

Mixed Movements Update for South-East Asia



January - June 2016



An internally displaced woman in Sittwe, Myanmar. Smugglers initially told her that her son had perished in the Andaman Sea. With the help of UNHCR, she later learned that her son had actually been rescued by Thai authorities in early 2015. © UNHCR/Keane Shum

Maritime Movements

In the first half of 2016, mixed maritime movements of refugees and migrants through South-East Asia were limited to isolated attempts by several hundred people trying to reach Malaysia and Australia, fewer than during the first six months of any year since 2011. By comparison, over 31,000 people were estimated to have attempted such movements in the first half of 2015.

There have now been no large-scale mixed maritime movements in South-East Asia since the events of May 2015, when [over 5,000 refugees and migrants were abandoned by smugglers](#) in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. Roughly 10 percent of those abandoned in May 2015 remain detained or in confined shelters, but the vast majority are either residing in refugee communities or have returned home. Of the two-thirds who were migrants, almost all have been repatriated. More than 600 of the refugees have been or are in the process of being resettled, including 47 particularly vulnerable individuals who departed for resettlement countries in the first half of 2016.



UNHCR's Maritime Movement Monitors interview a refugee in the temporary shelter in Aceh, Indonesia, where she and her brother lived after being rescued by Indonesian fishermen from a sinking smugglers' boat in May 2015. © UNHCR/Tarmizy Harva

As the root causes of refugee flows out of Myanmar have not been resolved, the absence of maritime movements by refugees in 2016 is attributable to intensified interdiction efforts (particularly in Bangladesh and Thailand), greater awareness of the risks of the journey, and lack of legal status in traditional destination countries. At the same time, the costs for viable air and land routes are prohibitive. Legal pathways remain scarce.

The few isolated attempts to depart by sea were said to involve small groups of around a dozen people either organizing their own vessels or essentially stowing away for a fee on boats carrying ordinary cargo, such as timber. Although a small number of smugglers were alleged to be preparing boats with capacities for several hundred passengers, departure costs are believed to have increased significantly. The amount previously charged per adult—only a small proportion of which was required up front—has risen as smugglers pass on the higher costs now required to circumvent authorities and demand full payment, or a guarantor who can provide full payment, prior to departure.

Meanwhile, lack of legal status in Malaysia—where between 7,000 and 9,000 Rohingya are detained annually—has made it difficult for refugees there to sustain livelihoods. In past years, a young man leaving Bangladesh or Myanmar by boat could effectively embark

Maritime movements have declined due to intensified interdiction efforts, greater awareness of the risks, and lack of legal status in destination countries

with little or no upfront payment, find steady enough work in Malaysia to pay off his debt to smugglers within a year, then begin sending remittances home. Now, his family must arrange the funds pre-departure, entering a cycle of debt and interest they can no longer pay off because they lack any steady source of income. Many Rohingya families in both Bangladesh and Myanmar have said that remittances from relatives in Malaysia or Saudi Arabia comprised the majority of their income.

Between 7,000 and 9,000 Rohingya are detained annually in Malaysia

Other Modes of Movement

Overland, hundreds of Rohingya are believed to have crossed by foot, bus, and train from Myanmar and Bangladesh to India in 2016, and UNHCR continues to register new Rohingya arrivals in India. The rate of registration in India, however, has remained steady since the beginning of 2015—before maritime routes through the Bay of Bengal dissipated—suggesting that recent overland movements are a continuation of previous movements along the same overland route, rather than a new alternative to maritime movements. A limited number of Rohingya, possibly in the hundreds, have also reportedly found means to fly to Malaysia for between USD 4,500 and USD 6,600 or to Saudi Arabia for up to USD 8,300.



A Rohingya refugee stands in front of her temporary shelter after being rescued by Indonesian fishermen from a sinking smugglers' boat in May 2015. At least a dozen passengers from the boat drowned or were killed during a vicious fight for drinking water. © UNHCR/Tarmizy Harva



Hope for a New Future for Bay of Bengal "Boat People"

One evening in May 2016, Bibi and Aishah clutched each other's hands anxiously as they waited to be screened by a medical officer at the UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The two 19-year old Rohingya women from Myanmar were part of a group of 36 extremely vulnerable Rohingya refugees who had been released that afternoon from the Belantik Immigration Detention Centre in the northern state of Kedah. They had been brought to UNHCR's office for a quick medical checkup before departing for the airport, where they would be resettled to the United States under UNHCR's resettlement programme.

