UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

REFUGEE MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH - EAST ASIA
2018 – JUNE 2019

In November 2018, Romana, 9, took shelter with her family in the UNHCR Transit Centre in Kutupalong camp in Bangladesh along with other Rohingya newly arrived from Myanmar. Women and children continue to represent the majority of refugees on the move in the region. © UNHCR/Roger Arnold

Searching for safety

Four years after the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis, refugees in South-East Asia continue to risk their lives, albeit in smaller numbers, to reach safety in hope of securing a better future for themselves and their families.

Safe and legal pathways for refugees and asylum seekers, and regional cooperation to rescue those in distress, can prevent violations of human rights and loss of lives of people on the move.

This report presents the trends of refugee movements in South-East Asia observed by UNHCR[1] between January 2018 and June 2019, highlighting the serious risks taken by people to cross international borders through irregular pathways. Recognizing the diversity of people on the move in the region, this report also sheds light on several groups of economic migrants traveling along the same routes as refugees.

Trends

Persistent push factors in countries of departure

The majority of refugees moving through South-East Asia are Rohingya, a stateless[2] Muslim minority from Myanmar. Rohingya suffer serious limitations on their basic human rights in their country of origin, depriving them of opportunities to lead decent lives and dimming their hopes for a secure future. Since August 2017, 741,947 Rohingya refugees have fled into neighbouring Bangladesh,[3] from the northern part of Rakhine State in Myanmar to escape violence and persecution.

In late 2018 and 2019, the intensification of conflict between the Arakan Army, an ethnic Rakhine Buddhist armed group, and the Myanmar Armed Forces has led to increasing insecurity in northern part of Rakhine State, displacing approximately 22,000 people.[4] While these security developments have not led to an appreciable increase in persons seeking international protection to date, they have nevertheless adversely impacted an already complex protection environment, exacerbating pre-existing challenges and difficulties for Rohingya to move and access livelihoods.

In Bangladesh, the Government with the support of the international community has mounted a large scale multi-sectorial response through the Joint Response Plan (JRP) to address the humanitarian needs of some 906,500 refugees.[5] Despite these efforts, challenges for refugees remain. Restrictions on livelihood and education opportunities, dwindling financial support to meet humanitarian needs, fragile peaceful coexistence with the hosting communities and the uncertain time period required to secure a sustainable solution in Myanmar are factors compelling many refugees to move onward.

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[1] *UNHCR Regional Mixed Movements Monitoring Unit conducted a total of 23 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 165 refugees and individual interviews with 152 refugees and key informants conducted in Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Indonesia during the reporting period. This data collection complemented UNHCR Country Offices ongoing protection and border monitoring activities in the region.*

[2] *The international legal definition of a stateless person is "a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law" as per Article 1 of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons.*

[3] *UNHCR Bangladesh Population Factsheet dated 30 June 2019, available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/70123*

[4] *Estimates of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) provided by the Rakhine State Government as of 19 June 2019. Nonetheless, movements remained fluid, with frequent reports of new arrivals at displacement sites, alongside returns.*

[5] *The 2019 Joint Response Plan For Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis (January – December) was launched on February 2019, available at: www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2019_jrp_for_rohingya_humanitarian_crisis_compressed.pdf*

A Rohingya man who fled the armed conflict that affected his village. © UNHCR/Samuel Siew

"We were caught in the crossfire"

"We were caught in the crossfire. Their stray bullets flew into our village and endangered us. Two of my relatives were killed […]. I did not feel safe to go to my field to farm or to the river to fish. This means I was not able to earn a living to feed my family. This security situation was starving us. That is why I left [my country]."

Women and children on the move

Four out of five refugees seeking safety in Bangladesh between January 2018 and June 2019 were women or children, 26% and 55% respectively.[6]

In the case of maritime movements, an estimated 59% of individuals who moved irregularly by sea (or attempted to) were women or children.[7] This represents a notable change from the period of 2013-2015, when the large majority of persons engaging in similar journeys were men.

