

Thai government to investigate Rohingya abuse claims

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Thailand's government has promised to investigate claims that the country's military authorities abused hundreds of Rohingya by pushing them back out to sea to die. At the same time, the UN has appealed to Thai authorities to be given access to survivors of the incidents believed to be in custody in southern Thailand.

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva says Thailand will investigate allegations that the Thai navy cast members of the Muslim minority population from Burma adrift in the Andaman Sea in southwest Thailand last month. The country's Defense Minister will investigate the accusations and report back to the Prime Minister as soon as possible, according to Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban.

The premier also assured human rights activists who met him earlier this week that his government would not tolerate any violation of the rights of Burmese boat people.

"If any officials committed such inhumane acts against [the Rohingya refugees] they will be punished," he promised.

Thailand's Army chief, General Anupong Paochinda, later told journalists that the military was investigating the incident. However the army chief added that he was confident that no Thai officials used violence when dealing with migrant workers and refugees. *"They all adhere to international standards and principles of human rights in dealing with illegal immigrants,"* he said.

However human rights activists based in Thailand fear that hundreds, if not thousands, of Rohingya are dead after being pushed back into the sea by Thai authorities. Up to 200 people are missing while more than 300 others are already known to have drowned after they were set adrift by Thai soldiers, some with their hands tied behind their backs in boats without engines, survivors and human rights activists told Mizzima.

The United Nation's refugee agency has already voiced its concern about these reports and urged the government to investigate the incidents. They are now calling for Thai authorities to give them access to some of the Burmese refugees, who are believed to be in Thai custody in southern Thailand somewhere near Ranong.

"We have asked the Thai government for access to two groups totaling 126 Rohingya boat people, who are in custody in southern Thailand, in order to assess their situation and determine whether any of them are in need of international protection," said a UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesperson, Ron Redman.

The Rohingya in custody are in two groups, around 80 who are believed to have survived the ordeal of being cast adrift after they reached Thailand and a further 46 boat people who were detained by Thai naval authorities off the west coast of Thailand last Friday. But the actual whereabouts of these people is shrouded in mystery. Local Thai naval authorities deny that they are holding any migrant

workers in custody.

"We continue to stress that the Thai government should take all measures to make sure the lives of the Rohingya boat people are not put at risk," the UNHCR spokesperson added.

The UNHCR's latest request follows their initial response last week to media reports of the Thai authorities' inhumane treatment of Burmese migrant workers and refugee seekers. *"We request the Thai government to take all measures necessary to ensure that the lives of Rohingya are not at risk and they are treated in accordance with humanitarian standards,"* regional spokeswoman Kitty McKinsey said in Bangkok on Friday.

Yet so far there has been no official response to any of UNHCR's requests. The UN body cannot even confirm how many Burmese Muslims are being detained or their whereabouts.

"But what is needed now is not a knee-jerk response – to what is the tip of the iceberg – but a clear policy position and procedures for processing would be migrants and refugees in keeping with accepted international standards," Sunai Pasuk, a Thai-Burma specialist with the US-based Human Rights Watch told Mizzima.

"It's a real test for the [Thai] Democrat-led government. Will it maintain its integrity and really fulfill its promises to protect human rights and international laws or will it compromise its values in the interest of maintaining good relations with the country's top military brass," asked Sunai.

The Rohingya live in northern Arakan state, in western Burma, bordering Bangladesh. For decades, many have fled social and religious persecution by Burmese military authorities there. Most human rights activists believe that the abuses committed by the junta in the Muslim dominated areas of western Burma are worse than anywhere else in the country.

"Burma's Rohingya minority is subject to systematic persecution – they are effectively denied citizenship, they have their land confiscated, and many are regularly forced to work on government projects," Ben Zawacki, Amnesty International's Burma researcher told Mizzima.

"The regime creates conditions and circumstances that make it clear to the Rohingyas that they are not wanted or welcome in the country; so it's no surprise that they try to flee the country by the thousands," he added.

Since Burma's independence from Britain, there have been several successive surges of Muslim refugees fleeing the country, amounting to millions. The first massive wave was in the late 1970s, when tens of thousands fled to Bangladesh – though nearly all of them were later repatriated. Since the early nineties though, tens of thousands of Burmese Muslims have fled the increased social and religious repression and sought asylum and work abroad; most of them escaping to Bangladesh in the first instance.

Now many Burmese migrants are trying to get further afield – particularly to Indonesia and Malaysia. Their first stop though is Thailand, and thousands have been taking their chances and making the perilous two-week long voyage by sea from Bangladesh to southern Thailand on the first leg of their journey. The period from November to February is when most of the trips are made as the seas are generally not so rough.

But in the past few months thousands of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Burma have been rounded-up by Thai soldiers and transferred to an island off the coast of southern Thailand, near Ranong, before being allegedly put into boats without engines and set adrift.

"Nearly a thousand Burmese immigrants who were held on Koh Sai Daeng [or Red Island] were left drifting in international waters by Thai military authorities in the past few weeks, in at least two separate incidents," a local Burmese resident in Ranong told Mizzima on condition of anonymity.

In the first incident, around the 18th of December, 412 Burmese refugees were placed on board a large barge, hands tied behind their backs, and towed out to sea with little food or water, according to survivors from the boat. They originally had some five separate boats, but were transferred to an open-deck boat. "At first we refused to get into the boat, but then the guards threw at least four of us overboard, with their hands tied behind their backs," according to a survivor who declined to be identified.

"We were tied up and put into a boat without an engine," Zaw Min, one of the few survivors from the boat told Mizzima. *"We were then towed into the high seas by a motor boat and set adrift,"* he said.