The entire group of 36 had arrived in Malaysia in May 2015, among thousands of trafficked and smuggled individuals from Bangladesh and Myanmar who were abandoned by people smugglers in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. Of those who landed in Malaysia, 371 were identified as Rohingya from Myanmar and of concern to UNHCR. They were held in Belantik for over a year while UNHCR advocated for their release. Other than the 36 resettled to the

U.S., 316 others were released from detention in July 2016 and have taken shelter in refugee communities where UNHCR continues to monitor their protection needs.

For a fortunate few—resettlement is available to less than one percent of the world's refugees—their journey will now take them to a new country where they can begin rebuilding their lives. Best friends Bibi and Aishah have started to make plans for their new life together in the U.S. Both alone and without family, they will now become each other's family.

The two women had met on the smuggler's boat en route to Malaysia, keeping each other strong throughout the harrowing journey, their abandonment at sea, and a year in detention.

"We were together in the boat. We came together to Malaysia. We spent one year in detention together," said Bibi. "I am so glad we are going together to the U.S. I am so glad that I can finally live a free life."

— Yante Ismail, UNHCR Malaysia

Regional Action on Protection at Sea

On 23 March 2016, ministers of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, a 45-government body that includes all the countries affected by mixed maritime movements in South-East Asia, declared that mixed maritime movements should be addressed through:

- Identification of those with protection needs;
- Predictable disembarkation options;
- Accurate data on the whereabouts of migrants and vessels stranded at sea;
- Capacity building in search and rescue operations;
- Temporary protection and local stay arrangements;
- Access by UNHCR and IOM;
- Alternatives to detention; and
- Safe, legal and affordable migration pathways.

The Bali Declaration provides the foundation for the coordinated regional action required to manage and protect refugees and migrants at sea

The [Bali Declaration on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime](#) echoed 17 proposals and recommendations put forward by many of the same governments at the [Bangkok Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean](#) on 29 May 2015. Together, the Bangkok and Bali instruments provide the foundation for the coordinated regional action required to manage and protect refugees and migrants at sea.



A fishing trawler sails through the Andaman Sea near where boats carrying thousands of refugees and migrants were abandoned by smugglers in May 2015. © UNHCR/Keane Shum

In October 2016, the Bali Process will also undertake a review of the events of May 2015 in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea to develop options for preparing for and responding to similar movements of refugees and migrants in the future. Under the auspices of the Regional Support Office (RSO) of the Bali Process, UNHCR is assisting the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in developing a related training curriculum on Comprehensive Approaches for Addressing Irregular Movements by Sea.

With large-scale mixed maritime movements unlikely to resurface in South-East Asia until 2017 at the earliest, the second half of 2016 presents an opportunity for countries in the region to implement the recommendations they made in Bangkok and Bali without being constrained by the exigencies of any ongoing crises. For one possible blueprint for action, UNHCR, IOM, and the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have jointly developed an implementation plan for immediate responses at five key stages when refugees and migrants are in distress at sea:

1. Preparation:

Harmonize response across region through the Joint Task Force recommended by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and/or a Regional Rescue Coordination Centre.

2. Determining if and where refugees and migrants are in distress:

Home communities may inform agencies, including UNHCR, which can use satellite imagery to survey likely areas of location identified by cellular data.

3. Once refugees and migrants are located:

Mass rescue operation triggered and equipped with vital supplies of food, water, and medicine typically needed to treat malnourished and ill survivors, such as vitamin B₁.

4. Rescue operation underway:

Staging at safe disembarkation sites that are pre-identified so that resources can be prepared in advance and costs shared equally across the region, possibly through the ASEAN Trust Fund established in July 2015.

