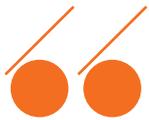


Exposing Asia's brutal slave trade

Men and women are being abducted and taken to ships anchored in international waters off Bangladesh that act as prisons as trafficking becomes increasingly lucrative

BY AMY SAWITTA LEFEVRE AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

OCTOBER 22 PHANG NGA, THAILAND



When he awoke, it was dark. He had lost all sense of time. Two Bangladeshi men then forced him and seven others onto a small boat and bound them.



When Afsar Miae left his home near Teknaf in southern Bangladesh to look for work last month, he told his mother, “I’ll see you soon.” He said he expected to return that evening.

He never did.

When he reported for work at a house on the outskirts of Teknaf, a man there gave him a drink of water. Soon, his eyelids sagged and his head started spinning.

When he awoke, it was dark. He had lost all sense of time. Two Bangladeshi men then forced him and seven others onto a small boat and bound them.

“My hands were tied. My eyes were blindfolded,” said Miae, 20.

The boat sailed through the night until it reached a larger ship moored far offshore. Miae was thrown into its dark, crowded hold by armed guards. He and his fellow captives survived on scraps of food and dirty water, some of them for weeks.

The ship eventually sailed toward Thailand where, as Reuters reported last year, human-trafficking gangs hold thousands of boat people in brutal jungle camps until relatives pay ransoms to secure their release.

Testimonies from Bangladeshi and Rohingya survivors provide evidence of a shift in tactics in one of Asia’s busiest

human-trafficking routes. In the past, evidence showed most people boarded smuggling boats voluntarily. Now people are being abducted or tricked and then taken to larger ships anchored in international waters just outside Bangladesh’s maritime boundary.

It’s unclear exactly how many people are being coerced onto the boats. But seven men interviewed by Reuters who said they were taken by force described being held until the boats filled up with hundreds of people in what are effectively floating prisons. Two of the men were taken to trafficking camps in Thailand.

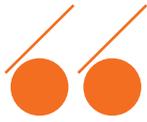
“EATING LEAVES”

The experiences of these men recall the trans-Atlantic slave trade of centuries ago. Miae and four other men who were held on the same ship as him described being kept in near total darkness and being regularly whipped by guards. Two men from another boat said they were forced to sit in a squatting position and that the hatch to the hold was only opened to remove dead bodies.

Miae and 80 other men were abandoned, starving and dehydrated, on a remote island by their captors, who appear to have fled for fear their operation had been exposed, according to two local Thai officials who were involved in rescuing the men in Phang Nga, located just north of the popular tourist island of Phuket.

“Their conditions were beyond what a human should have to go through,” said Jadsada Thitimuta, an official in Phang Nga. “Some were sick and many were like skeletons. They were eating leaves.”

More than 130 suspected trafficking victims, mostly Bangladeshis but also stateless Rohingya Muslims from western Myanmar, have been found in Phang Nga since Oct. 11, according to Thailand’s Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. Prayoon Rattanasene, the acting governor of Phang Nga province, said that interviews conducted by police, rights groups and his own people revealed that the victims were “brought by force. Many were drugged but we don’t know



Two men from another boat said they were forced to sit in a squatting position and that the hatch to the hold was only opened to remove dead bodies.



the exact number,” he told Reuters.

Evidence indicates that many of the boats appear to be from Thailand. The abducted men recalled ships with either Thai flags or Thai-speaking crews. In June, six people were killed and dozens injured when a mutiny broke out in Bangladeshi waters on what the Bangladesh Coast Guard described as a “Thai trawler” trafficking hundreds of men to Thailand.

The Bangladesh Coast Guard told Reuters it was aware of trafficking ships lurking just outside Bangladesh’s territorial waters. Intercepting them wasn’t easy, said Lieutenant Commander M. Ashiqe Mahmud.

“At night they enter our waters, take the people and again cross the boundary,” he said. “It is very difficult to identify those ships at sea.”

Ashiqe said the coast guard was intercepting smaller boats that were leaving Bangladeshi shores with people to feed the larger ships. A report in August by the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR said that in the first half of the year, Bangladeshi authorities reportedly arrested “over 700 people (including smugglers and crew) attempting to depart irregularly by sea from Bangladesh.”