"The food and water ran out within a few days," said another survivor. *"We were starving for nearly two weeks and feared we would never see dry land again,"* he added.

The boat drifted for more than ten days in the Andaman Sea, before being rescued by the Indian coast guard. The survivors are now being held in jail on Little Andaman Island. They were all severely dehydrated, according to a local medical official.

"The Thai authorities obviously wanted us to die on the boat," said Zaw Min.

Only 107 Burmese migrants survived the ordeal, according to refugee workers in contact with the group. There were also four dead bodies on board when the boat was beached. In all, more than 300 Burmese perished, according to researchers with a regional NGO, the Arakan Project. Most of those who died did so when they jumped overboard and tried to swim to safety when they saw land and lights on the island. The area is renowned for its rough seas and shark infested waters.

Just before the New Year, Thai authorities towed 580 Rohingyas out to sea in four boats, according to Arakan Project researchers monitoring Rohingya movements. They had arrived in Thai waters in five different boats. One of these boats ended up back near the Thai coast and 81 Burmese Muslims were rescued by a Thai fishing trawler and handed over to Thai authorities on January 6th. Originally they were detained once again on Koh Sai Daeng, but were recently moved to an unknown location, according to local residents. They comprise one of the two groups to which the UNHCR wants access.

The second boat beached on Sabang Island just off the Indonesian province of Aceh, on the 7th of January. The 193 Burmese Muslims on board were rescued and are now being held in police custody. The third boat was rescued by Indian authorities on Tillanchang Island in the Andamans and around 150 refugees transferred to a hospital for treatment, according to Indian authorities.

The fourth boat is still missing and more than 200 Burmese refugees on board are now feared dead.

However, Thai authorities dismiss these incidents as fantasy. "We never push them back to the sea," said one official, Lieutenant Colonel Tara Soranarak, an inspector in the Ranong immigration office.

"We have our procedure to deport the migrants to their home country after processing them through the Thai legal system," he added.

While this may have been the case in the past, many human rights activists believe there has recently been a change of policy. Instead of being handed over to police and immigration officials, they are now apparently taken into custody by the military.

"This change of policy is certainly for security reasons," said Amnesty's Ben Zawacki. "While the Rohingyas are not alone in being repatriated or turned back, other Burmese ethnic minorities - like the Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan - are dealt with more sympathetically."

Privately, Thai officials have expressed concern that the Rohingya, who are Muslims, may be headed to join the rebellion in southern Thailand, where insurgents are seeking greater autonomy.

All the Burmese Muslims who have been detained and cast adrift originally set off from Cox's Bazaar, on Bangladesh's eastern coastline, which is also close to the border with Burma. *"All of them paid 10,000 baht to traffickers in Bangladesh for the journey to Thailand," Chris Lewa, who heads the Arakan Project, told Mizzima. It costs a further 18,000 to 23,000 baht for Thai traffickers to transport them from Thailand to Malaysia.*

Last year more than 5,000 Burmese refugees fleeing in boats from Bangladesh and Burma were detained by Thai authorities. Many others have successfully managed the dangerous journey to Malaysia and Indonesia. But many more may have perished en route to Southeast Asia, without anyone ever knowing. Hundreds of boats leave Bangladesh at this time of year, leading to hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths, according to Lewa.

In the past two years thousands of Burmese Muslim migrants have been tempted to head to Southeast Asia after the safer route to Saudi Arabia was blocked when it became impossible to get Bangladeshi papers permitting a direct flight.

But this latest tragedy has helped highlight the continuing problem fleeing Burmese Muslims face - repression and persecution in their own country, an uncertain future in Bangladesh and being left to the small mercies of human traffickers. The Thai response may be draconian, but all countries in Southeast Asia are likely to take a harder line against illegal immigrants in the future in the face of the international economic down-turn and credit crunch.

"What is needed is a regional solution" said Ben Zawacki. "There are at least five countries affected by this latest stream of refugees and migrant workers, so its time for Thailand to talk to Bangladesh, Burma, India, Indonesia and Malaysia, for starters. ASEAN may also be able to play a role in resolving this issue."

Most experts involved with the issue agree. *"It's a regional issue," said Lewa. "Thailand cannot solve it alone, but should collaborate with the counties concerned and international agencies to find a solution to this problem."*

The UNHCR is also endorsing this approach. *"Because the plight of the Rohingyas is a regional problem, UNHCR is urgently seeking to discuss with the Thai government ways that all concerned countries can address the root causes that impel the Rohingya to put their lives at risk on such perilous journeys,"* said spokesperson Ron Readman.

While the Thai Foreign Minister is planning to raise the issue with his counterparts in neighboring countries, according to Thai diplomatic sources, there are so far no plans to call a summit. *"Because of the increasing urgency of this issue and the increasing size of the problem, we will coordinate closely with the countries concerned and will also consider raising this issue in such forums as BIMSTEC,"* the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a press statement emailed to Mizzima.

As an initial step, the Thai government plans to invite the ambassadors from the concerned states to discuss the matter after it has more details from the Defence Ministry's investigation, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Tharit Charungvat told journalists on Tuesday.

Many countries, and even the UN, have in the past tried to help resolve this problem; but efforts have thus far proved unsuccessful largely due to the intransigence of Burma's military rulers. Prophetically, during the height of the last mass exodus of Burmese Muslim refugees from Arakan more than fifteen years ago, the then Bangladeshi Foreign Minister, Mustafizur Rahman, told Mizzima the Rohingya problem can never be solved while the Generals are still in power in Burma.

P.S.

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