Bangladesh remains the main destination for those fleeing violence and persecution

Rohingya refugees have continued to seek safety in Bangladesh and represent by far the largest group of refugees on the move in the region. Since January 2018 until June 2019, 17,907 Rohingya refugees were registered as new arrivals in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh.[8] Among them, most fled directly from Myanmar reporting ongoing persecutions while others journeyed to Bangladesh from India, where they had previously sought refuge, due to a shrinking protection environment, including tensions with the host community.

Across the region, small numbers of refugees have engaged in secondary movements from their initial country of asylum to another third country such as Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Indonesia or Malaysia. Refugees' decision to move to another country are made by the individual or the family based on considerations of both push factors in the country of asylum and conditions in the intended country of destination. Although motivations such as the desire to be reunited with family or community members in a third country play an important role in the decision to leave the first country of asylum, refugees strongly emphasized negative push factors as the main triggers for their secondary displacement. Push factors commonly identified by refugees include physical threats, inability to meet basic needs often due to restrictions to access employment, fear of deportation, tensions with the host community, or inadequate education opportunities.
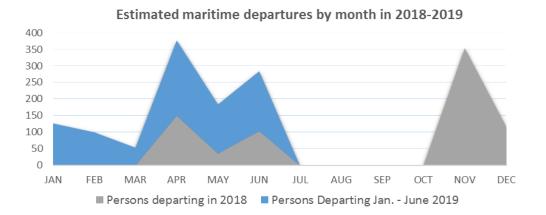
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[6] *Among the 17,907 Rohingya refugees recorded as new arrivals in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, between January 2018 and June 2019, 55% were children, 26% women and 19% men.*

[7] *This estimation is based on a sample of reports with known gender-and-age breakdown in countries of departure and destination including reports of arrests from the authorities, media reports, and interviews with refugees in the region.*

[8] *UNHCR Bangladesh Population Factsheet dated 30 June 2019, available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/70123*

Small-scale resumption of maritime movements

At least 1,597 refugees and migrants undertook maritime journeys in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea between January 2018 and June 2019.[9] In 2018, 762 persons were recorded as having taken to the seas. This upwards trend has continued in 2019 with 835 people undertaking the same journey from January until the end of June. Most of these movements took place outside of the monsoon season of June-September, when rough seas, heavy rain or storms are common. This represents a small-scale resumption of such movements after a two-year interruption in 2016 and 2017. The 2018-2019 trend remained far below the numbers observed between 2013 and 2015 when 50 times more people were taking similar routes.

Estimated maritime departures by month in 2018-2019

■ Persons departing in 2018　■ Persons Departing Jan. - June 2019

As in previous years, vessels generally departed from coastal areas spanning Chittagong Division in Bangladesh to Rakhine state in Myanmar. In Myanmar, people often departed from central Rakhine State where some 130,000 internally displaced persons continue to live in confined camps under difficult conditions since 2012. Others left from villages where their freedom of movement is severely restricted. Following their departure, vessels usually headed south-east towards Malaysia.

The modus operandi of maritime movements has evolved compared to 2015, when cargo boats or large fishing trawlers organized by smugglers were transporting between 300 and 1,000 people in one trip. In 2018, refugees and migrants often relied on small fishing boats, bought directly from a local fisherman, with the capacity to transport between 20 and 100 persons each. In 2019, professional smuggling networks were the primary facilitators of irregular maritime movements, using larger vessels with the capacity to transport up to 200 people at once.

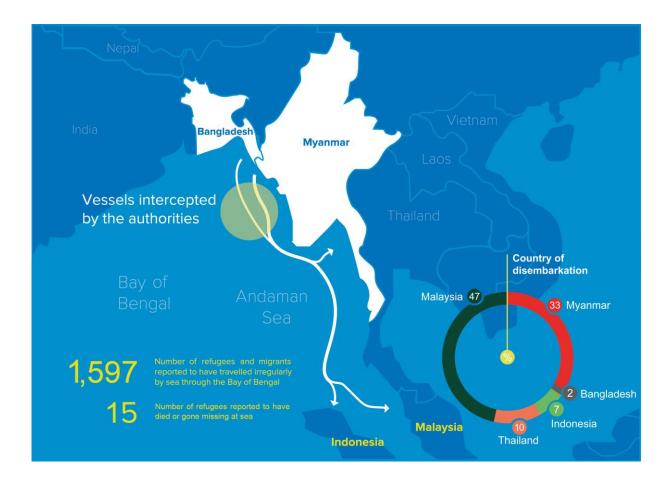[9] Mixed maritime movements are by nature clandestine, making the data on such movements difficult to independently verify. Unless stated otherwise, the information in this report is compiled from various sources including governments, implementing partners, media reports and interviews with persons of concern who have undertaken mixed maritime journeys in South-East Asia.

