

Project SafeCom News and Updates

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1. European Union asks member states to take 40,000 asylum seekers

ABC News Online / AFP / Reuters
Posted Thu 28 May 2015, 5:04am

The European Union (EU) has asked its member states to resettle 40,000 asylum seekers from Syria and Eritrea who have landed in Italy and Greece.

The emergency proposal — which comes atop another one to admit some 20,000 Syrian refugees in member states — is in response to a surge in migrants making the dangerous crossing over the Mediterranean.

Both Rome and Athens, which are struggling with the wave of migrants, have appealed to other EU countries to share the burden.

Italy's refugee-reception facilities are stretched to breaking point with 80,000 people currently being housed in them and local authorities are growing increasingly impatient with the demands placed upon them.

"We ... have a proposal for an emergency mechanism to relocate 40,000 asylum seekers to other European (member) states," EU migration commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos told a press conference.

"Syrians and Eritreans will be relocated from Italy and Greece to other European Union member states over a period of two years."

The measure concerns people arriving in those countries after April 15 this year, the commissioner said.

Under the proposals, migrants would be shared out according to each EU country's population, economy and unemployment rate.

Germany would take almost 22 per cent of the migrants from Italy and Greece, or 8,700, while France would take 17 per cent, or some 6,700.

The commission said member states would be given 6,000 euros (about \$8,468) per asylum seeker.

EU plan met with resistance from Britain

Britain's newly elected Conservative government, which wants to reduce immigration, said it would not take part in either scheme.

Under special rights it enjoys, Britain can choose whether to participate in EU migration proposals.

There is also opposition to the plan in central and eastern European states.

"Compulsory quotas and distribution of refugees regardless of their will are not a sustainable solution of the current migration crisis," Czech prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka said in a statement.

Lithuanian deputy foreign minister Rolandas Krisciunas said the commission's scheme should be voluntary, not mandatory.

Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban has said the scheme was "bordering on insanity".

One central European diplomat was pessimistic about chances of agreement, saying: "There would be serious consequences for the European project if this was imposed on countries."

But EU power broker Germany backed the proposal.

"You can negotiate the allocation. It won't be easy but the way is right," interior minister Thomas de Maiziere said in Berlin.

France would examine the proposal but believed more work was needed to shape an effective and fair plan, a diplomat said.

Spanish foreign minister Jose Manuel Garcia-Margallo said Spain would apply the relocation quotas, if approved, although it would press for a fairer treatment that took account of Spain's high unemployment rate.

"It does seem as if some member states were reluctant but they have to accept it's not about words," European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker said.

"It's about action."

No quotas for resettlement, says EU commissioner

Mr Avramopoulos insisted that the European Commission, the executive arm of the 28-nation EU, was not proposing a quota system for distributing people.

Many member states, which are under pressure from anti-immigrant parties during tough economic times, have strongly objected to quotas.

"It's up to each member to decide how many [potential] refugees they will grant refugee status [to]," Mr Avramopoulos said.

"If countries want to relocate or settle more, they can, but we want to insure minimum solidarity."

However, EU sources said countries must first admit the 40,000 asylum seekers based on a "distribution key", which looked like a quota.

They then process their requests, either accepting or rejecting them.

It opens a breach in the Dublin rules that require the country where asylum seekers first land to take them in.

UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon, who met with Mr Juncker and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini on Wednesday, welcomed the commission proposal.

"I encourage the EU member states to show compassion as they consider this important proposal," he told reporters.

But Mr Ban poured cold water on a plan approved by EU nations to launch an unprecedented naval mission starting next month to fight human traffickers responsible for the flood of migrants.

He said there may be ways to do that other than military action.

Italy and Greece serve as the main gateway into Europe for migrants from North Africa, Asia and the Middle East, more than 600,000 of whom sought refuge in the EU last year.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-28/european-union-asks-member-states-to-admit-40000-asylum-seekers/6502698>

2. Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina slams starving migrants as 'mentally sick'

Brisbane Times

May 25, 2015 - 12:40PM

Lindsay Murdoch

Bangladesh has slammed thousands of starving migrants and asylum seekers stranded at sea, calling them "mentally sick" and accusing them of damaging the country's image.

"Side by side with the middlemen, punishment will have to be given to those who are moving from the country in an illegal way ... they are tainting the image of the country along with pushing their life into danger," prime minister Sheikh Hasina said in comments reported by the state-run Bangladesh news agency.

Ms Hasina said the boat people were "mentally sick" for fleeing in search of jobs, adding "they could have better lives in Bangladesh."