The Royal Thai Navy, which patrols the coastline with the Marine Police Division, also said it was aware people were being held captive on ships off its coast. “The truth is they use fishing boats to transport people and the bottom of the boat becomes like a room to put the people [in], but it seems like a commercial fishing boat,” said Royal Thai Navy spokesman Rear Admiral Kan Deeubol.

The ship on which Miae was held set sail with its human cargo for Thai waters four days after he was taken aboard. Others interviewed by Reuters say they spent up to six weeks in the hold of the ship anchored in the Bay of Bengal. Fourteen armed guards were aboard, said Miae.

The men were forced to squat for much of their journey and sometimes had their hands and feet bound with rope or cloth. The guards routinely beat them with sticks or whipped them with rubber fan belts.

Food was a handful of rice a day, or nothing at all. What little drinking water they received

was contaminated with sea water. “We tasted it in our hands and it was salty,” said Muhammed Ariful Islam, 22, a Bangladeshi fruit vendor who was on the same boat as Miae.

A NEW WEAPON

Miae, who left behind his wife and three children, said he was kidnapped. “I never thought I would leave Bangladesh,” he said, sitting in a government shelter in Phang Nga.

That’s a change. In the past, many impoverished Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar and Bangladesh voluntarily boarded small, local fishing boats heading across the Bay of Bengal in the hope of reaching Muslim-majority Malaysia where they could find work. Smuggling, done initially with the consent of those involved, differs from trafficking, which involves entrapment, coercion and deceit.

Thai authorities say the existence of the boats in which people are being held against their will is a response to the more strenuous efforts they are making to combat trafficking. Police operations have led to the rescue of 200 to 300 trafficking victims in the past six months, said Police Major General Thatchai Pitaneelaboot, who is in charge of counter-trafficking operations for immigration police in southern Thailand.

“The traffickers have become more sophisticated and cautious, partly because of the Thai government policy to crack down,” he said.

The country’s military government says it is beefing up cooperation with neighbouring Malaysia and has registered more than one million illegal migrant workers to prevent them falling prey to traffickers. “That’s a big step,” said Sek Wannamethee, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Human rights groups say the growing use of force is because trafficking has become increasingly lucrative, not because of any new measures taken by Thailand. Competition between a rising number of people smugglers explains why they are resorting to kidnapping, said Chris Lewa of the Arakan Project, a Rohingya advocacy group. “There are always five to eight boats waiting in



October marks the start of the four-month “sailing season,” the busiest time for smuggling and trafficking ships plying the Bay of Bengal.



the Bay of Bengal. And the brokers are desperate to fill them.”

Matthew Smith, the executive director of Fortify Rights, an organization that documents human rights violations in Southeast Asia, said the size of the ships being used by traffickers has increased as business is thriving and the trafficking rings are able to operate largely with impunity.

THAILAND’S ROLE

A series of Reuters investigations in 2013 revealed the complicity of some Thai authorities in smuggling Rohingya and in deporting them back into the hands of human traffickers.

Thailand was downgraded in June to the lowest category in the U.S. State Department’s annual ranking of the world’s worst human-trafficking centers, putting it in the same category as North Korea and the Central African Republic. The same month, the Thai military vowed to “prevent and suppress human trafficking,” after having seized power from an elected government on May 22.

Five months later, jungle camps are still holding thousands of people in remote hills near the border with Malaysia, according to testimonies from two recent escapees and a human smuggler.

The men and women aboard the prison ships who reach Thailand are sold for \$200 each to trafficking gangs, according to one of two Rohingya men interviewed by Reuters who recently escaped from the trafficking camps.

“The camps are running very smoothly,” the human smuggler, based in southern Thailand, told Reuters.

The smuggler, a long-time Rohingya resident of Thailand who spoke on condition of anonymity, estimated there were up to eight large camps holding 2,000 to 3,000 people at any one time.

The two men who recently escaped described the brutality in the camps. One of them told Reuters he witnessed camp guards gang-raping a woman.

Police Major General Thatchai describes a vast and complex trafficking network in which

Bangladeshis and Rohingya kidnap and trade their own people with the help of nationals from Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia and Pakistan. “It’s transnational crime,” Thatchai said.

The United Nations refugee agency UNHCR confirmed the existence of “bigger fishing or cargo vessels” that carry up to 700 passengers across the Bay of Bengal to Thailand – a five- or six-day journey.

This time of year is rush hour for smugglers and traffickers. October marks the start of the four-month “sailing season,” the busiest time for smuggling and trafficking ships plying the Bay of Bengal.