Mixed movements at sea

Mixed movements refer to flows of people travelling together, generally in an irregular manner, over the same routes and using the same means of transport, but for different reasons. Some men, women and children travelling in this manner often have been forced from their homes by armed conflict or persecution, while others are on the move in search of a better life. People travelling as part of mixed movements have varying needs and may include asylum-seekers, refugees, stateless people, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied or separated children, and migrants in an irregular situation.

For some economic migrants in South-East Asia, irregular migration is perceived as the most viable option due to established migration routes, costly and complex procedures associated with legal labour migration, and porous borders. This is the case of small numbers of male Bangladeshi nationals who travelled along the same routes as Rohingya refugees in search of economic opportunities in Malaysia or other countries.

Similarly, in the Indian Ocean, small-scale mixed movements of Sri Lanka nationals by boat were also recorded during the reporting period. If some headed east towards South-East Asia and beyond, most travelled south-west. Between 2018 and June 2019, 291 Sri Lankan nationals reached the French islands of La Réunion and Mayotte, near Madagascar, after crossing the Indian Ocean in fishing vessels or makeshift rafts. Out of the seven boats, five departed from Sri Lanka, one from Indonesia and the most recent one from India. Upon arrival, national authorities conducted individual assessments of international protection needs. Those found not to be in need of international protection were returned to their country of origin.

Vessels intercepted by the authorities

1,597 Number of refugees and migrants reported to have travelled irregularly by sea through the Bay of Bengal

15 Number of refugees reported to have died or gone missing at sea

Country of disembarkation

Malaysia 47 — 33 Myanmar — 2 Bangladesh — 7 Indonesia — 10 Thailand

Interceptions at sea

From January 2018 to June 2019, 10 vessels were intercepted at sea shortly after their departure from Bangladesh or Myanmar, with their occupants returned to shore and handed over to relevant authorities, presumably before they could leave territorial waters. In addition, in at least two instances in 2018, the Thai navy intercepted vessels of Rohingya refugees. Food and water were then reportedly provided to passengers and their vessels escorted to international waters.

In the Indian Ocean and Laccadive Sea, five vessels were intercepted near or after departing from Sri Lanka before they could reach their destination.[10] For instance, in May 2019, a vessel transporting 20 Sri Lankan nationals was intercepted by the Australian navy. According to the Australian authorities, they were found not to be in need of international protection and were returned to Colombo.

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[10] Media reports suggest that a total of 187 persons were on board of these five ships.

The principle of non-refoulement for people at sea

UNHCR's Executive Committee ("ExCom") has emphasized the fundamental importance of fully respecting the principle of non-refoulement[11] for people at sea, underlining that "interception measures should not result in asylum-seekers and refugees being denied access to international protection, or result in those in need of international protection being returned, directly or indirectly, to the frontiers of territories where their life or freedom would be threatened on account of a Convention ground, or where the person has other grounds for protection based on international law.[12]"

Dangerous journeys

The vulnerability of those taking irregular pathways

People moving in an irregular manner often find themselves in vulnerable situations requiring international protection and humanitarian assistance. Refugees are particularly vulnerable in transit, as they often carry no travel or identification documents, having either lost them during flight, or are unable to obtain them from the authorities, for reasons of persecution or statelessness. As a result of their irregular status, refugees are often reluctant to approach the authorities for help in transit countries or the destination country, fearing arrest, detention or deportation to their country of origin. This places them at further risk of harm and allows abuses and exploitation to continue.

