SOUTH-EAST ASIA

IRREGULAR MARITIME MOVEMENTS

January – March 2015

KEY FIGURES

25,000
Estimated number of people who departed irregularly by sea from the Bay of Bengal in the first quarter of 2015

300
Estimated deaths at sea among irregular maritime departures from the Bay of Bengal in the first quarter of 2015

USD 90-370
"Boat fare" individuals pay to board a boat in the Bay of Bengal, often without knowing they will have to pay up to USD 2,000 for their freedom upon arrival in Thailand or Malaysia

100%
Interest charged by some money-lenders for financing journeys from the Bay of Bengal, to be paid within six months of arrival in Malaysia

Over 5,400
Persons of concern to UNHCR who travelled irregularly by sea in the Asia-Pacific region and are currently in detention facilities

61
Persons of concern to UNHCR in Malaysia presenting with symptoms of beriberi in the first quarter of 2015

Irregular maritime movements are by their nature clandestine, making the data on such movements difficult to independently verify. The information in this report is compiled from various sources, including governments, implementing partners, media reports, and hundreds of direct interviews with persons of concern who have undertaken irregular maritime journeys in South-East Asia.

HIGHLIGHTS



A small boat ferries passengers off the coast of Teknaf, Bangladesh, to a larger vessel in the Bay of Bengal.

- The predominant route of irregular maritime movements in South-East Asia continues to originate in the Bay of Bengal, from where tens of thousands of persons of concern to UNHCR leave Bangladesh and Myanmar by sea in hopes of ultimately reaching Malaysia. Passage along this route takes place year-round, but traditionally increases following the end of the rainy season in October. This bulletin covers developments since October 2014 through the first quarter of 2015, as well as aspects of the Bay of Bengal route that have been further explored in recent interviews.[*]

- In the first quarter of 2015, 25,000 people are estimated to have departed in irregular maritime movements from the Bay of Bengal. The departure rate in the first quarter of 2015 was approximately double the departure rate reported in the first quarters of 2013 and 2014.

- Based on interviews with those who have reached Thailand and Malaysia, 300 people are estimated to have died at sea while attempting maritime journeys from the Bay of Bengal in the first quarter of 2015—and as many as 620 since October 2014—primarily as a result of starvation, dehydration, and beatings by boat crews.[†] A few interviewees also told of entire boats sinking, but there was no way to verify such reports or if, and how many, lives were lost.

- Sexual and gender-based violence continues to be reported by many individuals who have made this journey, as well as an increasing prevalence of possible human trafficking in the form of abductions and marriages arranged without the consent of women whose passage was ultimately paid for by prospective husbands.

[*] For more information about irregular maritime movements in South-East Asia, please refer to the full-year 2014 report available at: storybuilder.jumpstart.ge/en/unhcr-imm.

[†] The estimated fatality rate is derived from the number of deaths interviewees reported, divided by the number of passengers interviewees said were on their boats, with statistical outliers excluded.

DEPARTURE

- Between 40 to 60 per cent of the estimated 25,000 people who departed from the Bay of Bengal in the first quarter of 2015 are thought to originate from Rakhine State, Myanmar, though many embarked on their maritime journeys from Bangladesh. Virtually all other passengers on such journeys were Bangladeshi.

- The rise in maritime departures from the Bay of Bengal in the first quarter of 2015, as compared to the same period in previous years, was accompanied by a rise in overland departures from Myanmar to Bangladesh reported by Bangladeshi authorities who in recent months conducted a series of operations that intercepted hundreds of individuals attempting both sea and land journeys.

- The increase in such movements has been attributed to a variety of factors, including more Bangladeshis embarking on the maritime journey, political developments in Myanmar, and the previously reported exodus of young men to Malaysia, which has led both relatives and young women to now also depart in hopes of joining or marrying them.

