institutionalized persecution while living in abject poverty. Crimes against humanity have been perpetrated against them, including denial of citizenship rights, severe restrictions on freedom of movement, education, marriage and religion, forced labour, rape, land confiscation, arbitrary arrests, torture, extra judicial killings and extortion on daily basis. This extreme situation causes them to flee their homeland for various destinations of the world including neighbouring Bangladesh and Thailand in search of peace, safe shelter, and protection. Government of Thailand should, therefore, treat them humanely while addressing their problems.

3. The Rohingya problem, including the issue of the boatpeople, affects Thailand and other countries in the region and the world. It is essentially a regional issue having dimension in the perspective of internationalism. It is, therefore, imperative to address the root cause of their flights from Arakan towards finding a 'permanent solution'. In this connection, being an important neighbouring country in the region as well as its current chairmanship of the ASEAN, we hope the Government of Thailand can play a key role.

4. We welcome the statement of Thai Prime Minister H.E. Abhisit Vejjajiva to investigate the boatpeople incident. Meanwhile, we hope the proposed Regional Conference will address the Rohingya issue and problem.

In observation of the above facts, we demand the followings:

1. To treat the boatpeople humanely, and not to force them to the risk of sinking and drowning;
2. Not to send back the Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers, including the boatpeople, to Burma where their lives will be in danger;
3. To conduct an impartial inquiry, and to take appropriate actions against those responsible for the loss of lives and tragedy of the boatpeople;

4. To allow UNHCR access to the Rohingya boatpeople in Thai custody to determine their status or to see if they are in need of international protection;
5. To try for a 'permanent solution' of the longstanding Rohingya problem.

With highest regards.

Nurul Islam
President, Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO)

Tun Khin Ziaul Gaffar
President, BROUK



ARNO President, Mr Nurul Islam voices his concern for the Rohingya Boat people in front of Burmese Embassy in London, UK

This is a human rights crime

24 January 2009

There are, unfortunately, Muslims in various corners of the world who all too readily scream “Islamophobia” at the slightest perceived insult; who eagerly see plots against them in every action by non-Muslim governments, particularly Western ones. The cry of Islamophobia is not one this paper readily gives in to. But

that does not mean it is not real. It is — and it is alive and kicking in Thailand.

The allegations that as many as a thousand Rohingya refugees from Burma were deliberately put back to sea last month by Thai soldiers with almost no food or water and no motors and left to drift and die, that some were even thrown into the sea with their hands and feet bound, simply because they were Muslims, are profoundly shocking. If the allegations are true, this

was calculated, intentional genocide.

The Thai authorities deny any wrongdoing. Their denials convince no one. In India and Indonesia, where exhausted Rohingyas have washed up on the beaches, there are persistent reports that they were forcibly sent back to sea to die. Their stories appear to be backed up by Thai officials who, reportedly privately admit to sending refugees back to sea because, as Muslims, they

could be potential insurgents. That is outrageous: People being sent to die because they are a certain religion and, because they belong to a certain religion, they might be terrorists. This is not merely inhumanity, it is insanity.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is certainly convinced of the need for an investigation. But it is being given the run around. Its request to the Thai authorities to meet with 126 Rohingya boat people who arrived last week was at first ignored and then turned down: They too have now been sent back to sea.

The Thais are doing themselves no favors. Their response to the UN merely adds to the suspicion that they have something to hide and are involved in a cover-up. Coming on top of claims of Muslims in Thailand's south being tortured by the military, there is every reason to believe that there is institutional Islamophobia in Thailand — certainly in the all-powerful military. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva says he wants to reach out to Muslims. A week ago he went to the country's Muslim south and promised to end abuses by the military. He has likewise promised to investigate the claims about the Rohingya boat people. But the fact that more boat people can be turned back to sea after an international outcry shows how little control he has of the situation. Thailand's powerful military is a law unto itself. If all he is up to is damage limitation, then Thailand's standing with the rest of the world, especially the Muslim world, will plummet. Transparency is needed. There is a human rights crime here. If Thailand is not prepared to investigate this properly, then the International Criminal Court in The Hague will have to act. That is its remit: to act when national courts refuse to do so. It is not merely a case of justice for the Rohingyas, one of the world's most persecuted peoples. We are all diminished if such human rights crimes are allowed to go unmarked, unpunished.