Images of distressed Rohingya and Bangladeshi boat people have prompted outrage across the world as regional countries prepare to attend a Thailand-hosted 17-nation summit on Friday to discuss what has become a humanitarian crisis across the Bay of Bengal and in South-East Asian waters.

Up to 6000 people could still be adrift in boats after Indonesia and Malaysia last week reversed policies to push boats back out to sea.

Malaysia admitted on Sunday it had found a series of mass graves in a remote area at its border with Thailand that are believed to contain hundreds of Rohingya Muslims and Bangladeshis, despite earlier denials any existed.

Graves found in both Thailand and Malaysia are believed to contain the bodies of victims of human traffickers who held them ransom while trying to extort money from their relatives.

An estimated 25,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants and asylum seekers fled Myanmar and Bangladesh in the first three months of this year, part of the largest movement of people across South-East Asia since the fall of southern Vietnam 40 years ago.

Since taking office in 2009 Ms Hasina has taken a hardline against Rohingya Muslims in neighbouring Myanmar who have been described by the United Nations as among the world's most persecuted people.

In 2012 she refused to allow Rohingyas fleeing Buddhist mob violence in Myanmar's western Arakan state to reach safety in Bangladesh.

Ms Hasina, in comments to senior labour and employment officials, called on her government agencies to crack down on human trafficking.

"You have to conduct ... campaigns so migrants do not give money to brokers for going abroad in illegal ways, they are falling into a trap," she said, adding the boat people are "tainting Bangladesh's image in the international arena," she said.

Pope Francis has joined many world leaders in calling on countries to help boat people facing "severe suffering and danger."

The United States has offered to help set-up temporary camps for thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshis who are either still at sea or have made it ashore in Thailand, Malaysia or Indonesia in recent days.

But Thailand's military rulers have said they will only agree to set-up "temporary holding areas" because of fears that boat people will remain in Thailand for years.

The crisis was precipitated by a crackdown on human traffickers and their corrupt accomplices in Thailand which caused traffickers to abandon their human cargo on overloaded boats on the open sea.

Human rights groups have condemned what they describe as further persecution of Rohingya by Myanmar's military dominated government which has passed a law allowing the country's regional governments to introduce family planning regulations to reduce birth rates in their states.

"This will seriously worsen ethnic and religious tensions. We fully expect the Muslim Rohingya in (Arakan) state will be target number one of this legislation," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

Myanmar refuses to give 1.3 million Rohingya citizenship rights despite having lived in the country for centuries.

Tens of thousands of Rohingya are living in squat camps after being forced from their homes by Buddhist mobs.

Malaysia's Home Minister Zahid Hamidi has told reporters he expects more graves and people smuggler camps will be found in Malaysia's border areas.

"We are still investigating but I suspect they have been operating for at least five years," he said.

Malaysian media has reported that one of 30 graves found by Malaysian authorities contained 100 bodies.

Malaysia has for years quietly allowed tens of thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshis who arrived in the country without documentation to work as cheap labour.

Malaysia has been the destination of choice for the people fleeing Myanmar and Bangladesh.

<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/world/bangladesh-pm-sheikh-hasina-slams-starving-migrants-as-mentally-sick-20150525-gh8ua0>

3. Malaysia's jungle death camps reveal grim discoveries

Canberra Times
May 27, 2015 - 8:38AM
Lindsay Murdoch

Bangkok: The horror of Malaysia's jungle death camps has been revealed.

Photographs show makeshift bamboo prisons on stilts with mesh walls and coils of barbed wire.

Along a steep path strewn with clothes and food wrappings a low cage had been built, too small for a person to stand up in.

"These structures were believed to be used as human cages," said senior Malaysian policeman Mohammad Bahar Alias.

The scene described by journalists taken to the camps along Malaysia's northern border with Thailand by police has shocked many Malaysians.

"People were tortured, caged and robbed of their human dignity ... in our own backyard," said Malaysian opposition MP Charles Santiago.

"I will push for a royal commission of inquiry so that all Malaysians are informed, [and] for those responsible to face the law and, more importantly, that this never happens again," he said.

Police have found 140 shallow graves at the 28 people smuggler camps strung along a 50-kilometre stretch of the border in Malaysia's Perlis state, far more extensive than Malaysia announced on Sunday.

Joel Millman, a spokesman for the International Organisation for Migration told a news briefing in Geneva that the body's representative in the region "predicts hundreds more [bodies will] be found in the days to come."

