Hussein twice lived through the horror of Thai trafficking camps, sold by brokers to boats and working in terrible conditions at sea for four years without setting foot on land, in the service of the country’s multibillion-dollar seafood industry.

Hussein* was only 16 when he first experienced the jungle camps of southern Thailand. These were places of torture, rape and death, the holding pens of a vast transnational trafficking industry preying on the desperation and isolation of thousands of stateless Rohingya.

Hussein lived through the horrors of these trafficking camps not once, but twice. Now living in the relative safety of Malaysia, his voice still cracks and breaks when he recounts what he witnessed there.

“In total, I saw 13 people die,” he says. “There was a river by the camp which was used as a toilet and some people drank that water. Those who could not pay [a ransom] were tortured by the brokers.”

The second time he was held in the jungle, he was among groups of young migrants forced to dig a mass graves for corpses of those who had died or been killed.

When his family were unable to pay a ransom, the teenager was taken by truck from the jungle to Songkhla, in southern Thailand. At the port he was handed to a boat captain and taken on to a fishing boat flying the Thai flag. He wouldn’t set foot on land again for four years.
Those who could not pay [a ransom] were tortured by the brokers Hussein*

Hussein is one of hundreds of Rohingya migrants believed to have been sold from the trafficking camps over the past decade to crew boats that service Thailand’s $7.8bn seafood industry.

One year on from the Guardian’s revelations about the slavery in the supply chains of prawns from Thailand sold in supermarkets in the UK and around the world, a new investigation has traced the supply chain from the decks of the slave boats back to a network of Rohingya trafficking camps and mass graves snaking across south-east Asia.

In these jungle base camps, until as recently as this year, Thai fishing boats provided a lucrative secondary revenue stream for the highly organised and ruthless criminal gangs profiting from the plight of the stateless Rohingya people fleeing persecution and violence in Burma.

Survivors have told the Guardian of how men were routinely sold into forced labour by traffickers intent on maximising profits wherever they could.

“They sold people to the fishing boats or to work for hard labour,” said one man, who did not want to be identified. “They sold people wherever they could get money.”

The prospect of being sold on to a boat was used to terrify migrants into raising up to a thousand pounds in ransom payments from their families.

Survivors have described how men were routinely sold into forced labour by traffickers intent on maximising profits
“They told us [in the camps] every day, ‘If you are sold to the fishing boats, you will never see the shore again!’” one Rohingya survivor said. “When they said that, we got really scared.”

The selling of men as slave labour on to Thai fishing boats was good business for those involved. In a humid hotel room in Bangkok, a low-level broker describes personally selling more than 100 Rohingya on to fishing vessels.

“If they don’t look so healthy, they are not usually worth a lot of money,” he said. “The boat owners prefer the healthy, tall ones, because the work is quite hard. [The Rohingya] don’t want to go on the boats [but] they have to. [The boat owners] pay for them – I get about 30,000 baht [$900] per person.”

“I don’t feel good about it. They wouldn’t look at me,” he says.

A low-level broker describes personally selling more than 100 Rohingya on to fishing vessels

Life on the boats was brutal. “We were sold on to a fishing boat by a broker even after we got 15,000 Thai baht from our relatives [for our release],” one man said. “The broker got 25,000 or 30,000 baht [$900] for each person. We had to work nine months in that boat. We were beaten...[they] kicked our foreheads with shoes and beat us brutally in the boat. Only a Thai man protected us, otherwise we would have been killed at sea.”

In some cases, it was the Thai authorities who brokered the deals with the boat captains. Another Rohingya man, now also living in Malaysia, spoke of how he was sold by immigration officials into slavery on a fishing boat in Ranong, western Thailand.

Thai slavery at sea video survivor
Facebook Twitter Pinterest
‘When I was in the jungle camp, 50 to 60 people died within one and a half months’... a trafficking camp survivor. Photograph: Chris Kelly
“We were forced to work 22-hour days,” he said. “If we slept, we were beaten. Once, my friend was beaten so badly they broke his legs and [he] couldn’t walk. He died ten 10 days later.”

The scope and scale of the lucrative and sophisticated human trafficking networks that have grown up to exploit and profit from the plight of the Rohingya has been emerging over the past months.