The heightened vulnerability of stateless persons

Being stateless, Rohingya refugees experience additional challenges. Stateless persons often do not have access to the rights that citizens take for granted, including the full protection of a state. Statelessness frequently means living without identity documents conferring legal personality and the rights that go with them – access to health care, education, property rights, and the ability to move freely. Births and deaths may not be registered with the result that stateless persons can be legally invisible: their existence experienced, yet never legally recognized. It can also mean being shunned and discriminated against, and the added pressure of passing that stigma on to children and future generations.

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[11] *The principle of non-refoulement is a cardinal principle of international refugee law, most prominently expressed in Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention. It prohibits any State conduct leading to the return of a refugee 'in any manner whatsoever'—including by way of interceptions of various kinds on land or at sea (whether in States' territorial waters, contiguous zones, or the high seas)—to a place where they would be at risk of persecution related to a 1951 Refugee Convention ground or of other serious violation of human rights.*

[12] *ExCom Conclusion No. 97 (LIV), 2003, para (a)(iv).*

"I was held captive by the smugglers for one and a half months, until my family paid the debt."

[Rohingya refugee, 44 years old, male]

Without safe and legal pathways to seek asylum, refugees and asylum-seekers are often compelled to use smugglers and other risky measures to cross international borders in order to flee persecution and conflict. Aside from the inherent dangers of border crossings, these circumstances can result in refugees being victims of exploitation, abuse, and trafficking along the way or upon arrival at their destination. Refugees reported multiple incidents where smugglers kept smuggled persons captive for several weeks during which they inflicted severe pain and suffering with iron rods, bamboo sticks and other tools to extort increased payments from relatives. Violence was also used to enforce order and prevent demands for water and food during the irregular journey. Women and girls, especially those travelling on their own, are particularly exposed to risks of sexual and gender-based violence.
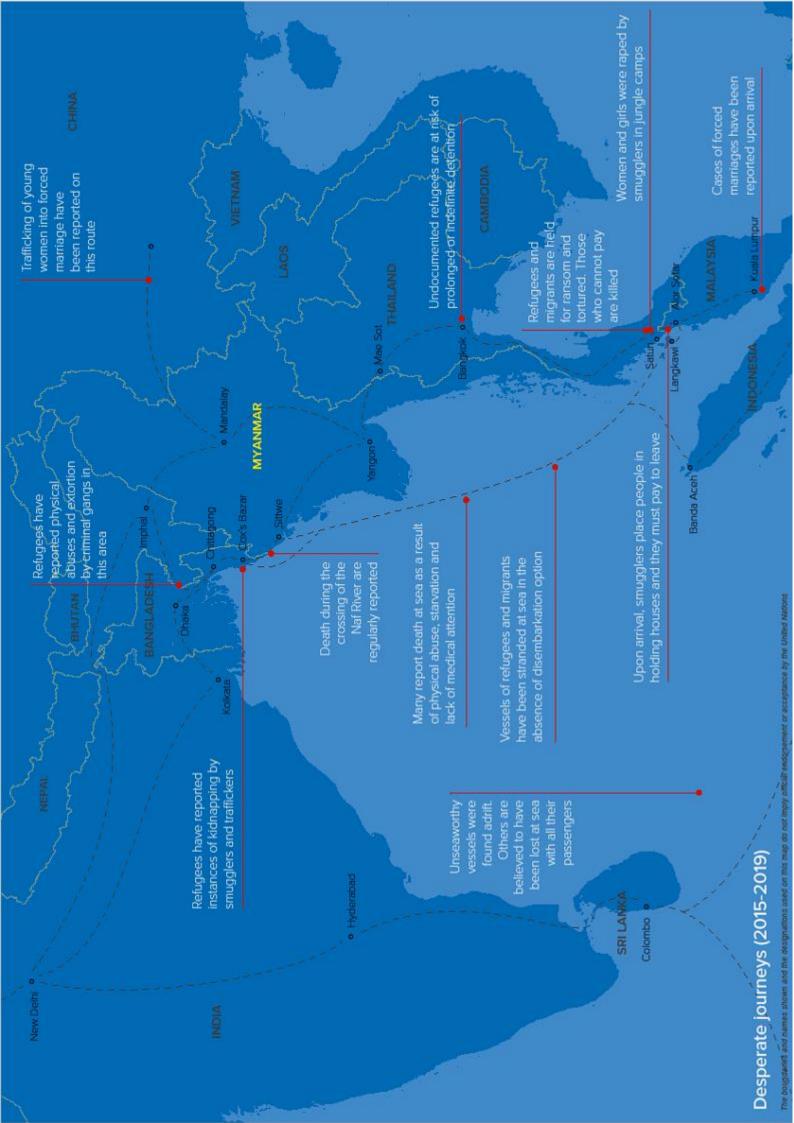
"[The smuggler] said: 'The agreement has changed. You have to pay now, or we will shoot you dead.' He forced me to bow with my head touching the floor, then hit me on my back with a bamboo pole until I lost consciousness. The smugglers also put me in a set of boards with holes for my hands and feet, so I could not move for an entire day."