Late on Tuesday police exhumed the first of what are believed to be hundreds of Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Myanmar and Bangladeshi migrants.

The grisly discoveries have exposed a hidden network of jungle camps run by ruthless people-smugglers who held migrants and asylum seekers captive while extorting money from their relatives.

If money was paid the captives were allowed to enter Malaysia, where many ended up working as cheap unregistered labourers.

But many others disappeared and mass graves on both sides of the Malaysia-Thai border now reveal their fate.

"If an individual's family did not pay, those staying long in camps were tortured, beaten and deprived of food," Mr Millman said.

An Associated Press reporter saw a tiny orange slipper partly buried on a slope at one of the Malaysian camps, indicating children were held there.

Police said the camp could hold 300 people.

A Reuters journalist said the location was a perfect setting for smugglers to ply their trade.

An hour's trek from the nearest road, prisoners could be kept alive with water from a stream running through a gully and there was good mobile telephone reception from Thailand so the smugglers could communicate with accomplices across a lucrative trafficking supply chain.

Malaysia's police chief Khalid Abu Bakar said the camps were thought to have been occupied since 2013 and two were "only abandoned between two and three weeks ago."

Residents in the area said they were used to seeing migrants.

"They are often starving, not eaten for weeks," said Abdul Rahman Mahmud, who runs a small hostel in the area.

"They eat seeds or leaves or whatever they could find. It's a real pity and sad to see this," he said.

Malaysia's Home Minister Zahid Hamidi said police are probing the possibility that government officials, including some from the Forestry Department, may be involved in trafficking syndicates.

Several Malaysians have been arrested.

In Thailand, where mass graves were found in early May, dozens of people have also been arrested in a crackdown on human trafficking, including local politicians and police.

The crackdown prompted traffickers to abandon thousands of migrants and asylum seekers in overloaded boats that had made the perilous journey across the Bay of Bengal in a humanitarian crisis that caused international outrage.

Several thousand could still be adrift at sea, refugee advocates fear.

More than 15 nations, including Australia, are due to discuss the crisis at a Thailand-hosted meeting in Bangkok on Friday.

<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/world/malaysias-jungle-death-camps-reveal-grim-discoveries-20150526-ghacug>

4. Mass graves of suspected trafficking victims found in Malaysia

Reuters
Sunday May 24, 2015
Praveen Menon and Trinna Leong

Mass graves and suspected human trafficking detention camps have been discovered by Malaysian police in towns and villages bordering Thailand, the country's home minister said on Sunday.

Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said officials are determining whether the graves were of human trafficking victims, but did not say how many dead bodies were discovered.

"This is still under investigation," he told reporters at the sidelines of an event in Kuala Lumpur.

According to media reports, the mass graves were believed to contain bodies of hundreds of migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Police discovered 30 large graves containing the remains of hundreds of people in two places in the northern state of Perlis, which borders Thailand, the Utusan Malaysia newspaper reported.

The Star newspaper reported on its website that nearly 100 bodies were found in one grave on Friday.

"I reckon it was a preliminary finding and eventually I think the number would be more than that," Ahmad Zahid said when asked about reports of the number of mass graves discovered.

Ahmad Zahid said that the camps identified are in the areas of Klian Intan and villages near the border.

"They have been there for quite some time. I suspect the camps have been operating for at least five years," he said.

A police spokeswoman declined to comment saying a news conference on the issue would be held on Monday.

A police official who declined to be identified said police commandos and forensic experts from the capital, Kuala Lumpur, were at the site but it was not clear how many graves and bodies had been found.

"Of course I believe that there are Malaysians involved," Ahmad Zahid said, when asked on possible involvement of locals in the incident.

Northern Malaysia is on a route for smugglers bringing people to Southeast Asia by boat from Myanmar, most of them Rohingyas, who say they are fleeing persecution, and people from Bangladesh seeking work.

Smugglers have also used southern Thailand and Utusan Malaysia and police believe the discovery had a connection to mass graves found on the Thai side of the border this month.

Twenty-six bodies were exhumed from a grave in Thailand's Songkhla province, over the border from Perlis, near a camp with suspected links to human trafficking.

More than 3,000 migrants, most of them from Myanmar and Bangladesh, have landed on boats in Malaysia and Indonesia this month after a crackdown on trafficking in Thailand.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak on Thursday pledged assistance and ordered the navy to rescue thousands adrift at sea.