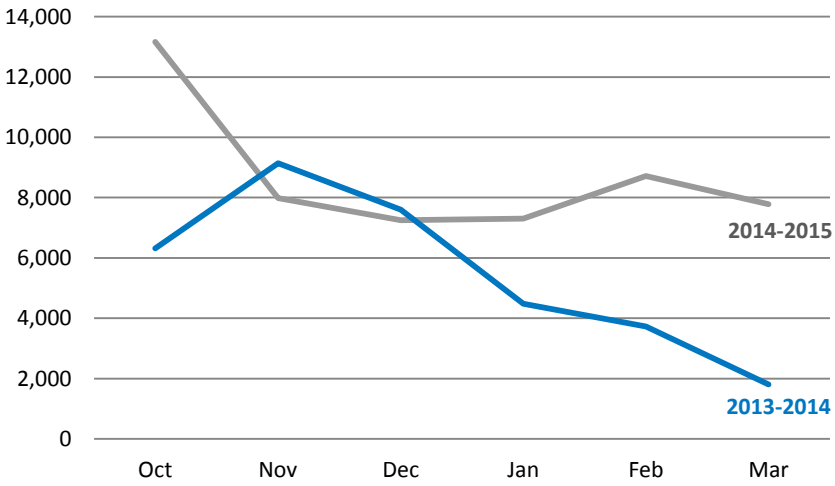
- Individuals who departed by sea have increasingly said they were able to embark on their journeys having only agreed to pay between USD 90-370 for the entire passage or, in some cases, were told they could board for free and pay for the journey with earnings to be made in Malaysia. Several individuals described being spontaneously lured on to a boat by the prospect of work in Malaysia and even small cash inducements, then wishing to return home upon seeing the conditions, but forced by smugglers to remain aboard. Unless they later escaped, all individuals ultimately had to pay much larger amounts to be released from smugglers' camps in Thailand.

- In the first quarter of 2015, UNHCR interviewed over 150 recent maritime arrivals in Thailand and Malaysia who had departed since October 2014 on boats that cumulatively carried an estimated 7,000 passengers. Interviewees reported an average of 408 passengers on such boats, an 11 percent increase over the average passenger loads reported by interviewees who travelled of boats that departed from January-September 2014.

- As in previous periods, roughly one-third of all interviewees were under the age of 18, and one in every ten was younger than 16 years old. Based on interviews, there has been a slight increase in the proportion of female passengers on boats leaving from the Bay of Bengal, from 10 per cent on boats that departed in the first three quarters of 2014 to 14 per cent on boats that have departed in the last quarter of 2014 or later.

- The lack—and, in some reported cases, complicity—of law enforcement at embarkation points has given rise to a zone of impunity in which competing smugglers are under pressure to deliver on promised passenger quotas. In this environment, some individuals, including children, have reported being abducted by smugglers off the street or while fishing and forced against their will to board boats departing from both Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Estimated Irregular Maritime Departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar Maritime Border



- Since October 2014, an increasing number of individuals who departed from Sittwe have said they left on boats carrying between 30-100 passengers that were arranged with associates, rather than smugglers. Although such arrangements allowed individuals to bring their own food on board and should have decreased the cost of passage, most individuals who said they had departed in this manner nevertheless fell into the hands of smugglers when attacked at sea or caught disembarking in Thailand, even after taking precautions such as scuttling their boat upon reaching shore.

TRANSIT

- Conditions at sea remained dire en route from the Bay of Bengal through the Andaman Sea. More than 60 per cent of individuals interviewed by UNHCR who departed since October 2014 said one passenger on their boat died on board, and 13 per cent of interviewees believed 10 or more people on their boat perished.

- Rape by crew members and smugglers was reported by female interviewees who were either themselves the victims or knew of other women or girls who had been raped, occasionally on board but more frequently—and repeatedly—in smugglers' camps in Thailand. Men were beaten for attempting to protect women from abuse.

- Many women hoping to join their husbands in Malaysia travelled with as many as seven children and were not always given additional rations for their children. Their health, safety, and dignity were often further compromised by being limited to one use per day of the same one or two toilets used by all other passengers, male and female.

- Several women told UNHCR that they were only released into Malaysia upon payment of their ransom by a man in Malaysia who agreed to do so in exchange for taking the woman as his wife. One woman said she had departed from Maungdaw, Myanmar, through such an arrangement, but when she reached Thailand, the man who was supposed to pay for and marry her could not be contacted, leaving her in limbo for two months in a camp, during which she was abused by smugglers. The woman was eventually released with the help of relatives in Malaysia.