SOURCE: Arab News



Joint Statement of Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) and Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK), issued in London on 26 January 2009

STOP ROHINGYA EXTERMINATION

The indigenous Rohingya, with a long history and glorious past in Arakan, are not tolerated in Burma. The ruling Burmese military SPDC is systematically exterminating this particular ethnic Muslim community from their ancestral homeland with intent to turn Arakan into a Muslim free region. About 1.5 million of them are in Diaspora in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Gulf States, Thailand and Malaysia. They are vulnerable in those countries without status.

The SPDC has declared Rohingya as non-nationals rendering them stateless. They have become the worst victims of systematic, persistent and widespread human rights violations in Burma, including denial of citizenship rights, severe restrictions on freedom of movement, education, marriage and religion, forced labour, rape, land confiscation, arbitrary arrests, torture, extra judicial killings and extortion on daily basis. These crimes against humanity which are arguably 'slow-burning genocide' have forced the Rohingyas

to leave their homes for various destinations in search of peace, safe shelter, and protection.

From 18-30 December 2008, about 1000 boatpeople, most of them Rohingyas fleeing large-scale persecution in Arakan were intercepted by the Thai navy on Thai territorial waters in Andaman Sea. Over 500 boatpeople are missing or feared dead after being forced back into the sea by the Thai navy in engineless boats. Some of the drifting boatpeople were rescued by the Indian and Indonesian coastguards. We condemn this terrible action of the Thai navy. We also strongly condemn SPDC for creating an impossible situation for a peaceful living of these people and is more responsible for this human tragedy.

SPDC is an illegitimate military regime perpetrating crimes against humanity particularly in ethnic areas. Besides, it is now destroying mosques, churches and places of worship across the country. The regime is making increased demographic changes, particularly in North Arakan, by expelling the Rohingya population and establishing Buddhist settler villages on the Rohingyas' lands.

It may be stressed that, today the SPDC has made the Rohingya people as the most illiterate section in Burma's

society. Virtually they have become 'living dead' and are 'dying alive' without any rights of man. They are helpless, hapless and defenceless and so 'the responsibly to protect' this highly vulnerable people lies with the international community.

On this occasion, we demand SPDC:

1. To stop Rohingya extermination and their expulsion;
2. To restore the Burmese citizenship of the Rohingya, and lift forthwith all restrictions on their right to education, right to get married and freedom of movement;
3. To stop religious persecution, destruction of mosques, churches and places of worship, and cease all human rights violations across the country;
4. To free Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, U Tin Oo, U Kayw Min, U Khun Tun Oo and all political prisoners;
5. To start genuinely all inclusive democratic and political process in accordance with the will of the people of Burma.

Joint Statement by Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) and Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK) issued on 26th January 2009

CONCERN ON THE ROHINGYA BOATPEOPLE

(1) The Thai navy had intercepted at least 992 Rohingya and Bangladeshi boatpeople on Thai territorial waters in Andaman Sea between December 18 and 30, 2008. Some of the boatpeople were beaten. Then the Thai navy, after intentionally removing the engines from the captured boats, tied the hands of these helpless people and forced and towed them in engineless boats into the high sea, without navigational equipments, sufficient food and water, and abandoned them to die. More than 500 boatpeople are reportedly missing and feared dead. We have never expected such a treatment from a neighbouring democratic country like Thailand. It is a violation of international humanitarian laws and standards. We strongly protest and condemn these atrocious actions.

(2) The Rohingya, who are rendered stateless, are worst victims of systematic, persistent and widespread human rights violations in Burma, including denial of citizenship rights, severe restrictions on freedom of movement, education, marriage

and religion, forced labour, rape, land confiscation, arbitrary arrests, torture, extra judicial killings and extortion on daily basis. So far about 1.5 million them were expelled from the country or have had to leave their homeland to save their lives since 1948. These crimes against humanity which are arguably 'slow-burning genocide' forced the Rohingyas to leave their homes in search of peace, safe shelter, and protection. Government of Thailand should treat them humanitarily while addressing the root cause of their flights from Arakan.

(3) The longstanding Rohingya problem with the issue of the boatpeople affects Thailand and other countries and is essentially a regional issue having dimension in the perspective of internationalism that demands a 'permanent solution'. In this connection, being an important neighbouring country in the region and its current chairmanship of the ASEAN, we hope Thailand can play a 'key role'.

(4) We are grateful to the Governments of India and Indonesia for rescuing and looking after the drifting boatpeople. Meanwhile, we welcome the statement of Thai Prime Minister H.E. Abhisit Vejjajiva to investigate the boatpeople incident.

