UNHCR urges South East Asian governments to prioritize saving lives amid reports that thousands adrift in region's waters

Briefing Notes, 12 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 12 May 2015, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

UNHCR is appealing to governments in Southeast Asia to step up search-and-rescue efforts and keep their borders open, amid continuing reports that thousands of people are stranded on smugglers' boats between the Andaman Sea and the Straits of Malacca.

Our partner, the Thailand-based NGO The Arakan Project estimates that several thousand people – believed to be mostly Rohingya, and Bangladeshi nationals – could be adrift at sea as smugglers abandon them to avoid arrest in the wake of recent crackdowns in Thailand and Malaysia.

UNHCR welcomes the rescue of hundreds of people off the coast of Indonesia and Malaysia in recent days. Through various sources we have been alerted that there could be more such boats in the region that still need to be located and assisted. UNHCR appeals to governments to continue their life-saving operations to find and safely disembark the passengers, many of whom are believed to be in a weakened state after days, possibly weeks with little food and water.

Our staff have been on the ground to talk to the survivors in support of government efforts. In Thailand, where more than 230 smuggling victims have approached the police in recent days after they escaped or were abandoned in smugglers' camps, UNHCR teams are distributing relief items and providing counselling.

In Indonesia, UNHCR has sent a team to Lhoksukon in northern Aceh to assist the Government in interviewing groups rescued by the Indonesian navy over the weekend and provide them with protection.

In Malaysia local authorities say 1,093 people – including many believed to be Rohingya – arrived by boat in Langkawi on Sunday night. Considering their ordeal, in general they are in fair condition and have been seen by doctors. A UNHCR staff member is currently in Langkawi to meet with the authorities and local contacts. We are aware of the challenges of managing such a humanitarian emergency, and we have offered our assistance to the government. We stand ready to participate with the authorities in providing humanitarian assistance.

While those involved include both asylum-seekers and migrants, the first priority is humanitarian relief, followed by the identification of those in need of international protection.

UNHCR urges against indefinite detention of those rescued, who should be given access to basic rights and services including family unification, shelter, healthcare and where possible, the right to work while longer-term solutions are sought.

We stand ready to help address the root causes of the outflow, including the resolution of longstanding citizenship issues for the Rohingya.

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