- The extensive network of, and rising competition among, smugglers manipulating the Bay of Bengal route was evidenced by several individuals who said they were transferred between up to six boats before reaching shore. Smugglers identified each passenger for whom they were to be compensated by tying plastic color bands around passengers' wrists, and separating passengers—including families—according to wristband color upon disembarkation in Thailand.

Asad*

Asad, 30, had his doubts; he could not imagine being able to afford whatever the journey to Malaysia would ultimately cost. But with no other options in Sittwe, Myanmar, when a smuggler offered him and his mother passage to Malaysia without any upfront payment, Asad agreed.

- The night of their departure, smugglers led Asad and his mother to the sea, where they waited until morning to board a Thai boat with some 200 passengers and an armed crew. Asad and his mother were separated, with women kept below deck and prohibited from communicating with men, who crouched on deck for the duration of the journey without any overhead cover.

- The boat made several stops en route, collecting an additional 200 passengers, all of whom joined the men on deck. Passengers had no room to unfold their legs, and some sat atop one another. On two occasions, storms nearly capsized the boat. At other times, passengers were burnt by extreme and constant exposure to the sun. Any attempt by the men, including by Asad, to obtain more rations, use the latrine out of turn, or talk with female relatives, was met with beatings by plastic rods. Asad counted 62 days at sea. "It was as if we were in a graveyard," Asad said. "We lost hope we would reach shore alive."

- After negotiations with authorities near the Thai coast, smugglers were able to disembark the passengers to a camp in the forest, where they were separated into three groups according to the color of plastic bands tied around the wrists of each passenger when boarding. Having not asked for any money upfront, smugglers now demanded MYR 14,000 from Asad and his mother. Over the course of two months, Asad was made to call relatives and detail his suffering in order to elicit payment. Even after payment was made, Asad and his mother, who had become immobile, waited another month to be released, all the while being shifted around the forest to evade authorities. Asad saw two individuals beaten to death in the forest by smugglers.

- Asad and his mother were sent to a holding house in Malaysia with 15 others, but without the contact number of any relatives in Malaysia, remained in captivity for one more month, until relatives in Myanmar were able to find someone in Malaysia willing to receive them. When they were finally released, Asad and his mother had been in and between the custody of smugglers for six months. His mother still cannot walk.

**All names have been changed for protection reasons*

- Sailing was often interrupted by the need to add fuel or passengers to or from other boats, and sometimes stalled completely when crews or smugglers suspected the presence of maritime authorities. Since October 2014, some smugglers have eschewed onshore camps in Thailand by holding passengers for payment at sea, with anecdotal reports of up to 2,000 people held on several boats. Payment in these cases was demanded by calling passengers' relatives while still on board, with the vessel thought to be moored near the Thailand-Malaysia maritime border. Some passengers were transferred by speedboat directly to the Malaysian coast upon payment, but others remained on board even after payment due to the risk of being apprehended.

Hasina

As a single woman in Maungdaw, Myanmar, whose parents had fled following intercommunal violence in 2012, Hasina, 22, sought a more secure life in Malaysia. She sold her home and belongings to pay smugglers for the journey, and boarded a boat that eventually took on 500 passengers.

- Roughly 100 women and 50 small children were kept in an enclosed lower deck—"It could hardly accommodate 30 people," Hasina said—with a single point of access. They were forbidden from emerging from the lower deck and communicating with male passengers on the upper deck. Two meals of a small bowl of rice and dried fish were provided each day, but mothers had to share these with their children, leading many to starve and eventually lose mobility from malnutrition as they made sure their children were fed first.

- Crew members threatened mothers of children who cried; Hasina remembers one crew member pointing a gun at a child to make the boy stop crying. Women covered each other whenever one had to use a makeshift toilet in the corner of the deck. And as all personal belongings had been confiscated by the crew upon boarding, women wore the same clothing for the length of the journey—in Hasina's case, a journey of 40 days—creating dangerously unhygienic conditions.

ARRIVAL

In Thailand

- Since October 2014, disembarkation in or around Ranong in Thailand, followed by a daylong overland transfer south to smugglers' camps in the forests and plantations surrounding Padang Besar and the Thailand-Malaysia border has continued to be the experience of the majority of individuals who departed by sea from the Bay of Bengal. Some individuals, however, have reported disembarking from their main vessel further south in Thailand and being ferried in smaller boats to shores abutting the Malaysian border, allowing for direct crossing overland into Malaysia.