<http://www.msn.com/en-au/news/world/mass-graves-of-suspected-trafficking-victims-found-in-malaysia/ar-BBkbAOs>

5. Malaysia migrant mass graves: police reveal 139 sites, some with multiple corpses

Dozens of suspected people-smuggling camps also discovered in north of the country on border with Thailand

The Guardian
Beh Lih Yi and agencies in Wang Kelian
Monday 25 May 2015 14.36 AEST

Police in Malaysia have given details of the discovery of nearly 140 grave sites – some with multiple bodies – and dozens of people-smuggling camps on the border with Thailand.

Only a day after reports of the finding of mass graves, national police chief General Khalid Abu Bakar said his officers had uncovered 28 suspected human trafficking camps located around 500 metres from the border in northern Malaysia.

"The operation which we have been conducting from May 11 to May 23 we discovered 139 of what we believe are graves," Khalid told reporters.

He could not immediately give a figure of how many bodies might have been buried in the sites but the confirmation that there are 139 sites means the number of dead will be much higher than the 100 first suspected.

Khalid added that one grave site was about 100 metres from a mass grave discovered in Thailand earlier this month.

The findings appeared to indicate a system of jungle camps and graves that dwarfs those found by Thai police in early May, a discovery that ignited regional concern about human smuggling and trafficking.

The discovery also follows repeated denials by top Malaysian officials – who have long been accused by rights groups of not doing enough to address the illicit trade – that such sites existed on their soil.

Khalid said the biggest camp that had been discovered in Malaysia could house around 300 people, while another one could take in around 100 people, showing the scale of the human traffickers operation in the area and highlights fears that a high number of bodies will be unearthed.

“The forensic team has gone in and we will carry out the investigation,” Khalid told reporters in Wang Kelian, a Malaysian town where most of the grave sites were found, as he described the sites as a “very sad scene”.

“We will find out who caused this definitely. We will not condone anybody who is involved including Malaysian officials,” he said.

Khalid declined to say whether the victims are Rohingya or Bangladeshi, saying police have to wait until they exhume and identify the bodies. But the route has been traditionally used by thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshi who seek to flee persecution and poverty.

Khalid also said they found at least one highly decomposed body left with just skin and bone. Police believed two to three of the camps were only abandoned as recently as two weeks ago because they found rice, vegetables, recently cooked meals and cooking utensils.

Questioned on why there was no action taken earlier, he said police have been building up intelligence based on 37 arrests of suspected human traffickers – including two policemen – since the start of the year, which led to the grim discovery.

However no arrests have been made in connection to the discovery of the 139 grave sites.

Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak said on Monday he was “deeply concerned” by the discovery in the jungle.

“We will find those responsible,” Najib said in comments on his Facebook page.

Earlier in the month he declared “Malaysia does not and will not tolerate any form of human trafficking.”

But the revelation is likely to focus new attention on Malaysia’s record in battling a scourge that activists say is carried out by criminal syndicates, likely with the complicity of authorities.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/25/malaysia-migrant-mass-graves-police-reveal-139-sites-some-with-multiple-corpses>

6. Myanmar's navy seizes boat with 727 migrants, government says

ABC/Wires

First posted Fri 29 May 2015, 6:58pm

Updated Sat 30 May 2015, 4:53am

Myanmar's navy has seized a boat packed with 727 people off the country's southern coast, the government says, about a week after it found a similar boat it said carried around 200 Bangladeshi migrants.

The nationality of the people on the boat was unclear.

Myanmar's ministry of information described them as "Bengalis", using the term the government uses to describe the country's persecuted Muslim Rohingya minority as well as immigrants from Bangladesh.

"Altogether 727 people — 608 Bengali men, 74 women and 45 children — in a fishing boat have been arrested as a Myanmar navy ship found them this morning in the delta," a statement posted on Facebook said.

Myanmar insisted it was not to blame for South-East Asia's latest influx of "boat people" at a regional crisis meeting in Thailand, as the United States said thousands of vulnerable migrants remained adrift at sea and needed urgent rescue.

More than 3,000 migrants have landed in Indonesia and Malaysia since Thailand launched a crackdown on human trafficking gangs this month.

About 2,600 are believed to be still adrift.

"Myanmar navy is now transporting the boat to its base on Haingye Island," said Tun Kyaw Kyaw, the deputy director general of the Ayeyarwady Division government, responsible for the area region where navy base is located.

The island is also on Myanmar's southern coast, close to the place where the boat was seized.

"After sending the people to the island, we will investigate them," said Tun Kyaw Kyaw, adding that the examination was necessary to determine their identity.

Pictures posted on the ministry of information's Facebook page showed scores of men huddling shoulder-to-shoulder under the sun on the front deck, while uniformed officials — one of them carrying a rifle — stood above.