[Rohingya refugee, 44 years old, male]

In 2018 and 2019, refugees paid smugglers between $1,700 and $6,000 depending on the destination and means of transport. Such large sums require refugees to borrow money from neighbours or community members. In Myanmar, Rohingya reported using their land, house or other belongings as collateral. In Bangladesh and Myanmar, some refugees reported lending their food ration card in exchange for a loan, without alternative means of subsistence. The mounting debts resulting from this situation and pressure to repay lenders renders refugees highly vulnerable to exploitation in countries where they often do not have the right to work.

"The smugglers kept me for five days. I saw men who could not pay being beaten. They didn't beat me or the other women, but they threatened us. The smuggler said, 'If you don't pay, we will bury you alive like those two,' and pointed at a mound of dirt some distance away. Two other captives were curious and walked over there to investigate. They came back and told me they saw a woman's hair sticking out of the dirt. I was very frightened."

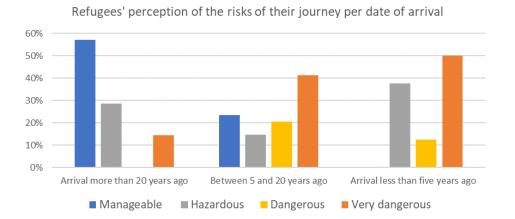[Rohingya refugee, 16 years old, female]

Desperate journeys (2015-2019)

Trafficking of young women into forced marriage have been reported on this route

Refugees have reported physical abuses and extortion by criminal gangs in this area

Refugees have reported instances of kidnapping by smugglers and traffickers

Death during the crossing of the Naf River are regularly reported

Many report death at sea as a result of physical abuse, starvation and lack of medical attention

Vessels of refugees and migrants have been stranded at sea in the absence of disembarkation option

Unseaworthy vessels were found adrift. Others are believed to have been lost at sea with all their passengers

Upon arrival, smugglers place people in holding houses and they must pay to leave

Undocumented refugees are at risk of prolonged or indefinite detention

Refugees and migrants are held for ransom and tortured. Those who cannot pay are killed

Women and girls were raped by smugglers in jungle camps

Cases of forced marriages have been reported upon arrival

CHINA

VIETNAM

LAOS

THAILAND

CAMBODIA

MYANMAR

NEPAL

BHUTAN

BANGLADESH

INDIA

SRI LANKA

MALAYSIA

INDONESIA

New Delhi

Imphal

Dhaka

Kolkata

Hyderabad

Colombo

Chittagong

Cox's Bazar

Sittwe

Mandalay

Yangon

Mae Sot

Bangkok

Satun

Langkawi

Alor Setar

Kuala Lumpur

Banda Aceh

A Rohingya boy who fled his home country because of armed conflict
and deprivation of education and livelihood opportunities. © UNHCR/Samuel Siew

"*The smuggler locked me in a room with other boys and beat me with an iron rod*"

"I decided to go on this journey myself; I did not tell my parents. My father is a labourer who could not find steady employment, he has to take whatever job is available. Because of the fighting in our area, it is very dangerous to move around, which stopped my father from finding work. He could no longer afford the 7,000 Kyat ($5) per month to send me to school. The teacher told me in front of my classmates that if my family cannot pay my school fees, I should stop coming to school. I felt so ashamed. I felt that since my future is blocked here, I needed to go to another country where I could work and send money to my family. I decided to travel with a smuggler who told me I did not have to pay anything in advance. But when I reached the city, the smuggler locked me in a room with other boys and beat me with an iron rod. He made me call my mother and turned on the speaker phone so she could hear me crying. He demanded the full payment from my mother. My parents had no choice but to sell their land to pay."