5. Disembarkation to place of safety:

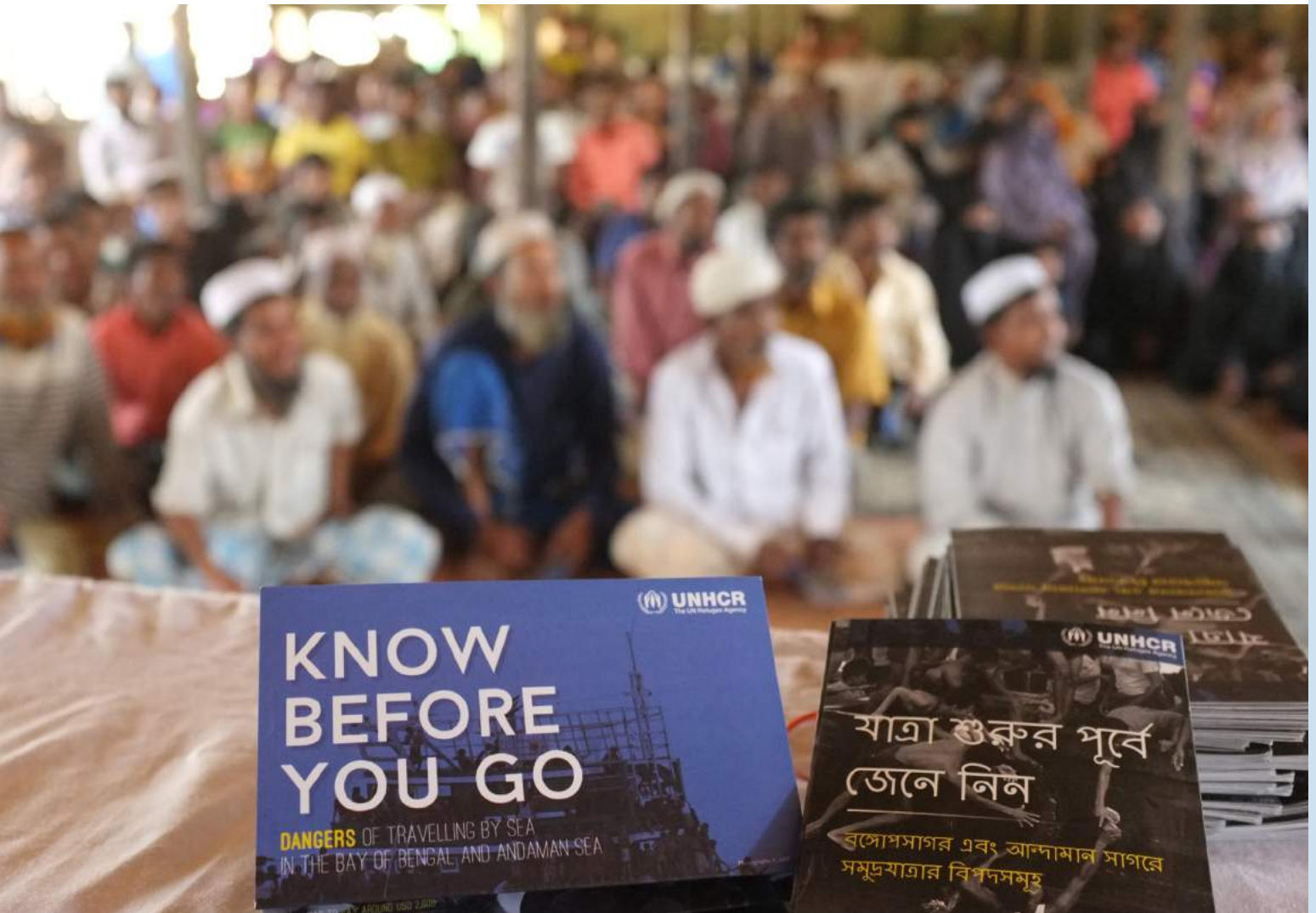
Mobile, multidisciplinary reception teams are deployed to assess protection, medical, and psychosocial needs, as many survivors may be refugees, in poor health, and victims of trafficking or sexual and gender-based violence.

The second half of 2016 and early 2017 present an opportunity for countries in the region to implement the proposals they made in Bangkok and Bali

This implementation plan has been presented to a range of stakeholders at various fora, including to public and private sector search and rescue practitioners at the International Search and Rescue Conference in Kuala Lumpur from 19-21 July 2016 and naval and coast guard officials at the Maritime Security and Migrant Protection in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea workshop in Jakarta from 26-27 July 2016.

Know Before You Go

Based on over 1,000 interviews with persons of concern to UNHCR who have travelled by sea, UNHCR developed material for potential travelers describing the dangers of undertaking maritime journeys across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. The “Know Before You Go” information campaign was launched in refugee camps in Bangladesh in February 2016, when UNHCR distributed hardcopy pamphlets in both Myanmar and Bengali languages and electronic versions that can be shared via social media, and also broadcast a video of a stage performance by a local theatre troupe reenacting the journey to highlight the many serious risks it presents.



Mixed movements are by their nature clandestine, making the data on such movements difficult to independently verify. The information in this report is compiled from various sources, including governments, implementing partners, media reports, and direct interviews with persons of concern to UNHCR who have taken part in mixed movements through South-East Asia.

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