Women could be seen crammed together in the boat's cabins.

The navy found the boat 30 nautical miles off Myanmar's southern coast in the Andaman Sea.

Commitment to intensified search and rescue, future talks

A regional meeting to address Asia's refugee crisis has ended with a commitment to improve the security of those fleeing Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Representatives from 17 nations including Australia agreed to strengthen intelligence sharing and address the root causes of the migrant flows, but they did not elaborate on how that would be done.

A four-page summary released after the crisis meeting committed to an intensified search and rescue operation and further talks into the future.

The United States said it had been given the go ahead by host of the summit, Thailand, to begin aircraft maritime surveillance to collect data about the flow of boats.

Thailand said achieving any more from a single day meeting would have been a miracle.

Myanmar refused to be singled out as the cause of the migrant flows and accused the UNHCR of politicising the issues.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-29/myanmar-navy-seizes-boat-with-727-migrants-government-says/6508488>

7. Migrants found off Myanmar to be taken to Rakhine

ABC News Online / AFP

First posted Sat 30 May 2015, 10:40pm

Updated Sun 31 May 2015, 3:21am

More than 700 migrants found crammed into a fishing boat by Myanmar's navy will be taken to the country's troubled Rakhine state, a local official says, adding all those on board were from Bangladesh.

A total of 727 people, including 74 women and 45 children, were discovered in the hull of a vessel on Friday morning, with state media reporting that 50 passengers had perished before they were rescued.

It is the latest boat to have been discovered as the region battles a migrant crisis that has erupted since the start of May, leaving around 3,500 people on Thai, Malaysian and Indonesia soil and an estimated 2,500 more stranded at sea.

The majority of those fleeing to the three countries are persecuted Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar's western Rakhine state or people escaping poverty in neighbouring Bangladesh.

A local official said the group discovered on Friday had been taken to Thamee Hla Island in the Irrawaddy delta region by the navy, ahead of their transfer to Rakhine.

Buddhist-majority Myanmar does not recognise the Rohingya as an indigenous ethnic group and officials routinely refer to them as "Bengalis" from across the border.

"They will be taken to Rakhine State near Bangladesh tomorrow or the day after," Myo Win, a local official from Haigy Island, which is close to where the navy towed the boat on Saturday, said.

"As these people came from Bangladesh, we will take them back to Rakhine state because it's close (to the border)," he added, referring to the western state.

Earlier this month Myanmar's navy found more than 200 men in the hull of a wooden, Thai-registered fishing vessel.

Myanmar insisted all but eight of those found on that boat were Bangladeshi nationals and vowed to deport them there.

Rohingya left stranded

The discovery of the latest vessel looks set to deepen a tug of war between Bangladesh and Myanmar over who is responsible for migrants discovered in the Bay of Bengal.

Myanmar has been keen to portray those leaving its shores as Bangladeshi economic migrants and has rejected widespread criticism that the Rohingya's dire conditions are one of the root causes of the current exodus.

Bangladesh has said it will not take back any migrants who trace their origin to Myanmar.

Myanmar's 1.3 million Rohingya are heavily persecuted and are one of the world's largest stateless populations.

A Thai crackdown on the lucrative regional smuggling trade in early May left thousands of desperate migrants stranded on land and sea after they were abandoned by human traffickers who promised to get them to Malaysia.

Myanmar state media reported that the 700-plus recently discovered migrants were originally on board three vessels that had tried to go to Thailand but turned back after the crackdown.

They were herded onto a single vessel after the Thai people smuggling team who ran the operation abandoned them.

"About 50 people died on the way," the Myanmar News Agency reported.

Another state media publication, the Global New Light of Myanmar, reported on Saturday that a Thai man who allegedly owned the first boat with 200 migrants on board had been arrested in Yangon.

"He was said to have contacted human trafficking gangs in Bangladesh and trafficked people into Thailand and Malaysia," the report said.

The report did not say what charges the man, who was apprehended Friday morning, would face.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-31/migrants-found-off-myanmar-to-be-taken-to-rakhine/6509578>

8. Asian refugee crisis: trafficked migrants held off Thailand in vast 'camp boats'

Trafficking syndicates seeking to avoid crackdown by Thai and Malaysian authorities hold Bangladeshi and Rohingya migrants at sea

The Guardian
Emanuel Stoakes in Ranong and Chris Kelly
Friday 29 May 2015 04.30 AEST

Thousands of Bangladeshi and ethnic Rohingya migrants are being held in huge cargo ships by human traffickers in the Andaman Sea, according to testimony collected from survivors.