A perceived increase of risks taken by refugees

Refugees' perceptions of the dangers of their flight across international borders by land or sea are changing. A survey conducted with several generations of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia highlighted that the perception of the risks of the journey has increased over time. Among refugees in Malaysia who arrived more than 20 years ago, 57% found the journey difficult but non-life-threatening, 29% hazardous and 14% very dangerous. For refugees who arrived less than five years ago, they described their journey as being very dangerous (50%), dangerous (13%) or hazardous (38%).[13]

Refugees' perception of the risks of their journey per date of arrival

The specific dangers of the sea journey

Maritime journeys are perilous and sometimes deadly. At least 15 refugees and asylum seekers died or have gone missing when crossing rivers and seas between January 2018 and June 2019,[14] including 4 deaths during the first six months of 2019.[15]

"There was strong wind and rain, I felt scared. Our boat was about to capsize, the pilot told all the passengers to come to the back of the boat."

[Rohingya refugee, 16 years old, male]

[13] *This data is based on 49 individual surveys conducted from 24 to 30 November 2018 in Malaysia by the Regional Mixed Movements Monitoring Unit.*

[14] *Available data on the death of refugees and migrants remain scarce and often overdue. These figures are a likely underestimate of actual fatalities due to the fact that most bodies are never found, especially following a disaster at sea, and many missing persons never reported.*

[15] *The four Rohingya went missing in May 2019 while crossing between Myanmar and Bangladesh. In 2017, more than 200 Rohingya fleeing the violence in Rakhine with rafts and boats died between August and October 2017 alone after their crafts capsized. Many of the refugees who crossed from Myanmar to Bangladesh in 2018 and 2019 continued to use this dangerous route.*

According to UNHCR estimates, one person in 69 who embarked on the maritime journey in 2018 lost their life or went missing at sea. This is higher than the average 2013-2015 fatality rate when one person in 81 died at sea. In previous years, smugglers were to blame for the majority of these deaths due to beating, gunshot wounds or deprivation of food and water. Since 2018, the most common reason for death or disappearance at sea was due to boats in distress. This means boats that were lost at sea, had engine troubles, or ran out of food, water or fuel. Dangers were made more acute by the absence of professional sailors on board and the fact that vessels used by refugees were usually not built for, equipped, or in a good state of maintenance required to take a long journey on the open seas.

"We were desperate, drifting at sea without food or water."

[Rohingya refugee, 33 years old, male]

On 11 June 2019, 64 Rohingya refugees were on board this vessel when it washed ashore after experiencing engine trouble and running out of fuel and food. The passengers were found in Koh Rawee, an island located in southern Thailand. They were identified as victims of trafficking by the Thai authorities. Credit: Thailand Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation; 11 June 2019

A Rohingya boy who was rescued after his boat ran aground. © UNHCR/Samuel Siew

"*We could easily have drifted into the open sea where no one would find us*"

"We left from Bangladesh by boat with about 160 people on board. We spent 12 days [at sea] waiting for the boat to fill up, then we started to sail. We did not get enough food or water, so we were hungry and thirsty. When we approached the smugglers to give us more, they beat us with iron rods. For the last one and a half days of the journey, we had no food at all. We were crammed into the lower deck. The captain had a gun and fired it into the air three times, threatening to shoot us if we tried to go outside. When it rained, we got wet, and because I was damp all the time, I got sick with a fever. After one week, I heard we reached Malaysia, but while we were waiting […], our boat ran out of fuel, and we drifted. The wind pushed our boat to an island, where we were rescued. We could easily have drifted into the open sea where no one would find us. I am thankful to have survived."

