

# CASE STUDY



HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA

## **BANGLADESHIS AND ROHINGYA BOATPEOPLE KIDNAPPED BY HUMAN TRAFFICKING GANGS TO BE SOLD INTO SLAVERY**

The figures of boatpeople recently discovered in captivity in Thailand reveal the extent of human trafficking between the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea.

In the space of three days, Thai authorities in Takuapa district discovered more than 130 suspected victims of human trafficking; on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 53 men were discovered on a rubber plantation. Two days later, a group of 79 men was discovered in a jungle clearing. This is in addition to the 636 people discovered in January and a further 37 found in September.



EPA

The men discovered by Thai authorities were Bangladeshi and Rohingya, brought by sea from Bangladesh

The two groups found in October were composed of Bangladeshi and Rohingya kidnapped in Bangladesh. There they were forcibly loaded into

the hold of a fishing vessel and transported from Cox's Bazaar on the south coast to Takuapa district on Thailand's Andaman coast. In Thailand the victims were off-loaded, divided into groups and held in captivity in secret jungle camps. The boat on which they arrived was said to have carried at least 200 people, including women and children.

According to Chris Lewa of the Arakan Project, a Rohingya advocacy group, the voyage from the Bay of Bengal takes roughly five days but many were held on board for weeks before setting sail while brokers kidnapped enough victims to fill the boat. The practice

of kidnapping victims, transporting them by sea to Thailand and Malaysia, and selling them into slavery is rampant; according to Lewa there “are always five to eight boats waiting in the Bay of Bengal. And the brokers are desperate to fill them.”<sup>1</sup>

The men had allegedly been beaten both on the vessel and in the camps. They were given little food and water and survived in the jungle by eating leaves. Four of the victims required hospitalisation when discovered by Thai local authorities acting on a tip-off.

The areas where the men were discovered suggest the organised, well-established nature of the human trafficking operation; in one instance, a rudimentary bridge has even been built. The size of the clearing in the jungle land indicates the significant numbers of people held while their brokers negotiated their sale into slavery.



BBC  
A jungle clearing in which the victims were held captive

### **COERCED, DECEIVED, BOUND, DRUGGED, KIDNAPPED...**

The circumstances of the individual kidnappings vary but what is common is the victims’ trauma and suffering.

One man, an electrician, recounted that he was kidnapped by a gang of men after being called to a house in Cox’s Bazaar to do some repair work. He worries for his mother: “I feed her medicine every day. Since I was kidnapped, she will have had nobody to give her the medicine.”

Another man, a farmer, said he was trapped with four others when he went to fix a roof. His arms were bound behind his back. After nightfall, his captors took them first to a small boat, then a larger vessel.



BBC

<sup>1</sup> <http://>

<http://www.bbc.com/news/health-2014-10-13>

Absar Mia (C), 27 – “All I think about is how I can get home, how I can see my mother again, how I can see my little boys and girl again. That's why I'm crying.”

Phuketwan.com  
A Rohingya man shows signs of abuse inflicted by his captors

A boy of 17, still a student, was kidnapped in a shop while topping up his telephone credit. “A man grabbed me and put his hand over my mouth. I ended up in the boat. My parents will be wondering where I am.”



An 18 year old, originally from northern Bangladesh, was seeking work in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka. An elderly man offered him a job for around \$6 a day. The two travelled to Cox's Bazaar to a small, remote house where the young man was bound and drugged. He woke up to find himself on a boat. At sea for seven or eight days, he was repeatedly beaten.



BBC  
Ayub's captors threatened him with death

### **DISCOVERED IN CAPTIVITY BEFORE BEING SOLD INTO SLAVERY**

Fortunately, the boatpeople were discovered before their plight further worsened. It is said that other victims from the vessel had already been loaded onto trucks, allegedly bound for Malaysia, destined for enslavement on fishing trawlers.

When discovered, each member of the initial group of 53 was wearing a wristband in one of four colours, thought to denote various buyers or final destination, suspected to be southern Thailand or Malaysia.



Phuketwan.com  
Coloured wristbands being removed from rescued victims

### **REPATRIATION HAMPERED BY BUREAUCRACY**

Both groups were taken into the custody of local authorities for their own protection, as it was feared that the police would jail the men as illegal migrants.



It is alleged that senior government and police officials are resisting efforts to have the men classified as victims of trafficking, a status which accords them support, shelter and faster repatriation to Bangladesh. Despite these efforts, the initial 53 men have been classified as victims of trafficking.