First-hand accounts indicate that trafficking syndicates trading in vulnerable migrants have responded to a recent crackdown by authorities in Thailand and Malaysia by holding their victims in large vessels close to international waters, where they are ransomed for their freedom in return for money from relatives.

The practice, which has been accompanied by violence and other abuses, mirrors the fate of victims held in camps recently discovered by officials in southern Thailand and Malaysia, where dozens of mass graves have yet to be unearthed according to survivors who spoke to the Arakan Project. There is one crucial difference, however: the bodies of the dead were dumped overboard into the ocean, with no hope of being recovered.

"The traffickers will not abandon their business, so they have now started putting 'camps' in the sea," said Chris Lewa, founder of the Arakan Project. "Since the end of February, we now have thousands and thousands of people stuck at sea, and I think we already have more death than even at the camps in Thailand."

A survivor from one ship who agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity described an ordeal of violence and sexual abuse accompanied by demands for ransom payment. She described a ship containing "six storeys in total: three above deck, three below. The men and women were separated."

As a result of this arrangement, the women on the ship were targeted by sexually predatory crew members, she claimed. A girl "around 12 years old" who was "very beautiful" was taken to a room by a group of men and was "not released from the ship", she recalled.

Other women onboard were subjected to similar treatment, she said, adding: "If the women did not go, they were beaten."

Recalling other aspects of her ordeal onboard the vessel, the woman said: "Food rations were not enough ... when I asked for more, they beat me." She was accompanied by her three children during her time on the ship.

In other testimony collected by the Arakan Project, a 19-year-old Rohingya man from Burma's northern Rakhine state described his journey on one of the boats last year. After nine days at sea on a Burmese cattle ship, his vessel joined with a bigger boat not far from the Thai shore. He estimated there were more than 1,000 people onboard, roughly one-third of whom were women.

"I spent 14 days on this ship. Three days after we were transferred, three smugglers arrived from Malaysia and boarded our ship. They carried mobile phones. They first asked who had phone numbers and, one by one, we started calling our relatives. Those [who did not provide] phone numbers were beaten," he recalled.

"The smugglers ordered passengers to beat them with engine chains wrapped in plastic and plastic pipes with something heavy inside. Even those with phone numbers were beaten," he said.

The abuses continued until families sent money, after which survivors were taken to shore by small fishing boats.

"Before I left, I witnessed three men who had become paralysed and one dead body was thrown overboard," he added.

A survivor from northern Thailand who spoke to the Guardian by phone described similar treatment. "I stayed on the boats for three months from February this year until April. I remember people were beaten every day, sometimes two or three times a day. Those who could not pay were beaten.

"I think there were more than one-and-a-half thousand people on that boat," he estimated.

Abdul Kalam, an adviser to Thai police, told Channel 4 News that refugees were being taken offshore for months. He said that a tanker ship has been deployed as a camp. "It has been out for two months and is moving all the time. The ship has got 2,000 people on it. The traffickers are relocating their camps because so much money is involved."

The testimony of survivors has been reinforced by the accounts of Rohingya helped to shore by fishermen in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, after being stranded at sea. Visitors to the tightly-controlled camps containing the refugees heard multiple accounts of the use of large "camp boats" at sea.

"I have just spent a week in Aceh working in three camps with my local humanitarian team, and we have conducted interviews with dozens of Rohingya and Bangladeshi survivors. Many of them spoke of being held in offshore camps on big ships in international waters," said Lilianne Fan, a research associate with the Humanitarian Policy Group.

Htike Htike, co-founder of the Bangkok-based Equal Harmony Together project, who also went to Aceh, offered a similar account. "I conducted 30 interviews in Aceh. During that time many people spoke of the use of 'camp boats' where they were forced to call their family to ask for money," she said.

A 15-year-old survivor recalled seeing 34 people die from sickness during a 40-day stay onboard one of the huge camp vessels. "Crew members threw the dead bodies overboard," he said.

He even saw the dead from other ships. "About the 20th day of waiting in the Andaman Sea, another two cargo boats arrived. They were smaller than our boat and they anchored near our boat ... I saw people who had died in those two boats: eight bodies were thrown overboard from one boat and the following day another 13 bodies were thrown from the other boat. I do not know how they had died."