At this point in time, we demand the Government of

Thailand:

1. To treat the boatpeople humanely, and to stop forcing them to the risk of sinking and drowning;
2. Not to push back the Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers, including the boatpeople, to Burma where their lives will be in danger;
3. To conduct an impartial inquiry, and to take appropriate actions against those responsible for the loss of lives and tragedy of the boatpeople;
4. To allow UNHCR access to the Rohingya boatpeople in Thai custody to determine their status or to see if they are in need of international protection;
5. To try for a 'permanent solution' of the longstanding Rohingya problem.

Beckoning of fortune traps Rohingyas

Refugees from Myanmar get on boats; go for horrific sea journey to seek better life abroad

Porimol Palma, back from Cox's Bazar

Driven by abject poverty, Rohingyas living in Cox's Bazar camps and adjacent areas undertake perilous sea journeys in search of better lives in Malaysia via Thailand.

Although the practice has been going on for nearly five years, the issue came into the spotlight when Indian and Indonesian coastguards rescued several hundred Rohingyas and some Bangladeshis a few weeks ago. Many others were feared dead in the Indian Ocean.

Denied citizenship and persecuted in Myanmar, an estimated 2 lakh Rohingyas infiltrated the Bangladesh border since the early 1990s, only around 23,000 of whom living in two camps in Cox's Bazar are registered as refugees, while the rest are deemed illegal. And the influx is still continuing.

The Rohingyas are a Muslim ethnic group of the Northern Rakhine State of Western Myanmar, whose population is mostly concentrated in two northern townships of the state formerly known as Arakan.

In Myanmar they are forbidden to get married or to travel without the state's permission, and have no legal right to own land or property, although the population has been living there for hundreds of years.

As they are physically, linguistically and

culturally similar to South Asians, especially the Banglees, and since Bangladesh shares a border with Myanmar, hundreds of them cross into Bangladesh every year, living illegally in Cox's Bazar area. In further search of fortune many of them embark on journeys through the sea towards Malaysia, often ending up dead without reaching the destination, while the luckier ones get rescued or end up in sweatshops of Malaysia. On December 28 last year the Indian coast guard rescued 105 illegal migrants from the high seas off the coast of Andaman.

Following the rescue the Indian authorities sent a list of 67 names of the rescued people to the Bangladesh government saying they were claiming to be Bangladeshis. Cox's Bazar police checked the identities of the 67 and found that only 36 of them are Bangladeshis.

The rest are most probably Rohingyas who were living in Bangladesh illegally, said Matur Rahman Sheikh, police superintendent of Cox's Bazar.



The human traffickers who arrange such deadly journeys are also mostly Rohingyas said officials of Bangladesh Rifles and of the Cox's Bazar administration. Life is not much better for them in Bangladesh either, as the country is one of the poorest in the world, which cannot afford to extend

a welcoming hand to such a large number of desperately needy uninvited guests.

The fallout gives rise to obvious strife between the illegal immigrants and the unwelcoming host population. "They are very vulnerable. And that's why they are the main target of the human traffickers," said Helal Mohammad Khan, a BDR official in

Teknaf.”Around 95 percent of those who risk their lives in the sea to go to Malaysia are Rohingyas,” said Mohammad Jasim Uddin, officer in charge of Teknaf police station, adding, “The sea route for illegal migration is actually their discovery.”

The Thai authorities alone picked up some 4,886 Rohingyas from the Indian Sea between 2007 and 2008, according to a media report. Besides, there are around 600 Rohingyas languishing in Indian jails, said a police official in Cox’s Bazar.”There is a huge syndicate of human traffickers based in Myanmar, Bangladesh and Malaysia,” another BDR official said. The syndicate chooses winter as the best time for arranging such desperate journeys because the sea remains relatively calm during the season, the official noted.

Enayetullah, one of the 105 rescued by the Indian coastguard on December 28, told his brother-in-law Hafez Ahmed over the phone that they arrived at the Thai coast in a week after starting from Cox’s Bazar, but the Thai coast guard refused to accept them and pushed them back into the deep sea instead, on an engineless boat.

“They were over 500 Rohingyas and some Bangladeshis,” Hafez told The Daily Star quoting Enayetullah. Enayet said they had some dry rice cereal and molasses initially on the boat, but soon they ran out of that ration and were starving for days when the boat started to drift into deeper sea,” Hafez added.

