Asian refugee crisis: trafficked migrants held off Thailand in vast 'camp boats'

Trafficking syndicates seeking to avoid crackdown by Thai and Malaysian authorities hold Bangladeshi and Rohingya migrants at sea

Source:

Thousands of Bangladeshi and ethnic Rohingya migrants are being held in huge cargo ships by human traffickers in the Andaman Sea, according to testimony collected from survivors.

First-hand accounts indicate that trafficking syndicates trading in vulnerable migrants have responded to a recent crackdown by authorities in Thailand and Malaysia by holding their victims in large vessels close to international waters, where they are ransomed for their freedom in return for money from relatives.

Thailand human trafficking death toll far greater than feared, claims rights group

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The practice, which has been accompanied by violence and other abuses, mirrors the fate of victims held in camps recently discovered by officials in southern Thailand and Malaysia, where dozens of mass graves have yet to be unearthed according to survivors who spoke to the Arakan Project. There is one crucial difference, however: the bodies of the dead were dumped overboard into the ocean, with no hope of being recovered.

“The traffickers will not abandon their business, so they have now started putting ‘camps’ in the sea,” said Chris Lewa, founder of the Arakan Project. “Since the end of February, we now have thousands and thousands of people stuck at sea, and I think we already have more death than even at the camps in Thailand.”
A survivor from one ship who agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity described an ordeal of violence and sexual abuse accompanied by demands for ransom payment. She described a ship containing “six storeys in total: three above deck, three below. The men and women were separated.”

As a result of this arrangement, the women on the ship were targeted by sexually predatory crew members, she claimed. A girl “around 12 years old” who was “very beautiful” was taken to a room by a group of men and was “not released from the ship”, she recalled.

Asian refugee crisis: ‘camp boat’ survivor describes ordeals endured by trafficked women

Other women onboard were subjected to similar treatment, she said, adding: “If the women did not go, they were beaten.”

Recalling other aspects of her ordeal onboard the vessel, the woman said: “Food rations were not enough … when I asked for more, they beat me.” She was accompanied by her three children during her time on the ship.

In other testimony collected by the Arakan Project, a 19-year-old Rohingya man from Burma’s northern Rakhine state described his journey on one of the boats last year. After nine days at sea on a Burmese cattle ship, his vessel joined with a bigger boat not far from the Thai shore. He estimated there were more than 1,000 people onboard, roughly one-third of whom were women.

“I spent 14 days on this ship. Three days after we were transferred, three smugglers arrived from Malaysia and boarded our ship. They carried mobile phones. They first asked who had phone numbers and, one by one, we started calling our relatives. Those [who did not provide] phone numbers were beaten,” he recalled.

South-east Asia migrant crisis: numbers are now 'alarming', talks told

“The smugglers ordered passengers to beat them with engine chains wrapped in plastic and plastic pipes with something heavy inside. Even those with phone...
numbers were beaten,” he said.

The abuses continued until families sent money, after which survivors were taken to shore by small fishing boats.

“Before I left, I witnessed three men who had become paralysed and one dead body was thrown overboard,” he added.

A survivor from northern Thailand who spoke to the Guardian by phone described similar treatment. “I stayed on the boats for three months from February this year until April. I remember people were beaten every day, sometimes two or three times a day. Those who could not pay were beaten.

“I think there were more than one-and-a-half thousand people on that boat,” he estimated.

Abdul Kalam, an adviser to Thai police, told Channel 4 News that refugees were being taken offshore for months. He said that a tanker ship has been deployed as a camp. “It has been out for two months and is moving all the time. The ship has got 2,000 people on it. The traffickers are relocating their camps because so much money is involved.”

The testimony of survivors has been reinforced by the accounts of Rohingya helped to shore by fishermen in north and east Aceh, Indonesia, after being stranded at sea. Visitors to the tightly-controlled camps containing the refugees heard multiple accounts of the use of large “camp boats” at sea.

Malaysian police arrest own officers over involvement in migrant death camps

“I have just spent a week in Aceh working in three camps with my local humanitarian team, and we have conducted interviews with dozens of Rohingya and Bangladeshi survivors. Many of them spoke of being held in offshore camps on big
ships in international waters,” said Lilianne Fan, a research associate with the Humanitarian Policy Group.

Htike Htike, co-founder of the Bangkok-based Equal Harmony Together project, who also went to Aceh, offered a similar account. “I conducted 30 interviews in Aceh. During that time many people spoke of the use of ‘camp boats’ where they were forced to call their family to ask for money,” she said.

A 15-year-old survivor recalled seeing 34 people die from sickness during a 40-day stay onboard one of the huge camp vessels. “Crew members threw the dead bodies overboard,” he said.

He even saw the dead from other ships. “About the 20th day of waiting in the Andaman Sea, another two cargo boats arrived. They were smaller than our boat and they anchored near our boat ... I saw people who had died in those two boats: eight bodies were thrown overboard from one boat and the following day another 13 bodies were thrown from the other boat. I do not know how they had died.”

This article was amended on 29 May 2015. The original stated that Rohingya had been helped by fishermen in Banda Aceh. This has been changed to north and east Aceh.