- Individuals recently held in smugglers' camps in Thailand reported a significant decrease in the size of such camps, possibly due to increased scrutiny by Thai authorities. Interviewees who had departed since October 2014 reported an average of 318 people held in each camp, compared to an average of 485 reported by individuals who departed between January-September 2014.

- Over half of individuals interviewed by UNHCR who departed since October 2014 said someone died in their smugglers' camp, mostly from illness, beatings, or being shot by smugglers when attempting to escape. Thai authorities have since unearthed mass graves with dozens of bodies believed to be those of smuggled Rohingya and Bangladeshis. Recent arrivals have also said they were beaten with pipes and wires, hung upside-down from trees, and had fingernails pulled off with pliers.

- An increasing number of individuals reported being released for less than the usual USD 2,000 demanded by smugglers, once it became clear that their relatives would be unable to acquire the full amount. Some interviewees who did not have any means to pay, including unaccompanied boys and girls as young as 12, were released after Rohingya communities in Malaysia heard of their situations and raised money to free them, though at least for adults there appeared to be an expectation of repayment with interest. Others who had no relatives to pay said they worked as laborers for smugglers for several months in order to secure their freedom.

- In January, 53 and 98 individuals were apprehended by Thai authorities in Takuapa and Nakhon Sai Thammarat, respectively. In the first incident, 37 were believed to be Rohingya and the others Bangladeshi. All 53 individuals in

the former group were believed to be passengers of same vessel and were deemed to be "illegal immigrants", whereas authorities deemed the entire second group "victims of trafficking".

- UNHCR continues to seek out durable solutions for the small proportion of refugees arriving by sea in Thailand who are intercepted by authorities, including resettlement for the most vulnerable cases. In the first quarter of 2015, UNHCR submitted 35 such cases (comprising 38 persons) for resettlement consideration, and 11 individuals departed for resettlement to the United States.

Hamid and Azida

It was evening in Sittwe, Myanmar, when Hamid, 23, and his wife Azida, 19, stole away on a small boat bound for Thailand by hiding below deck, hoping not to be noticed beneath the hundred others who had paid smugglers a fare that Hamid and Azida could not afford.

- They remained hidden as the boat set off, but by the end of the second day, Hamid and Azida were starving and dehydrated. They had not brought their own rations, and had little choice but to reveal themselves.
- The crew members were surprised, and furious. Hamid and Azida had no relatives who could pay for them, which to the crew made them dead weight, unable even to be tortured into payment like the other passengers. They were tied up, to be thrown into the sea, when Azida revealed another secret: she was five months pregnant.
- The crew spared the couple's lives but brutalized them for 16 more days at sea, beating both and providing only just enough food to survive. When they reached Thailand, Hamid and Azida were among a small group delivered to a smuggler, who in turn handed them off to another smuggler. During the handoff, Hamid remembers the first smuggler pointing to him and Azida before saying, "Do anything and everything you want with these two."
- Hamid and Azida were taken to a house where 80 people were being held, and beaten, for payment. They were tied up for days in straining positions, and fed no more than one scoop of rice each day. Hamid was punched in the face with metal knuckle dusters.
- Exhausted and desperate, Hamid and Azida found an opportunity to escape one night, and fled on foot for two days until finding shelter in a man's house. They were in Malaysia, the man told them, and for a couple weeks, he paid Hamid to perform odd jobs. After earning MYR 200 (USD 60), Hamid and Azida travelled further south in Malaysia in search of a Rohingya community. When UNHCR interviewed them, their newborn child was two months old.