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/may/28/asian-refugee-crisis-trafficked-migrants-held-off-thailand-camp-boats>

9. Australia accused of being nationalistic, xenophobic ahead of regional people smuggling talks

ABC-TV - Lateline

By Ginny Stein

Updated Thu 28 May 2015, 2:23pm

Australia has been accused of being xenophobic, parochial and nationalistic in its response to asylum seekers, on the eve of a regional people smuggling summit.

Australia's former Ambassador to Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, John McCarthy, and Thailand's former foreign minister, Kasit Piromya, have both expressed their dismay at the Federal Government's policies.

It comes as Thailand begins the first concerted search and humanitarian effort to locate thousands of Rohingya missing at sea.

Seven navy ships, four small patrol vessels and aircraft have been dispatched to search an area in the Andaman sea where scores of boats are currently believed to be adrift with up to 10,000 people onboard.

Hundreds of the ethnic minority, mainly Muslim refugees, have made it ashore in the past couple of weeks, despite initially being forced back to sea as countries in the region — including Australia — ruled out taking them in.

Now warnings are being sounded about the slow response to this crisis.

Mr McCarthy told Lateline Australia's response placed it on shaky moral ground going into tomorrow's talks in Bangkok.

"We need to show that we are a decent country," he said.

"Right now we are not showing that we are. And I think it is very much open to question that we are behaving as a decent country. I don't think we are."

Mr McCarthy said a regional solution to the problem was needed and Australia should be looking to increase its refugee intake.

"Merely because at some stage somebody got on a boat and somebody may have paid somebody should not preclude them from being regarded as worthy of being given sanctuary," he said.

"People like Angus Houston and the committee that was established two years ago argued that we should increase our intake to 20,000 and then to 27,000."

Mr Piromya also voiced his disappointment at Australia's hardline position.

"I think at the time of Whitlam and Hawke and so on you were very internationalist, you were pro-Asia Pacific and human rights and so on, but lately the Australian Government has become more parochial, xenophobic, nationalistic and so on," he said.

Call to copy post-Vietnam War response

Mr Piromya said Australia and Thailand had a history of working together to resolve regional refugee crises and that is what tomorrow's talks should be seeking to achieve.

He pointed to the post-Vietnam War response.

"The international community was able to solve the Vietnamese boat people [crisis] successfully, so that experience should transfer, be translated into action with the Rohingya," he said.

Mr Piromya said when almost 1 million Vietnamese refugees fled their country by sea in the 70s and 80s, Thailand committed to following Australia's lead.

"When we were receiving the Vietnamese boat people the Australian government at that time was telling the Thai government to follow the principle of non-refoulement, the French word for not to push back," Mr Piromya said.

"So today I think Australia must also work hand in hand with the countries in Asia and the Pacific region to find a common solution to the Rohingya's problems."

Tomorrow's meeting in Bangkok will bring together 17 countries from the Association of South-East Asian Nations, as well as international organisations.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-28/australia-accused-of-being-xenophobic-in-migrant-crisis-response/6503844>

10. Thailand hosts meeting to find solution; suspected Rohingya boats evade Malaysian rescue team

ABC Radio CAF - AM / wires

By South-East Asia correspondent Samantha Hawley and wires

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Thailand's ruling military will today host an unprecedented meeting to address the humanitarian crisis involving Bangladeshi and Rohingya migrants.

The gathering comes as at least 2,000 migrants are thought to be stranded at sea with nowhere to land.

The meeting in Bangkok will bring together 17 countries from across the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and elsewhere in Asia, along with the United States, Switzerland and international organisations like UNHCR, the UN refugee agency.

Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman Sek Wannamethee said the meeting would focus on international co-operation to resolve the crisis.

"We hope that this meeting will yield similar short- and long-term solutions to the problem," he said.

"This meeting is aimed at alleviating the suffering of those still at sea."

However, there is scepticism about just how much can be achieved to find a solution to the crisis.

According to the Thai Foreign Ministry, at least three of the countries central to the crisis will not be sending ministers: Myanmar, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Myanmar has reluctantly agreed to attend the meeting but refuses to recognise Muslim Rohingya's as citizens.

"We are going there only to discuss the regional crisis which all of the ASEAN countries are facing," said its delegation head, foreign ministry director-General Htein Lin.

An Australian representative will attend the meeting, but Prime Minister Tony Abbott has already made it clear Australia would not be a resettlement country.

The International Organisation for Migration said it needed more than \$20 million to care for those who have been rescued and third nations will need to offer resettlement.

IOM spokesman Joe Lowry said nations need to step up to provide refuge.

"The numbers we're talking about are not enormous, they're not as astronomical by, or even comparable to, the number in Europe at the moment."