The Thai Navy’s Kan said most of the boats and crews were from Thailand and that patrols against traffickers had been increased in the country’s territorial waters. But Kan said the bigger boats were operating beyond Thailand’s maritime boundaries, in international waters, and so the navy couldn’t move against them.

WHOSE JURISDICTION?

Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which Thailand is a signatory, each nation “shall take effective measures to prevent and punish the transport of slaves in ships authorized to fly its flag.” The Navy didn’t respond to queries on why it wasn’t acting against trafficking ships carrying the Thai flag outside its territorial waters.

Robert Beckman, the director of the Centre for International Law at the National University of Singapore, said the Thai Navy would have jurisdiction over a ship flying a Thai flag in international waters. Under UNCLOS it had a right, not an obligation, to act against someone suspected of engaging in the slave trade, he said. The “uncertain state of the law on these matters,” Beckman added, meant that navies and coast guards were “usually very reluctant to arrest persons outside their territorial waters, especially if they are on ships flying the flag of another state.”

Interviews with two Rohingya, who in early October escaped from a Thai trafficking camp, corroborate the testimonies of the Phang Nga



There was one woman who was very beautiful. The guards took her upstairs. When she came back she was crying and her clothes were wet. She didn't say anything.



victims. They also suggest the slave ships have been operating for some time.

Mohamad Nobir Noor, 27, says he was living in an impoverished Rohingya settlement in Bangladesh, near the border with Myanmar, when he was taken. One September evening last year, men with knives and sticks forced him onto a small boat that sailed all night to reach a larger vessel moored at sea.

It would eventually hold 550 people, Noor estimated.

They were guarded by 11 men with guns, he said. Most were Thai speakers but one was Rakhine, the majority Buddhist ethnic group in Rakhine State, where communal violence since 2012 has killed hundreds and left 140,000 homeless, most of them Rohingya.

About 30 of those being held were women. "There was one woman who was very beautiful," said Noor. "The guards took her upstairs. When she came back she was crying and her clothes were wet. She didn't say anything."

Drinking water was so scarce that Noor said he drank his own urine to survive. When someone died, a small group of men was permitted to carry the body up on deck. A quick prayer was said and then the bodies were thrown into the water. "For the sharks," Noor said.

ESCAPE AND MUTINY

Once, Noor tried to escape by jumping overboard during a trip to the toilet. The guards dragged him back in and gave him electric shocks with wires attached to the ship's generator, he said.

Usually, most passengers were too physically weak or terrified to confront the guards. But, on at least one occasion, desperation trumped fear.

On the morning of June 11, the Bangladesh Coast Guard arrived off the coast of St. Martin's Island, in Bangladesh waters, to record the bloody aftermath of a high-seas firefight that followed a mutiny aboard a Thai trafficking ship. Desperate for food and water, passengers had overwhelmed the crew. But another trafficking ship quickly arrived and its crew opened fire on the mutineers, said Lieutenant Commander

Mahmud of the Bangladesh Coast Guard.

Six people were killed and 30 sustained bullet injuries. Among the injured were "two Thai crew members and one Myanmar human trafficker," according to a Bangladesh Coast Guard statement.

A record 40,000 Rohingya passed through the Thai camps in 2013, Lewa of the Arakan Project said. They are held captive until relatives pay the ransom to traffickers to release them over the border in Malaysia, she said.

By early 2014, not just Rohingya but other nationalities were also ending up in the trafficking camps. In a series of raids earlier this year, Thai police found hundreds of Bangladeshis, as well as Uighur Muslims from China's restive northwestern province of Xinjiang.

The camps were also the likely destination of the Bangladeshis rescued in Phang Nga. But something went wrong.

They were brought ashore at the remote island in Phang Nga under cover of darkness. Phang Nga official Jadsada says he believed they were about to be transferred by road to another location, but a tip-off to the authorities compelled their captors to flee.

Local officials have yet to account for another 190 passengers they believe came on the same boat as Miae and Islam from Bangladesh via the Bay of Bengal. Jadsada said they might already be trapped in trafficking camps. 

Cover photo by **Athit Perawongmetha**
 Additional reporting by **Serajul Quadir in Dhaka and Mohammad Nurul Islam in Cox's Bazar**
 Editing by **Peter Hirschberg and Bill Tarrant**