In Malaysia

- Malaysian authorities apprehended a total of 137 Rohingya and Bangladeshi individuals—some of whom had been chained by the leg and scalded with hot water—either shortly after they had entered overland from Thailand or, in one case, as dozens were disembarking from a fiberglass boat off Sungai Padang beach. Officials believe that smugglers have not only shifted operating areas to the waters off Perlis, but have also moved to high-speed boats.
- In the first quarter of 2015, 61 persons of concern to UNHCR in Malaysia presented with symptoms of beriberi—and were referred to medical care and shelters—compared to 36 in the previous quarter. The higher incidence of beriberi in the first quarters of years tracks the traditionally higher rate of departures from the Bay of Bengal in fourth quarters of years, as it takes several months for an individual to reach Malaysia.
- Earnings made in Malaysia by those who had made the maritime journey were used to pay off debts owed to relatives, communities, and money lenders who financed the journey and release from smugglers' camps. Relatives and communities were known to charge interest rates of around 20 per cent, whereas money lenders reportedly levied up to 100 per cent interest over six months.
- Individuals used hundi credit networks—in which a receiving agent authorizes a paying agent in another country to disburse the same amount received, minus a commission—to send money home, with the amount and frequency of remittances increasing the longer one had resided in Malaysia. Amounts ranged from USD 30-190 per month. Employers and smugglers also provided remittance services by bank transfer from Malaysia to Bangladesh and Myanmar.
- Anecdotal reports of reverse journeys suggested some Rohingya individuals who have accumulated enough savings in Malaysia spend up to MYR 2,500 (USD 690) to obtain a Bangladeshi passport, then fly or sail to Bangladesh in hopes of resuming their livelihoods there.

- UNHCR conducts protection monitoring in Rohingya communities throughout Malaysia, and intervenes for the release of new maritime arrivals known to be in detention. UNHCR also supports refugee communities in the implementation of livelihood, community development, or skills-building and education projects.

Bashir

Bashir, 27, embarked from his hometown of Maungdaw, Myanmar, but by the time he had been transferred to the larger vessel meant to take him to Malaysia, he was one of just five passengers from Myanmar; the rest of the 215 passengers were Bangladeshis.

- Soon after they set sail, they were held up by Myanmar authorities for half an hour, and again 12 hours later, only this time, they were beaten with sticks, pipes, and wires until their smugglers struck a deal with the authorities.
- They reached Thailand in seven days, then waited offshore for two weeks, surviving on one handful of rice in the morning, one pack of dry Maggi noodles at night, and around 100 mL of water each day. Bashir saw 15 passengers die on board, of hunger, thirst, and illness, and four others jump into the sea out of desperation.
- After 15 days, a large, yellow boat with a steel hull and darkened doors and windows moored nearby, and all passengers from both Bashir's boat and another boat also waiting abreast were transferred to the large boat, owned and crewed by Malaysians. Smugglers then demanded additional fees from passengers, to recoup losses incurred in the two encounters with Myanmar authorities. Bashir was made to pay MMK 2,500,000 (USD 2,320), instead of the MMK 1,800,000 (USD 1,670) he had agreed to pay when leaving Myanmar.
- Bashir was held with hundreds of others on the large boat indefinitely, as smugglers waited for ransoms to be paid. After two months, the passengers began being disembarked by small ferries to a forested camp and later to a palm oil plantation. Bashir and scores of others sat on plastic tarpaulin, but had no cover overhead even as it rained for days, often soaking what little rice they were fed. Many died, Bashir recalls, some having been paralyzed by malnutrition.
- Once his father, borrowing heavily, was able to bridge the increased fee and deliver the cash to the smuggler's mother in Maungdaw, Bashir was taken to a holding house in Malaysia, where 40 others awaited release. The next day, a friend came to receive Bashir and made one final payment of MYR 200 (USD 60)—one night's "rent" at the holding house, the smugglers called it, after three months at sea.

BEYOND THE BAY OF BENGAL

- Eight individuals identifying as Rohingya registered with UNHCR in Indonesia in the first quarter of 2015, bringing the total number of Rohingya currently registered with UNHCR in Indonesia to 714, of whom 687 have been recognized as refugees.
- Indonesian and Australian authorities reported several attempts of maritime crossings to Australia in February and March: four Sri Lankans intercepted by Australian authorities off the Cocos (Keeling) Islands who were returned to Sri Lanka the following day after being interviewed at sea by Australian border protection officials; 30 Bangladeshi and Myanmar nationals apprehended in Padang, Indonesia, preparing to embark for Australia; and a group of 15 individuals returned to Indonesian waters by Australian authorities after staying on Christmas Island for three days.
- As of 31 March 2015, over 5,400 persons of concern to UNHCR who travelled by sea were held in immigration detention facilities in the Asia-Pacific region, including over 2,700 who are either in Australia or the offshore processing centers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

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