"It's a few thousand but it's a huge number that are still at sea in terms of lives at risk."

Sunai Phasuk from Human Rights Watch in Bangkok said he hoped nations would at least agree to step up search efforts.

"For Rohingya who may be still in the hands of trafficker both in jungle camp and offshore holding camps," Mr Phasuk said.

Suspected Rohingya boats evade Malaysian rescue team

Meanwhile, two boats believed to be carrying more than 40 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar have evaded Malaysian rescue forces, officials say.

The two boats, carrying more than 20 people each, were spotted by a Malaysian patrol near the resort island of Langkawi early on Thursday but were in Thai territorial waters, a senior Malaysian naval official said.

"The orders are to search for them and provide humanitarian assistance. We are also prepared to bring them to land," said Roslee Mohamad Isa, acting commander of Malaysia's northern region navy.

"I have nine tons of food and clothing for the migrants who we believe are ethnic Rohingya. We want to save lives."

Roslee said the two boats were spotted off Langkawi by a Malaysian warship but attempts to communicate with them failed as they turned back into Thai waters.

A total of six ships from the navy and coastguard along with a helicopter were deployed for the rescue operation on orders of prime minister Najib Razak.

Malaysia and Indonesia, under heavy international pressure, have agreed to allow boat people to land on their shores.

Roslee said the migrant boats were playing a cat-and-mouse game because they want to enter Malaysia but do not want to be caught by the authorities.

"They want to come in and to join their friends and relatives here. We cannot allow that to happen. I think the operators of the migrant boats do not want to be caught also," he said.

Chris Lewa who heads the Arakan Project, a Rohingya activist group, said she had word of two more boats in Thai or Malaysian waters — one with as many as 700 people on board.

"We are quite sure that there are still hundreds, if not thousands, of people still on boats," Ms Lewa said.

The Thai military has offered a floating naval base to help migrants stranded at sea.

Mr Phasuk said that was not good enough.

"The floating base that Thailand set up with navy ships will in effect prevent Rohingya boats to come ashore."

Almost 4,000 migrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar have landed in Indonesia and Malaysia since Thailand launched a crackdown on human trafficking gangs this month.

The UN Security Council on Thursday held its first closed-door briefing on the human rights situation in Myanmar, focusing on the dire situation of the country's Rohingya Muslim minority, the US and council diplomats said.

During the meeting US ambassador to the UN Samantha Power called for the "immediate lifting of restrictions on the freedom of movement of the more than 140,000 Rohingya trapped in IDP [internally displaced persons] camps, with little access to humanitarian support," a diplomat said.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-29/suspected-rohingya-boats-evade-malaysian-rescue-team/6505566>

11. Australia urges regional asylum solution

AAP / news.com.au

By Ron Corben

May 29, 2015 10:17PM

AUSTRALIA is calling on Southeast Asia to achieve a sustainable solution to the region's asylum seeker crisis, especially in Myanmar where thousands of Muslim Rohingya have fled poverty and persecution.

IMMIGRATION and Border Protection Portfolio chief executive Roman Quaedvlieg says Canberra is ready to put its money where its mouth is to support the effort.

Attending a meeting of senior representatives from 17 countries in Bangkok on Friday, Mr Quaedvlieg said additional financial support from Australia would come on top of substantial existing assistance.

"Over the next few years we're contributing \$50 million in monies to combat human trafficking in the region," Mr Quaedvlieg told AAP.

"Australia is also donating \$41.9 million to the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Indonesia."

Thousands of Muslim Rohingya from Myanmar's western Rakhine state have fled on boats, including women and children, in the face of long standing persecution only to be gathered up by smuggling gangs.

Hundreds are reported to have perished amid the discovery of mass graves in southern Thailand.

"We are significant donors in terms of humanitarian assistance in Rakhine State and we will continue to be generous," Mr Quaedvlieg said.

"Depending on the outcome of the discussions today, there may be further contributions we can make both in terms of advice and any donations that we can make," he said.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott has resisted pleas by international donors for Australia to allow any of the current migrant workers and asylum seekers entry to Australia.

Mr Quaedvlieg said Australia was pressing for a regional solution to the problem.

"What needs to happen here is a coalition of like-minded nations within the region who recognise this is a global problem and deal with a global solution," he said.

"If we all go away from here recognising that this is a regional problem, that a regional multi-element solution should apply, then that's a good thing."

<http://www.news.com.au/national/breaking-news/australia-urged-to-take-in-more-refugees/story-e6frfku9-1227374078779>