Investigators said human traffickers can easily attract the unemployed poor Rohingyas because the trafficking fee they charge is not very high, and since no document is required for the journey, only desperation do suffice. “The fee ranges between 20,000 to 25,000 taka,” said a police officer in Cox’s Bazar. Once the money is collected, the willing are picked up in groups of 20 or 30 by fishing boats from different coastal points of Cox’s Bazar, Teknaf, and Myanmar, and are

ferried to the deep sea to waiting trawlers or other engine boats holding promises of the journey to Malaysia, said a BDR official.

Moheshkhali, Kutubdia Fisheries Ghat, Shah Parir Dweep of Cox’s Bazar and the coastal zones of Myanmar’s Rakhaine state are the usual gathering points of the desperate migrating Rohingyas, he said.

The route runs through the Bay of Bengal to Thailand and from there to Malaysia over land, he said adding that there were many incidents when boats drowned or boat engines malfunctioned in the sea, eventually getting many of the passengers killed, while many also got arrested by the Indian or Thai coast guards.

There were even cases of defrauding the desperate migrants when swindlers promised them jobs in Malaysia, but ended up leaving them marooned on islands near Cox’s Bazar after a journey of a day or two by trawlers, said a journalist in Teknaf. Those who manage to reach Malaysia also do seldom get a mentionable better life. “These people are often sold to fish traders in the Chinese Sea, on top of that the traffickers extort a portion of their earnings,” said Harun Al Rashid, a Bangladeshi working with an immigrants’ rights group in Malaysia.

BDR official Helal Mohammad Khan said, “The traffickers also extort the migrants when they reach Thailand or Malaysia, through their family ties in Myanmar and Bangladesh.” A Bangladeshi who went to Malaysia with a group of Rohingyas through the sea route ten years ago, said he still has to work illegally there, with threats of arrest always hanging over him.

“Most of the time we can’t go to our dormitories to sleep in fear of getting arrested. We have to sleep on the hills,” the worker told The Daily Star over the phone from Malaysia requesting anonymity.

SOURCE: The Daily Star

Boat people claim Thai mistreatment

Thai authorities are grappling with a scandal over alleged mistreatment by soldiers of hundreds of ethnic Rohingyas refugees from Myanmar. Details are surfacing about the plight of Rohingya boat people who were apparently beaten by Thai soldiers before being towed out to sea. The allegations, apparently supported by photographs and witness accounts, have dented Thailand's tourist-friendly image. Some of the migrants managed to reach Indonesia and videos of them arriving on the shore show them to be in a shocking physical condition. Others are in detention on the Indian islands of Andaman. Two of those held there have spoken of being abused by Thai soldiers.

Thai admission

Thani Thongpajkdi, the Thai foreign ministry's deputy spokesman, says the Thai authorities did escort the migrants back to sea. "We are asking the agencies concerned what happened that led to the report, the allegations that came out," he told Al Jazeera.

"The government does not have a policy of treating these people inhumanely, or mistreating them. What we do is, when they arrive in the country, we get them provi-

sions - we get them food, water, medicine, and then we escort them out.

"Of course we're concerned for them but in escorting them out, we ensure that their vessel is seaworthy, we ensure that they have been given enough food, water, etcetera."

Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Thai prime minister, who has repeatedly stated a commitment to human rights and the rule of law, said on Thursday there were "quite a large number" of Rohingyas in Thailand but that they were illegal immigrants and had to be "sent back".

Thousands of Bangladeshis and Rohingyas - members of a stateless, Muslim ethnic group that fled to Bangladesh to escape persecution in Myanmar - leave Bangladesh aboard rickety boats each year in hope of finding work in neighbouring countries.

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, says as many as 230,000 Rohingya Muslims are now living a perilous, stateless existence just over the border in Bangladesh.

In the last three years, one of the most popular migration routes has been by boat to Thailand and then overland to Malaysia.

Migrants' accounts

Reports from survivors who washed up on India's Andaman islands and northwest Indonesia suggest as many as 550 of the 992 towed out to sea by Thai soldiers are

dead.

The men were headed from Bangladesh to Thailand when their boats were intercepted around December 27 by Thai naval ships. In a detailed account of their experience, two survivors rescued by the Indian coastguard have told Arakan Project, a refugees' advocacy group, that they were detained and beaten by Thai authorities on Koh Sai Daen, a remote island in the Andaman Sea.

They were then abandoned in the Indian Ocean in boats with no engines and only a few bags of rice. Arakan Project provided transcripts of their accounts on Friday to the Associated Press news agency.

'Handfuls of rice'

The migrants told Arakan that they survived on banana leaves and handfuls of rice while they on the remote island and that they were abused by armed guards they thought were from the Thai security forces. "I was beaten with a stick while collecting banana plants for no reason," said a 20-year-old Bangladeshi, whose identity was concealed by the rights group.