Focus on the response to mixed movements at sea

Search and Rescue at Sea

There are clear duties under international maritime law, and a longstanding maritime tradition, to assist persons in distress at sea. The duty to assist persons in distress at sea applies "regardless of the nationality or status of such persons or the circumstances in which they are found."[16] The duty to assist thus applies in respect of all refugees and migrants in distress at sea, regardless of their particular status or circumstances.

In April 2018, local Indonesian fishermen were exemplary in fulfilling their duty to come to the aid of 84 refugees in distress, whose vessels were lost at sea. The vessels had no qualified crew and had exhausted food, water and fuel supplies. 10 people died or went missing at sea on one of the vessels before the survivors were rescued and disembarked to a place of safety. In addition to Presidential Regulation No.125 determining governmental agencies' response to new arrivals of refugees and migrants, the Indonesian Search and Rescue Agency has developed operational procedures to ensure coordinated rescue at sea and disembarkation of refugees and migrants in distress at sea. These remain, however, the rare examples of good practices in the region.

Disembarkation to a place of safety, identification of needs and response

Although international maritime law does not provide for categorical obligations where a State is duty bound to allow disembarkation on its territory, key treaties indicate that the State responsible for the search-and-rescue region in which a rescue takes place is required to "exercise primary responsibility for ensuring such co-ordination and cooperation occurs, so that survivors assisted are disembarked from the assisting ship and delivered to a place of safety."[17]

In 2016, the Member States of the Bali Process, an international forum to discuss issues relating to irregular movement, smuggling and human trafficking, agreed on the Bali Declaration. This document expressed, among others, encouragement for states to work together to identify more predictable disembarkation options for irregular migrants stranded at sea.[18] Three years later, no regional

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[16] *International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea ("SOLAS Convention"), 1974, Annex, Chapter V, Regulation 33(1); International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue ("SAR Convention"), 1979, Annex, para 2.1.10.*

[17] *SOLAS, Annex, Chapter V, Regulation 33(1-1); International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue ("SAR Convention"), 1979, Annex, para 3.1.9. For relevant non-binding International Maritime Organization (IMO) guidelines, see in particular IMO, Rescue Guidelines, and IMO, Principles Relating to Administrative Procedures for Disembarking Persons Rescued at Sea, 22 January 2009, FAL.3/Circ.194, available at: www.refworld.org/docid/524be8244.html ("Disembarkation Principles").*

[18] *The 2016 Bali Declaration, at paragraph 5, called upon states to "improve identification of those with protection needs", "identify more predictable disembarkation options", and "encourage further capacity building of the relevant agencies in search and rescue operations." The 2016 Bali Declaration is available at: https://bit.ly/2ITmMyD*

arrangements have yet been established to ensure predictable disembarkation options as an essential component of a protection-sensitive response to mixed maritime movements in South-East Asia. Nevertheless, the establishment in January 2017 by the Bali Process of a Task Force on Planning and Preparedness (TFPP) is a positive development to encourage increased cooperation between states to promote protection at sea. Although states' response to mixed movements by sea has remained to date uncoordinated and ad-hoc, the TFPP with the support of the Regional Support Office to the Bali Process (RSO) has taken steps to foster cooperation between key stakeholders and support a more predictable response.

A place of safety

The International Maritime Organization's 2004 Rescue Guidelines indicate that a place of safety is a place:

- where the survivors' safety of life is no longer threatened;
- where their basic human needs (such as food, shelter and medical needs) can be met; and
- from which transportation arrangements can be made for the survivors' next or final destination.

As per available information, vessels transporting refugees and migrants were disembarked in Bangladesh (2%), Indonesia (7%), Malaysia (47%), Myanmar (33%), and Thailand (10%) during the reporting period. Survivors of the sea journey are often in poor health and may be victims of gender-based violence or trafficking. They require expert support to address their protection, medical and psychosocial needs. State practices vary but efforts should be recognized.