Rohingya have been trafficked into Thailand and Malaysia from Burma for decades, fleeing state-sanctioned persecution and extreme deprivation. An estimated 100,000 Rohingya have fled the Bay of Bengal in the last three years, with more than 25,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshis boarding smugglers’ boats in the first three months of 2015 alone.

In May, footage of starving Rohingya refugees, abandoned by their traffickers on sinking vessels and initially refused permission to land by Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, brought international attention to the human rights catastrophe unfolding across Asia.

The discovery of a string of abandoned trafficking camps in Thailand and Malaysia, with their barbed wire cages and isolation cells, and the exhumation of mass graves containing the bodies of Rohingya migrants, followed shortly after.

The Guardian was shown a boat that had been converted to carry people rather than fish – up to 400 people at a time

Faced with mounting international condemnation, the Thai government set a deadline of 10 days to close down the remaining camps and stop the trafficking operations. It now insists human traffickers no longer operate within its borders.

At the same time, it is also pushing through a series of wide-reaching reforms in its fishing industry after the EU threatened to ban all imports of Thai seafood if the
industry didn’t clean up its act; a move that could cost Thailand almost €1bn.

Thailand’s global fish exports were valued at $7.8bn in 2013. Last year, $717m of Thai fish exports – weighing 146,000 tonnes – were destined for European tables, where it made up more than 3% of the continent’s fish imports.

For boat captains, these reforms means potential ruin. They say they will be unable to earn a living if the government forces them to comply with new regulations aimed at eradicating illegal fishing, including registering all migrant workers. In a fishing port in Songkhla, posters protesting against the reforms hang from every wall. One reads, “Do not destroy fishermen just for the sake of profit-making and foreigners. Stop harming fishermen. We want justice.”

In Ranong, fishermen, who are also faced with increasingly empty nets after decades of overfishing and environmental destruction, say they have no choice but to turn to another kind of business – human trafficking.

The Guardian was shown a boat that had been converted to carry people rather than fish. This one boat can now carry up to 400 people at a time.

“Right now ... it’s really hard to find fish in the Gulf of Thailand. When this kind of job comes along it can make me money,” the boat owner said, “The more people you carry, the more money you get.”

Rohingya migrants in Malaysia also spoke of a grim evolution in the trade and exploitation of vulnerable migrants making their way across the open sea from Burma.
As their jungle camps are shut down, trafficking syndicates are reportedly taking their operations off-shore to huge multi-storey cargo ships acting as holding pens for thousands of Rohingya.

One woman told us how the smuggling boat she was travelling on was hijacked by armed men as they made their way from Burma across the open sea.

“They pointed guns at my children and said, ‘Don’t move. Don’t speak or we will shoot,’” she said. “The big boat was built like a holding camp. We had to sleep on top of each other.”

The off-shore boat prisons are allegedly being facilitated by Thai fishing boats.

“[The trafficking ship] was surrounded by fishing boats,” she said. “The boats would phone the big ship then it would move. When people died on the big boat, the dead bodies were taken away by the fishing boats.”

For now, boat captains say many of the smuggling rings and trafficking syndicates have gone to ground as the Thai and Malaysian authorities continue to make a public display of their efforts to rid their waters of this now very-public blight on their international reputation.

Yet human rights groups in the region are warning that not enough has been done to prevent the trafficking of Rohingya from continuing unabated once the pressure subsides.

“State policies of persecution [against the Rohingya]... are continuing,” says Matthew Smith, director of human rights group Fortify Rights. “As long as that’s happening, people are going to flee their homes ... and they’re going to take to the seas because they see that’s the only option they have.”
The following months could also prove decisive for Thailand’s fishing sector, as it works to convince valuable trading partners that it is serious about reforming an export industry increasingly seen to be built on slavery, environmental destruction and illegal practices.

Siddharth Kara, a Harvard economist and world expert on modern slavery and human trafficking, believes that the fate of Thailand’s fishing industry now hangs in the balance.

“As the industry has evolved across the last several decades the sad truth is forced labour has become fundamental to the economic logic of the Thai seafood sector,” he says. “If you suddenly strip out forced labour an industry can fall apart ... and maybe it should.”

*Identities protected