"Other detainees arrested before us also complained they had been beaten without any reason." The two survivors said they were then rounded up at night along with about 500 others and forced into four rickety boats with no motors.

The boats - each holding 150 people and provided with only a 25kg bag of rice and a few containers of drinking water - were tied to a navy ship and dragged for a day out into the high seas.

“When the sun disappeared in the horizon, they suddenly started cutting the rope that tied each boat to their ship,” the Bangladeshi survivor said.

“Then, the navy boat made a U-turn and vanished in the dark of the night. We started drifting in the sea.”

The two survivors said their food and water ran out after the first day and that the boat drifted in the open ocean for eight days. It was unclear if any of the 150 migrants on their boat died on the journey.

“We drifted for eight days and then we suddenly saw a hill. None of us was able to move because of severe dehydration and food deficiency,” a 23-year-old Rohingya survivor said.

He said they survived for three days on coconuts before the Indian coast guard rescued them and took them to the Andaman islands.

Fate unknown

Fears are also growing over the fate of 126 Rohingya boat people thought to remain in Thai military custody.

But the government says it no longer has any Rohingya migrants within its borders, citing the army’s Internal

Security Operations Command (Isoc), which admits to overseeing the arrest and detention of the group of Rohingya.

“The latest information that we have from Isoc is that there are no longer any Rohingya left in Thailand,” a Thai foreign ministry spokesman said.

He refused to answer repeated questions about the current whereabouts of the 126 and he did not say where, when and how they left the country.

The Isoc colonel at the heart of the abuse allegations has denied any wrongdoing.

The UNHCR asked Thailand on Tuesday to see the 126, most of whom it said were in army custody on an Andaman Sea island.

The office in Bangkok said on Friday it was still waiting for a formal response to its request, which was made on Tuesday.

SOURCE: Al Jazeera

Britain ‘concerned’ over Rohingya

AFP 28/01/2009

London - Britain said Tuesday it was “deeply concerned” by allegations that the Thai navy abandoned hundreds of boat people from Burma and left them to die.

“We are deeply concerned by allegations that refugees from Burma were aban-

doned at sea by the Thai navy,” Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell wrote, in a written reply to a parliamentary question.

“We have raised the issue with the Thai authorities and welcome Prime Minister Abhisit’s assurances of an investigation into the matter.

“Working with EU partners, and in close consultation with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, we will continue to press the Thai authorities to establish the facts and take appropriate action.” Media reports accuse Thailand’s military of towing hundreds of the Rohingya migrants out to sea in poorly equipped boats with scant food and water.

Accusations of mistreatment surfaced earlier this month after nearly 650 Rohingya were rescued off India and Indonesia, some claiming to have been beaten by Thai soldiers before being set adrift in the high seas to die.

Hundreds of the boat people are still believed to be missing at sea.

Rights groups say the Rohingya are stateless and face persecution from Burma’s military regime, forcing thousands into rickety boats each year to try to escape poverty and oppression.

Thailand has for the past few years taken a harsh stance on Rohingya landing on its shores, in part to discourage further migration through Thailand.

SOURCE: Bangkok Post

Ihsanoglu expresses grave concern over hundreds of Muslim Rohingyas reported drowned or missing in Thai territorial waters; expresses concern over the fate of survivors

Date: 27/01/2009

The Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, expressed concern over reports confirming that hundreds of Muslim Rohingya refugees were feared missing and drowned in late December 2008 in Thai territorial waters. The Rohingya refugees were fleeing oppression and dictatorial rule in Myanmar. Thai coast guards pushed Muslim Rohingyas back at sea in decrepit boats and abandoned them helpless and with no adequate provisions.

Ihsanoglu stated that protecting the lives of refugees and preserving them from abuse is a legal responsibility that falls on Thailand through whose territorial waters the Rohingyas sailed. Thailand needs to provide care and protection to those refugees in accordance with the provisions of the 1951 UN Convention and the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. He expressed concern about the fate of survivors, appealing to countries the refugees reached to provide them with urgent humanitarian assistance.

The Secretary General also appealed to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to undertake an independent investigation and provide all assistance to the Muslim Rohingya refugees. He emphasized the need for the Thai government to conduct, as promised by Thai Prime Minister, an urgent investigation on the circumstances leading up to this tragic incident and refer those found responsible to justice. He affirmed that he will follow up developments of this matter with the Thai government.

SOURCE: OIC

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