In Thailand, government multi-disciplinary teams conduct a screening to identify victims of trafficking. If found to be victims of trafficking, they are transferred to shelters to facilitate their rehabilitation and investigations of suspected smugglers. When vessels carrying refugees have landed in Aceh in Indonesia, local authorities lead the initial response to new arrivals by sea, providing shelter and assistance to survivors including minors, in line with Presidential Regulation No. 125 adopted in December 2016. In Malaysia, UNHCR works closely with the National Human Rights Institution (SUHAKAM) to address the protection needs of new arrivals by sea. UNHCR and its partners have enhanced preparedness activities, identifying relevant expertise and capacities to deploy in the event of larger number of new arrivals by sea.

Upon request, UNHCR provides support to destination countries to identify those with international protection needs, conduct best interest determinations for unaccompanied refugee minors, as well as provide translation services to support the authorities' initial response. In the context of mixed movements, a prompt screening of international protection needs can facilitate timely returns, in safety

and dignity, of those found not to need international protection or with no compelling humanitarian needs.

A girl facing an uncertain future in detention. © UNHCR/ Rachakorn Surabhakdi

"He told me my trip would be smooth and no harm would happen to me"

"The broker who smuggled me said I would be safely delivered to my fiancée who is living in another country. He told me my trip would be smooth and no harm would happen to me. But the reality was totally different. We were crammed into cars and trucks, it was so hot inside and sometimes I could hardly breathe. I felt dizzy and vomited many times. We were fed when the vehicles stopped, but sometimes we travelled for one or two days straight without any food, and not enough water.

My journey ended when I was arrested before I reached my destination. I was brought to a government facility and am kept here. I am no longer free. I cannot talk to my parents or fiancée. In Myanmar, we could not leave the village because of the security situation, but at least I could walk around and talk to people. Now I can't go anywhere. All I want now is a solution that can give me just a bit of hope. The broker who smuggled me broke their promise. I would say to him, 'Look what you have done! Look where I have ended up now.'"

RECOMMENDATIONS

"Since there is no peace, no life, no future; people will continue to jump into the sea."

[Rohingya refugee, 29 years old]

In response to the concerns outlined in this report, South-East Asian states and other regional stakeholders should implement a comprehensive long-term approach to manage mixed movements in the region. Specifically, UNHCR calls for:

Addressing push factors

As long as the root causes of displacement remain unresolved, refugees will continue to be compelled to undertake dangerous journeys in search of safety for them and their families.

- Support improvement of conditions in refugees' countries of origin to make it possible for refugees to return voluntarily in safety and dignity.
- Enhance efforts to support refugee self-reliance in countries of asylum to ensure dignity in their country of exile, help refugees contribute to their host communities and prepare them for a future where they can re-establish their life permanently in their home country.
- Increase solidarity and support for countries along key migration routes to strengthen access to protection where refugees are located and thus reduce the need for dangerous irregular journeys.

Access to safe and legal pathways

- Expand access to safe and legal migration pathways by promoting educational opportunities (e.g. scholarship programmes), labour mobility schemes and family reunification visas for refugees.

Protection at sea

A coordinated and predictable regional response is required for rescue at sea, placing human life and dignity at its core in line with the spirit of the 2016 Bali Declaration.

- Support and actively engage the Bali Process Task Force on Planning and Preparedness (TFPP) to promote responsibility-sharing and support increased search and rescue capacity, predictable disembarkation options, and mechanisms to identify those with protection needs. Immediate priorities can include the establishment of a joint contingency plan and standard operating procedures to respond to mixed maritime movements.
- Strengthen the timely identification of victims of trafficking, persons with medical needs, and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, including male and child survivors, and ensure their referral to adequate multi-sectoral services.

Access to asylum

- Strengthen identification of those with international protection needs at borders and provide access to asylum procedures.
- Interception measures at sea should not result in asylum-seekers and refugees being denied access to international protection or result in those in need of international protection being returned, directly or indirectly, to the frontiers of territories where their life or freedom would be threatened.

Alternative to detention for the protection of children

- End the detention of children for immigration purposes, without undermining the principle of family unity, and ensure early identification of asylum-seeking unaccompanied and separated children and their integration within national child protection systems.

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UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Regional Mixed Movement Monitoring Unit
UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific
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