UNHCR report shows sharp increase in sea crossings in Bay of Bengal

Briefing Notes, 8 May 2015

This is a summary of what was said by UNHCR spokesperson Adrian Edwards – to whom quoted text may be attributed – at the press briefing, on 8 May 2015, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

This week, UNHCR’s office in Thailand learned from the authorities and media reports that more than 30 bodies had been found in graves in smugglers’ camps in the southern province of Songkhla, close to the border with Malaysia. The bodies were said to be of people originating from Myanmar and Bangladesh, who had likely died from illness or abuse. Some of these may well have been people seeking international protection.

UNHCR welcomes that the Thai police are investigating this and we hope the culprits will be identified and brought to justice. But we are also appalled by these deaths. Smuggling networks by sea from the Bay of Bengal area to Thailand and onwards to Malaysia have become increasingly lucrative for smugglers, and increasingly dangerous for their human cargoes.

Despite the risks, the number of people using these routes and means has recently been on the rise. A UNHCR periodic report released today estimates that some 25,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshis boarded smugglers’ boats between January and March this year – almost double the number over the same period in 2014. This is according to UNHCR’s latest Irregular Maritime Movements in South-East Asia report through which we have been highlighting our concerns and advocating with governments for urgent action since August last year.

UNHCR staff spoke to several hundred survivors of such journeys during the reporting period. Their accounts signal a shift in how smugglers recruit passengers for the boats. Initial boarding fees are often low and in some cases people are given free-passage on condition that they repay the debt with future earnings in Malaysia. There may be false promises of work and even small cash incentives offered. Those who change their minds and ask to be let off the boats are forced to remain. We heard of children being abducted off the streets or while fishing, and forced onto boats. People are unaware that money will be extorted from them later in the journey and what started with being smuggled soon turns into trafficking in persons.

Based on survivor accounts, we estimate that 300 people died at sea in the first quarter of 2015 as a result of starvation, dehydration and abuse by boat crews. One survivor who spent 62 days in such conditions compared it to a graveyard and said he lost hope of reaching shore alive.

The most commonly-described route has boat passengers disembarking in the Ranong area of southern, Thailand, followed by a day-long road trip to smugglers’ camps towards the border with Malaysia.

Conditions in the smugglers camp are horrific. People are held and abused until their relatives pay for their release. More than half the survivors interviewed by UNHCR since October reported that someone died in the smuggler’s camp where they were held. Beatings are common and there are reports of rapes. Those who try to escape, risk being shot.

UNHCR understands that since last October, some smugglers have abandoned onshore camps in Thailand in favour of holding passengers for ransom at sea. Once payment is made, people are taken by fishing or speed boats directly to Malaysia. According to NGO The Arakan Project, currently several thousand people could be held – and dozens could have already died – in these “offshore camps”.

Those who eventually made it to Malaysia were in bad shape. In the first three months of this year, UNHCR Malaysia saw 61 Rohingya arrivals with symptoms of beriberi caused by Vitamin B deficiency. Those who could earn some money in the informal sector had to pay off debts to people who paid for their release, often with high interest rates.

With people rescued from smugglers camps in Thailand, UNHCR assists by providing clothes, blankets, hygiene kits and other relief. Our teams also conduct interviews and counselling. We help reunite families who have been split during the journey. We also identify possibilities of resettlement to third countries for the most vulnerable.

In Malaysia, UNHCR conducts protection monitoring in Rohingya communities and intervenes for
the release of those known to be in detention for arriving irregularly. Our office also supports refugee communities in the implementation of livelihood, community development, or skills-building and education projects.

Considering the growing scale and severity of the boat exodus, UNHCR calls on countries in the region to work more closely together to counter the smuggling and trafficking of vulnerable people. Regarding the much-needed efforts to crack down on this illicit trade, international law prescribes an important distinction between smugglers and traffickers involved in criminal activities on the one hand and the victims of smuggling and trafficking on the other. Law enforcement measures must also be accompanied by efforts to reduce the need for migrants and refugees to turn to smugglers in the first place, including by addressing the root causes driving people to undertake these dangerous journeys and providing safe alternatives for them to access asylum and protection.

In Myanmar’s Rakhine state – where many of the smuggling victims originate – UNHCR has long advocated for and stands ready to support concerted efforts to stabilize the situation through reconciliation, the realization of rights for all, socio-economic equality and addressing issues related to citizenship.

UNHCR’s report is available at [http://www.unhcr.org/554c6a746.html](http://www.unhcr.org/554c6a746.html)

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