Thai and Bangladeshi authorities investigate veracity of every individual's claims before the classification as victim of trafficking is made. However, the investigative process is cumbersome and requires the coordinated efforts of various Thai and Bangladeshi ministries. Nationalities must first be confirmed, and the entire process can last for as many as three months, according to Ehteshamul Haque of the Bangladeshi embassy in Thailand. The embassy has sought permission from the Thai authorities to take the statements from the victims. These statements are sent to the Bangladeshi foreign ministry, which in turn passes them to the home ministry. The home ministry tasks the police in the victims' districts to verify the victims' identity claims.

### **DISTRICT CHIEF DETERMINED TO STAMP OUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING ALONG THE COAST OF TAKUAPA**

Manit Pianthiong, Takuapa District Chief, is credited with the discovery of the two groups in October. He is determined to put an end to the practice of human trafficking along the coast of Takuapa, with which he is very familiar, having lived in Takuapa for almost three decades. After making their grim discoveries, the local authorities continued searching islands in the vicinity for further victims. Mr Pianthiong fears that further victims were not rescued and have possibly already sold into slavery.



Takuapa District Chief, Manit Pianthiong (L)

### **ARRESTS MADE BUT SYSTEMIC RESPONSE NEEDED**

Two Thai men were arrested and charged with human trafficking in connection with the group of 53 men. Their conviction could result in custodial sentences of up to ten years. However, there remains much to be done to combat the kidnap, human trafficking and sale into slavery of Bangladeshi and Rohingya victims.

First, the gang leaders, for whom the police are looking, remain at large. It is the masterminds behind the elaborate operation who are, arguably, the most culpable and dangerous individuals.

Second, there is a need for constant vigilance along the Andaman coast. Mr Piantiong encourages the coastal fishing communities to alert him to indications that large numbers of people are being held in captivity.

Third, the Bangladeshi government must reinforce awareness of the risk of kidnap by human trafficking gangs. It is vital that Bangladeshis exercise caution with respect to job offers which might serve as a cover for kidnap. The Bangladeshi government is aware of the problem of people being deceived or coerced onto boats; Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, minister for the welfare of Bangladeshis overseas, says that the government “[reaches] out to the homes of common people in remote areas through our local remote areas through our local representatives, but they do believe these brokers.”<sup>2</sup>

Further, it is essential that the Thai authorities recognise the boatpeople as victims of trafficking in order to secure their repatriation, which in turn, should be expedited. Timely assistance from Bangladeshi authorities is vital in this regard. Obstructing recognition as victim of human trafficking is a miscarriage of justice, and those who are denied the status of trafficking victim could find themselves wrongly trapped in a Thai immigration prison for years or sold back into slavery.

The root causes and forces driving such human trafficking must also be considered. One such force is the flight of Rohingya from Myanmar (Burma) to Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia, escaping persecution in a State which refuses to grant them citizenship. Desperately seeking work, they fall victim to gangs of human traffickers who exploit their tragic circumstances.

Also, the Thai authorities must ensure that there is a systematic framework in place to combat human trafficking. Further, there such a framework must address human trafficking perpetrated not only by private individuals but also by State entities. For instance, in 2009, it was discovered that the Thai Navy had towed boats filled with Rohingya out to sea where they were left to drift. This was believed to have resulted in the deaths of hundreds. Further, more recently, members of the Thai police and armed forces reportedly sold Rohingya found on Thai shores back into slavery.

Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha has vowed to “prevent and suppress human trafficking”<sup>3</sup> since coming to power in a military coup in May 2014. However, less than a month after Prime Minister Chan-ocha seized power, the US State Department relegated Thailand to the lowest category in its annual Trafficking in Persons report<sup>4</sup> which addresses “the nature and scope of trafficking in persons and the broad range of government actions to confront and eliminate it.”<sup>5</sup>



Photo credit: AFP/Getty  
Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha

Thailand recently failed to secure a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council. This must serve as a message to the government that, if its

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/13/us-thailand-myanmar-rohingyas-bangladesh-idUSKCN0I21A|20141013>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-29612045>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2014/index.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/>.

wishes to exercise global influence in the domain of human rights, it must first address and rectify its own human rights record. Eliminating human trafficking on its Andaman coast must be a priority in this regard.

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**Human Rights at Sea**

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### **HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA**

Human Rights at Sea (HRAS) is a Registered Charity in England and Wales No. 1161673. The organisation has been independently developed for the benefit of the international community for matters and issues concerning human rights in the maritime environment. Its aim is to explicitly raise awareness, implementation and accountability of human rights provisions throughout the maritime environment, especially where they are currently absent, ignored or being abused.

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